Truancy in Elementary Schools:

Gaining a Perspective in the use of the Walking School Bus Program

by

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Abstract

Currently, attendance issues are prevalent in academic settings. When students do not attend school, it has an effect on their education and on the community at large. This study looked at the issue of truancy at the Early Years level and focused on studying one possible solution: the Walking School Bus Program. In this program two Community Outreach Workers were hired to walk students with attendance issues to school on a daily basis. A qualitative study was completed to obtain the perspectives of key individuals involved in the Walking School Bus program.

Keywords: truancy, attendance, Walking School Bus, Early Years

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Chapter One

Waking up at 7:30 a.m., Monday to Friday, and getting ready for school during the months of September to June constitutes the start of a routine school day, for most students. However, for a small percentage of students the day begins differently. These frequently absent students are sometimes referred to as truants. Pellegrini (2007) notes that "recent reviews suggest that the percentage of school non-attenders ranges between 1% and 5% of all school children". This information tells us that 99% to 95% of students attend school on a consistent basis. The question then is why do the other 1%-5% of students miss school? This chapter will provide a background to truancy and the effects it has on students, their families and the communities in which they live. As well, two separate truancy programs will be analyzed.

When a student misses school on a regular basis there are implications for those students, as well as for society. As Sheldon (2007) states, there are "important correlations between attendance and academic success" (p. 267). Students who attend school regularly perform better than their counterparts. As Pellegrini (2007) notes:

> … school is one of the main social agencies contributing to the
> creation of a 'citizen'. It plays a paramount role in instilling the
> values of a society and culture in children as well as teaching them
> essential skills to enable them to function in their environment. It is
> therefore not surprising that school non-attendance is considered
> detrimental for children and society (p. 63).

Truancy affects the student, his/her family, school and society. It can be argued that students who miss significant amounts of school can have poorer outcomes than their counterparts. As McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin (2004) state "Given the importance of

a high school education in the United States, truancy and school failure can affect

employment opportunities". Missing school can greatly affect the careers and

opportunities that students have once they graduate or reach adulthood. Epstein and

Sheldon (2002) mention that "students who are not in class have fewer opportunities to

learn the material that enables them to succeed later in school".   Missing school

consistently and habitually can affect students' opportunities to learn the outcomes

designed for the specific courses. Researchers have shown that having a high school

education provides the graduate a better life in comparison to a student who does not

finish high school (McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin, 2004). This provides us with

another reason why society wants and needs students to stay in school.

Truancy

The definitions of truancy vary, but most contain many of the same fundamental

ideas. A broad definition of truancy can include "unauthorized absence from school"

(Moseki 2004). Moseki (2004) notes that "this definition is adopted with the assumption

that absence with the knowledge and permission of the school and parents or guardian

does not constitute truancy". McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin (2004) note that **"**keeping

the criterion for truancy at 20% reduces the likelihood that youth were absent because

of illness or parents' decisions to keep their child home". However, Sheppard (2005)

suggests that "…most absence is authorized, that is, schools accept the reason given

by parents and 'allow' it". Sheppard (2005) also suggests that "most school absence is

parentally condoned, especially among younger children". Knowing that almost all

excuses for absences are being accepted means schools need to look at all types of

absences, both authorized and unauthorized, to have a full understanding of the issues

caused by absenteeism. With this in mind, the definition of truancy I chose to use in this study is the same as that used by Rennie (2007) to describe problematic school-related absenteeism: "a generic term to mean the persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child, of compulsory school age, or explained absence that can occur with parental knowledge and consent."

Sutphen, Ford and Flaherty (2010) state that "previous school year truant behavior be defined as a student missing 20% of the school year, regardless of whether the absences were excused or unexcused" (p. 169). This means any student that misses more than 20% of school would be considered truant. Sparks (2011) defines chronically absent as "missing 10% or more of school". This definition brings forth the question of what would be considered an excused or unexcused absence.

Excused and unexcused absences. Clearly identifying the type of absence is crucial in helping with truancy, as organizations working with these issues want to work with the most at-risk students. Baker (2000) has identified the criteria for excused absences as being:

- illness or accident,
- death in the immediate family,
- doctor, dentist and counseling appointments,
- educational activities approved by the principal,
- serving as a witness in a court proceeding, and
- "other," as defined by the school board policy.

Many question if taking holidays during the school year are excused or unexcused

absences. Many argue that students learn valuable information on these trips;

however, Davies and Lee (2006) note that:

> …as far as the government is concerned taking children on holiday
> during term time or to visit relatives or on shopping trips are judged
> to be non-attendance at best, truancy at worst. It is clear from
> anecdotal evidence that parents do not view these activities as
> truancy and see them as rather condoned absence, condoned by
> the parents… (p.204)

It seems as though schools, the government and parents need to have a clear

definition of excused and unexcused absences to move forward in dealing with

the issue of truancy. Some of the reasons why most students attend school

regularly while a minority does not are discussed in the following section.

History. When looking at the history of truancy, it is important to remember

implicit assumptions about schooling. According to Hodgkinson, (1991) "schools have

been largely fashioned to serve well-motivated white, middle to upper income students

whose families are relatively stable (Rush &Vitale). However, times have changed and:

> …in 2002 one survey estimated that up to 70 per cent of new
> school entrants in London at the age of three would no longer be
> living in the same family home as their natural mother and father by
> the time they left school.…. Therefore a minority of pupils in the
> future will lead 'conventional' family lives and many will experience
> considerable disruption to their regular familial routines at some
> point during their schooling (Reid, 2003b).

This is important because family dynamics have changed and the school system can no

longer teach to a homogeneous population that comes from two-parent, middle income

families. Considering that the dynamics of families with children in schools are

changing, it may be that the school system needs to adjust to meet the diverse needs of

the students present in classrooms today. Classrooms have diversity in cultures,

abilities, languages, economic levels, and familial configurations (Hodgkinson, 1991).

The way schools have dealt with truancy is summarized by Sheppard (2005):

> In the 1970s, the relationship between non-attendance and social,
> family and individual factors was highlighted (Reynolds, 1996), as
> there was a strong correlation between social disadvantage and
> typical truancy (Reid, 1999). However, these factors neither
> explained the variation in attendance rates nor predicted them, so
> in the 1980s focus shifted to the role of schools in improving
> attendance. Through the 1990s, strategies aimed at monitoring
> and maintaining attendance provided support for emotional,
> behavioural and social needs, and offered an alternative learning
> environment or curriculum to pupils as the basis of new school-
> based interventions (Edward and Malcolm, 2002, p.20).

As Sheppard states, it is important that educators understand the multiple issues

affecting truancy.

Warning signs. Truancy is often one of the first warnings signs a student

displays when he or she needs help. It also has been shown by many researchers that

truancy and future criminal behavior go hand-in-hand. Reid (1999) states that "truancy

is the greatest single predictor of juvenile and adult crime and of adult psychiatric

problems". McCray (2006) also states that "law enforcement agencies found positive

correlations between crimes during daylight hours and truancy". Throughout the

literature there appears to be a positive correlation between truancy and criminal

behavior. Sheppard (2005) states that the "Audit Commission (1996) "showed that 23

per cent of school-aged offenders were also truant".

While truancy has been shown to be positively correlated to criminal behavior, it

also can affect many other areas of the truant's life, including, his or her family, and the

people in his or her community. As Reid (1999) notes:

> Truancy is also closely linked to a wide range of other difficulties in adult life including: the inability to settle into the routine of work and/or marriage; frequent job changes; isolationism; pathological disorders; poverty; higher separation and divorce rates; living upon income support; illiteracy; depression; temper tantrums; and involvement with social workers and the social services. Truancy is also associated with a significantly higher likelihood of becoming a teenage parent and of being unemployed or homeless in later life. (p.3)

When a student becomes truant, it can be a warning sign of other issues in his or her family.

Early years: foundation of school. The Early Years of school are from Kindergarten to Grade four. They can be compared to the foundation of a home, the early years in school form the base of students' life-long learning. Without strong learning in their early years, students may crumble just as a house does with a weak foundation. In Kindergarten to Grade three, students learn basic skills, which include reading, writing and computation. Usually after Grade Three, students use these skills to learn more independently. Bye, Alvarez, Haynes, and Sweigart (2010) state that:

> Educational gaps occur when students are absent from school. This is particularly true in classes where the knowledge and skills build sequentially on previous information; any missed classes can create a real problem for learning new content when part of the foundational knowledge is missing. School becomes very difficult when students fall behind. Once students fall behind academically, it may seem overwhelming for them to catch up and much easier for them to give up and drop out of school. There can be a snowball effect, particularly with no intervention or support (p.53).

In obtaining the foundation of learning, it has been said that "if the battle for essential skills is not won before the fifth grade a student can automatically be identified as at risk of school failure" (Rush & Vitale, 1994).   Knowing that a student is at risk identifies that further intervention is required to support him or her. The Scottish Council

for Research in Education stated that "a survey undertaken in Scotland showed that

regular attendance is the most important factor in pupils' achievement at every level

from nursery school stage through year 12 and 13" (as cited in Reid, 2003b).

McCluskey, Bynum, and Patchin (2004) note "childhood patterns of behavior can

significantly affect adolescent and adult functioning". Students' patterns of behavior can

really affect what they can accomplish in the long run.

      Importance of Research on Earlier Intervention. Before fundamental changes

are made in education regarding truancy, it is extremely important that schools and

school divisions do enough research to truly understand the problems they face and

their possible solutions. As Reid (2003a) points out "the initial 'cause' or 'trigger point'

for the absence occurs when pupils are comparatively young normally between the

ages of seven and thirteen". This is an important point because a great deal of research

aimed at reducing and targeting truancy has been carried out in the junior and senior

high schools but little research has been done in the area of early years. Reid (2007)

states that "36% of all non-attendees now begin their histories of truancy whilst in

primary school and the age of consent is becoming younger and younger".   Reid

(2003b) notes that "currently, there is generally far too much emphasis on combating

persistent absentees at the secondary stage when much earlier intervention at the age

of onset, especially amongst primary age pupils, is likely to lead to much more

successful interventions".

      Many programs have been started to help with truancy and many show

improvements in attendance rates in the short-term but longitudinal studies are lacking.

As Sheppard (2005) states "school absence has not decreased over a century and is

greatest in the two years before GCSE" (General Certificate to Secondary Education).

Some attendance programs are discussed below.

Elementary absenteeism initiative. The Elementary Absenteeism Initiative

(McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004) was launched in 1991 in a Midwestern urban

community in the United States. It was referred to as a Weed and Seed program whose

goal was to create a community based method of crime control. The program was a

multi-departmental program in which school principals, the Department of Child and

Family Services, Mental Health and the juvenile court system were involved. The

program was used to address poor attendance and other family issues that the

identified students may have been experiencing. In order to qualify for the program, the

student had to have missed more than 20% of school in a six-week period. When a

student missed 20% or more, a letter was sent home by the principal of the school.

Following the letter, the principal monitored the student and if attendance improved, a

second letter of congratulations was sent home. If attendance did not improve, the

attendance officer became involved. The attendance officer called or visited the family's

home and the parents were required to sign a written acknowledgement of their child's

nonattendance. If the attendance officer deemed more work needed to be done with a

student, they forwarded the names of all the school-aged children residing in that

household to Mental Health Services or Child and Family Services and a caseworker

was assigned. Caseworkers followed up with the family for two weeks and if that did

not work to improve a student's attendance, then the community police officer along

with the attendance officer visited the home. If attendance still did not improve, the

police officer presented a warrant for parental prosecution under the state compulsory

attendance law. The results reported that after the first two stages of intervention,

attendance typically improved with statistically significant results. As noted by the

researchers McCluskey, Bynum, and Patchin (2004) "improvement in attendance was

modeled to occur up to 10 weeks following the letter sent to parents". The results from

this study showed that the program was "most effective for those with extreme

attendance problems" (2004). The results following the first two interventions were

difficult to track as the intervention happened too close to the end of the school year,

which did not provide enough time to monitor the changes.

       Focus on results-study of student attendance. Focus on Results-Study of

Student Attendance was an effort between the National Network of Partnerships

Schools and John Hopkins University (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The goal was to "use

research based approaches to plan, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs

of partnership that focus on increasing student success, including improving student

attendance" (Epstein & Sheldon 2002). The program included 12 elementary schools of

which five were rural and seven were urban. Comprehensive data was collected from

the school on its dynamics, attendance history over three years and the involvement of

families. The average percentage of students that were chronically absent was 8%.

They defined "chronically absent" as more than 20 days absent per school year. When

daily attendance was made a priority in the school, it showed attendance improved by

0.12% (93.08% to 93.22% in 1995-1996) and by 0.71% in 1996-1997 (93.22%-94.16%).

Schools also reported a decrease in chronic absenteeism when school-family-

community partnerships were developed. The average rate of chronically absent

students went from 8% to 6.1%. The strategies used in this study helped improve daily

attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism. The strategies included rewarding

students, communicating with families, identifying school contacts for families, providing

workshops for parents and offering after-school programs for students.

The Focus on Results-Study of Student Attendance was a small study and

cannot be generalized to all schools, especially since no suburban schools were used.

As well the improvement is very minor and may not be worth the resources dedicated to

achieve the results. The study also could not account for other factors that may have

affected truancy rates, including classroom and teacher practices.

Analysis of programs. The Elementary Absenteeism Initiative, and the Focus

on Results-Study of Student Attendance are examples of specific programs and they

showed how multi-departmental cooperation was used to assist and address the issue

of truancy. The first step in these programs was to identify who was considered truant.

Throughout the research, missing more than 20% of school was deemed unacceptable

and then the student was considered truant.

As previously shown, truancy had many causes. Due to this programs, often

collaborated with others including: attendance officers, Child and Family Services,

mental health and juvenile court systems, and counselors. This allowed the programs

to focus on assisting in various areas of students' lives. The Elementary Absenteeism

Initiative program used punitive and threatening measures when working with students.

These measures included sending letters home, home visits, and possible fines for not

attending school. The Focus on Results-Study of Student Attendance used more

positive approaches such as rewards for students as well as setting up contacts within

the school for the families. Based on these limited studies it appeared that punitive

methods appeared to be more effective than positive programs. All of the previously

mentioned programs used strategies of referral for students. These referrals included

Social Workers, Counselors and Truancy Officers. Using these outside agencies

enabled the school to try and reach out to the families and students in need with the

resources that were available. One of the issues with these specific programs was that

no longitudinal data had been collected to see if the results of improved attendance

were sustained. It seemed that these programs were short-lived and not followed over

multiple years or on a continual basis. The last issue was that it appeared that all of the

programs put all the blame on the family and none on the school. It seemed that these

programs were looking at what could be changed at the family level. Not one of the

solutions discussed what could change at the school level. Focus on Results-Study of

Student Attendance programs recognized students for their attendance but in my

opinion that did nothing to change how the school ran. It also did not include any

fundamental changes to the school structure or class instruction. I think that the

programs needed to look at what could be done at the school level as well as at the

family and student level to assist the students that were missing school.

The economic costs of truancy

Truancy is detrimental in many ways as it affects the student, their family and the

community at large. The economic costs are huge. "Boyle and Goodall, calculated that

the cost of State support given through a lifetime to each truant is not less than a

quarter of a million pounds each" (as cited in Reid, 2006a). The National Center for

School Engagement argues that:

> Truancy reduction programs (TRPs) are highly cost effective. The
> average high school dropout costs society over $200,000… yet
> many TRPs operate on less than $100,000 a year. Thus if they
> make a difference between graduation and dropout for even one
> child annually, they may be viewed as a sound investment of public
> funds."(2005, p. 3)

 As shown, it may be more cost effective to put programs in place to assist the students

that are truant in school rather than to support them later on in life.

Truancy and Manitoba

The Manitoba government recently recognized the impact truancy had on

students within the province and took action to limit truancy and increase attendance in

schools. The Manitoba government commissioned a study by Probe research in 2009

to "assist in the development of potential interventions to decrease school leaving and

reduce absenteeism" (Adams, 2009).

The School Attendance report in Manitoba was the first step in moving forward in

developing programs that would assist students in attending school. In order to find

information, the researchers used many sources including meetings with key

stakeholders such as organizations and non-profit groups that work with the youth

population. Dialoguing with these stakeholders, the researchers identified extensive

ways that school, community and parents could assist children with attendance issues.

One of the major findings from secondary sources showed that 90% of truant

students had the following three risk factors: involvement with Child and Family

Services (CFS), a teen mother and reliance on income assistance (Adams, 2009).

Absenteeism was an important issue targeted during the fall 2011 provincial

election in Manitoba. Many political parties included proposals for improving education.

For instance, the Liberal Party stated that, if elected, "they would adopt an integrated approach to truancy issues". The New Democratic Party stated that, if elected, they would "expand the school Resource Officer Program to more high schools, elementary and junior-high schools" (http://todaysndp.ca/our-plan, 2011). The Green party stated that they want to "begin shifting from a punishment-based model of justice towards a restorative, learning model of justice" (http://greenparty.mb.ca/platform, 2011). These platform promises indicated that school success and the issue of absenteeism are being thought of as an important issue in provincial election campaigns and thus they are being added to future political agendas. Given the focus on truancy, the walking school bus program is one initiative being implemented at the elementary school level to improve school attendance.

One possible solution: the walking school bus. In Manitoba there are numerous schools using a Walking School Bus Program (WSB) to help address the issue of truancy. Some programs are formal with paid employees and others are informal with volunteers walking with students. I was interested in this innovative program because I believed it may be a positive solution in helping students attend school on a consistent basis.

The WSB program, which originated in Brisbane Australia, had various reasons for operating. The reasons WSB's were developed include assisting with the obesity epidemic, environmental concerns (for example, traffic congestion) and safety concerns (Kong., Sussman, Negrete., Patterson, Mittleman,Hough, 2009).

In a ten week long study, Kong et al (2009) found walking school buses promoted physical activity, and that the participating students' body mass index (BMI)

percentiles remained stable. They argued that WSB programs prevented excessive weight gain. Sirard, Alhassan, Spencer, and Robinson (2009) completed a two week study with a control group and a walking group. They were trying to see if walking to school produced any changes in physical activity. However, the results indicated that they were not able to identify if the walking group had more physical activity and concluded that a larger study needed to be done over a longer period of time. Longer term studies also need to occur to determine if students will maintain or improve attendance due to a WSB program (2009). Kingham and Ussher (2005) also identified a number of concerns in regards to having an effective WSB program: adequate volunteers, communication between the organizers of the WSB and the school and council, and retaining student interest.

The WSB programs that I have heard about in Manitoba had both paid and volunteer employees that walked to and from school with a group of students. The students could either met at a specific location or the walker went to the students' homes and invited them on the walk. As elaborated in chapter 2, WSB programs used strategies that fell within both functionalist and structuralist frameworks to assist students to get to school. The school provided a way for parents to safely transport their child to school and the school changed a routine of the school to help assist students in getting to school. In my study, I plan to look at how a WSB program can assist in improving attendance. I plan to conduct a study to gain an understanding of the key perspectives of school personnel, students and parents on the use of the WSB to assist students in elementary schools to improve attendance.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the following chapter, I considered the factors that the literature identified as affecting students attendance or non- attendance of school. These factors were divided within the two worldview frameworks of structuralism and of functionalism. Structuralism is a framework in which people believe the structure of the organization needs to change to assist with the issue that has been identified (Skrtic 1995). In the case of attendance, a structuralist would argue the school needs to change practices to reduce truancy. Functionalism is a framework in which people believe the students and their families need to change to assist with the issue that has been identified (Skrtic, 1995). In the case of attendance, a functionalist would argue the family and student need to change their current behavior to increase attendance. This chapter also will examine common elements in successful truancy programs, including using a WSB Program to lessen truancy.

Search Parameters

In this study, I reviewed articles that met the following criteria: (a) involved research that looked at anti-truancy measures in the early years, at truancy and absenteeism, and at WSB Programs, (b) were published in a peer reviewed journal, government document, or master thesis dissertation from 2001 to 2011, (c) or were listed in the literature search results of Google Scholar[1] and EBSCO host[2]. Relevant citations from reviewed articles also were used.

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[1] Google Scholar is an internet search engine for scholarly work.
[2] EBSCO host is a large search engine that has numerous databases running concurrently.

On May 8, 2011, I used the phrase "Effective anti-truancy measures in early years" in Google Scholar, which yielded 92 items. Only the articles that were written after 2001 were examined. The exact same phrase and parameters were used on June 18, 2011, with the EBSCO host database and no results were found. On the same day, I also used the key words of "truancy, absenteeism and elementary" in the EBSCO host database, which yielded 24 results. Only the articles that were pertinent and were written after 2001 were reviewed. On May 21, 2011, Google Scholar was used to find information on "walking school bus programs" after the year 2001. There were 365 items found but upon further investigation of the articles, none of them appeared to have examined the WSB as a preventative measure for truancy. The EBSCO host database also was used with the same phrase and 10 articles were found that postdated 2001.

The importance of school attendance

As mentioned previously, school attendance is important given its impact on student outcomes, and requires a commitment by both parents and educators. It is important that students in the 21st century attend school and achieve the student outcomes set in provincial curriculums. Bye, Alvarez, Haynes, and Sweigart (2010) noted that "we live in a globally competitive world and it is essential that our students be in school, on task, and gaining the knowledge, skills they will need to live in the future global economy". Sheppard (2005) noted that

> the link between attendance and attainment is expected, as good
> attenders are likely to have attributes that promote attainment such
> as motivation, self-discipline and persistence, which will have
> derived from parent and school relationships from the early primary
> years (p.20).

Later, Sheppard noted that "the association between attendance and attainment is also expected to be influenced by interacting background variables (such as ability and domestic conflict), which will prevent it from being simple or linear". Sheldon (2007) also noted that "researchers have demonstrated important correlations between student attendance and academic success". This showed that the more time students attended school, the higher success they experienced in academic areas. The question this brings up is what is considered a legitimate reason to miss school and what is not?

The reason some students attend and others do not. Reid (2008) noted that "it needs to be recognized that more than 90% of children and young people choose to attend their primary or secondary school each day". When looking to find solutions for students missing school it is important to understand the reasons students attend school and the reasons they or others do not because such information can assist us in developing strategies. Ken Reid (2006) identified the following as some reasons why students miss school:

- parental attitudes to education,

- holidays taken during term-time,

- familial and home backgrounds issues,

- transportation difficulties,

- frequent school changes,

- the unattractiveness and lack of relevance of the curriculum,

- the management of behavior within schools,

- bullying,

- parent-school relationships,

- school policies and practices,

- pupils with special educational needs,

- learning difficulties and personal problems,

- peer pressure, and

- the influence of drugs, alcohol and child abuse

As shown in this list, students missed school for multiple reasons and, consequently, school and society may need a variety of reintegration strategies to help these students.

Ford and Sutphen (1996) completed a pilot project in an elementary school with three student social workers. In the study, they had one social worker address the attendance of the entire elementary school. This social worker completed whole school activities such as posting the names of students who had perfect attendance on bulletin boards and acknowledging them on the morning announcements. The other two student social workers worked with chronically truant students. They worked with a total of 13 students. They met with the students on a daily basis and helped the students identify some of the possible contributing factors to their nonattendance. The two social workers asked students why they missed school. The reasons the students gave and the frequency of each reason is reported in Figure 1.

The varying responses of truant students suggested they needed assistance with many different areas of their lives. The reasons were child-specific, related to family issues, and school related. Identifying such issues influenced the response provided for the student and his or her family, and

affected the reintegration strategy that was adopted in the Ford and Sutphen

(1996) study.

Figure 1

The Reasons Why Students Miss School According to the Students

Reason	Frequency
Child (participant) was ill	7
Mother wanted company	6
Parent was ill	4
Siblings were home from school	4
Parents took participant with them on visits to doctor, relative and so forth	4
Family had car/transportation problems	4
Child didn't feel like going to school	3
Child was too tired to go to school	3
Relative was ill	2
No one at home to see child off to school	2

Given the multifaceted reasons that are potentially linked to truancy, it is important to understand the responsibilities of both parents and schools as outlined in Manitoba's Public Schools Act.

The Manitoba Public Schools Act

The Manitoba Public Schools Act contained sections that addressed school and parental responsibilities in regard to attendance and truancy. The responsibilities are discussed in the following sections.

Parental responsibilities. The Manitoba Public Schools Act (Department of Education and Training, 2011) identified the Responsibilities of Parents in 58.7(b), which stated that a parent of a child who is of compulsory school age or who is attending school shall take all reasonable measures to ensure the child attends school regularly. As well, school attendance had been deemed so important that the Manitoba Government has made it law that children attend from the ages of seven to sixteen.

School responsibilities. The Manitoba Public Schools Act (Department of Education and Training, 2011) in the section titled Rights of Parents, 58.6(a), stated that a person who is a resident in Manitoba is entitled to enroll his or her child in a school and to be informed regularly of the attendance, behavior and academic achievement of his or her child in school. The law stated that it is a school's responsibility to inform parents whenever their child is not attending school.

The School Attendance Report for Manitoba (Adams, 2009) suggested that when parents are notified of a student's absence, a "two avenue notification system" be used such as sending an email or a cell phone notification, in addition to calling the children's

parents/guardians. The reason for the suggestion was that many students intercepted letters or deleted messages before parents found out about their children missing school.

Perspectives on truancy

With respect to research in the social sciences, Skrtic (1995) argued that there are "four paradigms of modern social scientific thought that he labels the functionalist (micro-objective), interpretivist (micro-subjective), radical humanist (macro-subjective), and radical structuralist (macro-objective) paradigms (p. 30)." For the purposes of this thesis the structuralist and functionalist paradigms have been referenced. Structuralism, as stated by Tomlinson, is the "… study of social institutions… with the belief that society is characterized by fundamental social, political, and economic conflicts, which have the potential, as they are worked through, to generate radical social change" (1995, p.123). Structuralists argue that if the structure of an organization is changed, other social changes (e.g., improved attendance) might occur. The functionalists perspectives are "grounded in scientific management, educational administration explicitly presuppose that school organization are rational (Clark, 1985; Griffiths, 1983), and, given the social norms of human pathology, they implicitly presuppose that school failure is pathological (see Skrtic, 1991a, 1991b)" (as cited in Skrtic 1995). Functionalists argue that the problems originate from the student directly or their family. Functionalists also believe that if students or their families addressed their issues other social changes could occur (e.g., improved attendance).

The following analysis outlines ideas that could assist in helping reduce truancy. These ideas have been organized within Structuralist and Functionalist paradigms.

Structuralism. The "radical structural paradigm takes a large scale or macroscopic, objective, and realist view of the social world, assuming that there is a real social world in which conflict, domination, and coercion predominate" (1995, Skrtic). Tomlinson goes on to state that "optimistic radical structuralists believe that if people can better understand the social structures and forces they live with, they will be better able to emancipate themselves from unfair discrimination and the influence of the powerful" (as cited in Skrtic). In terms of a school system, supporters of the structuralist framework believe that the school and school system must change in order to help students with absenteeism issues. Some of the ideas include: tracking attendance, reducing negative stereotyping, school population size, school environment and the curriculum. The following paragraphs will describe current literature on each of these ideas as they relate to how changing these structures might lead to improved attendance.

Monitoring/tracking of attendance issue. One major problem in assessing truancy issues is the lack of information we have regarding it. Recording attendance consistently is currently not occurring and varying definitions are affecting how a student is assessed in different areas. This creates problems when trying to figure out how big of an issue truancy really is. As Bye, et al. (2010) stated:

> Lack of consistency is a major problem in effectively tracking school attendance data…data's being "wildly inconsistent" include teacher inconsistencies in reporting attendance, inflated absences, inconsistent and incorrect coding, meaningless/incorrect codes on chronic truants and inconsistencies between school district (p.8).

Sheppard supported this idea by stating, "there are major difficulties in interpreting school absence data, complicated by whether a child is labeled a truant or school refuser" (2005).

It is important for provinces and school divisions to be consistent when recording attendance. As noted in the *School Attendance in Manitoba Report* (Adams, 2009), "school attendance policies are not consistent throughout the school divisions in the province". The document suggested that schools work on a system "to better track enrolments and attendance across the province with regards to school age children in the province, and consider having enrolment figures collected at least twice per year". The document cited that enrolment data does not correlate with population data of students who should legally be in school and, thus, we need to have more accurate ways of measuring attendance and nonattendance. McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin (2004) mentioned that students who experience, "consistent enforcement of attendance policies…are also more likely to have higher attendance rates". The tracking of attendance is a structuralist idea as it is the school systems role to determine how to track student's attendance and non-attendance. This system needs to be clear to all staff to ensure accurate records are kept.

Negative stereotypes. Teachers' beliefs in negative stereotypes can affect how they treat students in their classrooms consciously or unconsciously. Bye et al. (2010) stated that:

> Negative stereotypes related to race, class, sexual orientation, ability and so forth can influence a teacher's perception of certain groups of students and create low teacher expectation, isolating students who are then made to feel inferior or academically deficient (p.40).

It is important for teachers to make their judgments about students based on the

students' abilities and not on what they believe these students cannot achieve given

their family situations or parental issues. As is stated by Bye et al. (2010) that:

> High academic expectation and rigor coupled with support for
> learning help students feel more connection to their school. It is
> logical then that low expectation and low academic support
> discourage students from feeling connected (p.41).

Negative stereotypes may lead to low expectations for students before they

have had time to prove themselves. Teachers, educators and society sometimes

come to conclusions before ever giving a person a chance. Bye et al. (2010)

stated that "low expectations are fairly common reality for African American,

Hispanic, and American Indian students, particularly those coming from poor

homes and single mothers". Students with disabilities often experience the same

low expectations. However, Bye et al. (2010) also stated sometimes "love,

understanding, and support can make the difference in whether a student attends

school or feels that she or he does not belong and becomes truant". Having

positive expectations can make students want to come to school. In Barth's

article he discussed Rutter's study of characteristics that improved attendance

rates noting;

> That attendance levels at their highest for schools that gave
> homework often; had high expectations for student achievement
> (regardless of children's abilities); displayed student work on the
> classroom walls… (as cited by Barth, 1984, p.155)

Negative stereotyping is a societal issue and it is important that the school

system, educators and school employees ensure equal access to education for

all students while they are in school. It is important that the school system treat

students equitably and educate all students to the best of their ability.

     Non-accommodation of the diversity of students. Canada is becoming more

and more diversified in terms of culture, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation and so forth.

It is important that schools change to meet the needs of diverse populations.

Unfortunately, it seems that education is not always willing to change. As Bye et al.

(2010) stated:

> An educational system that refuses to incorporate differences in
> race, disability, sexual orientation, gender, class, culture, and so
> forth, into its policies, practice and curriculum, and instead pretends
> that all students are the same, cannot claim to provide equal
> educational opportunities and equal educational results (p.45).

     It is sometimes difficult for teachers to understand students. As Reid

(1999) stated, "It is often difficult for teachers who have been raised with middle

class social values to appreciate the full extent and meaning of the deprivation of

some of the pupils they teach". Understanding students' lives is difficult given

that, as educators, we may not have walked in their shoes. Nevertheless, as

educators it is essential to be professional, caring and understanding of all the

students. As professionals, with inclusion laws, it is important that we

accommodate the diversity of the students we have in classrooms today so as to

improve students' sense of belonging.

     School size. In the article by McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, and Legrers

(1998) a high school that implemented major changes to improve attendance and

performance was described. This school went as far as to divide into five smaller

"schools". This change resulted in teachers expressing that they felt better

connections with their students and that they were able to work more

collaboratively with their own teaching teams to meet the needs of the students.

"The evaluation data showed that the largest gains were mainly in student

attendance during the first year of implementation with modest additional

advances in the second year of implementation" (McPartland et al., 2008). It has

yet to be proven if smaller school sizes or learning communities lead to long term

improvement in attendance. The size of a school is dependent on the school

board. This system falls under a structuralist framework of providing education to

all students. However, school boards have the power to determine how they

provide schooling and this can be in smaller schools or larger schools. More

research needs to be completed to see the positive and negative effects of small

versus large school settings.

   School environment. The environment of a school is important because it

portrays to the student, parents and the community what is important and valued in the

school. Taking the time to make the school looked cared-for shows that teachers,

administrators and staff care and enjoy coming to that specific place. Hallam and

Rogers (2008) discussed some facilities that make schools more appealing, including

parent rooms. They also stated that:

> Parental access to the school is very important, including
> signposting to the reception area which should be pleasant and
> welcoming with a seating area, information about the school, and
> displays of pupils work. Access for the disabled, signposted car
> parking and labeled toilet facilities are also important (p.237).

McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin (2004) also mentioned that "schools that are safe have consistent enforcement of attendance policies, and those with high expectations for student achievements are also more likely to have higher academic rates".

The school environment is determined by the staff and administration that work in a particular school. This system can change with the support of the professional staff in a building. This system is a ground floor system in which the professionals in the building can work together to ensure that the school environment is welcoming to the students and community that use the school facilities.

Student /family/teacher relationships. An important issue in schools is the relationship students and their families have with teachers. Davies and Lee (2006) stated that,

> poor student-teacher relationships are seen by many as being at the heart of the problem and again, there is substantial evidence that where relationships are strained, there is tendency for many young people to avoid the experience by excluding themselves from such lessons (p. 205).

Bye et al. (2010) supported this statement by stating that "it is important for school social workers to be able to help students who have been marginalized to find a positive connection with a caring adult at school, because this connection helps to increase the student's sense of engagement". Bye et al. (2010) also noted "a trusting, respectful relationship is an important first step in reducing truancy". Thus, attendance is better when students have a good relationship with an adult in the school.

The school system needs to ensure that there are ways for students to be connected to adults in the building. Using homerooms or house groups ensures that

students know at least one adult with which a relationship can be developed. This relationship may help students to stay engaged, as well as attend school regularly.

    Curriculum. Davies and Lee (2006) completed a study that involved interviewing students who were both good and poor attenders, and interviewing parents and teachers about the reasons they believed truancy was occurring. In their small study, Davies and Lee found that both the students and their parents did not view the content of the curriculum as a problem for the students. However, when asked the same question, teachers stated they believed that the "curriculum [was] too rigidly defined" (2006). Throughout the interviews, students reported understanding why they had to learn specific subjects and topics, but still questioned the relevance of subjects such as French and Social Studies. These students also mentioned that they would like more opportunities to study vocational trades, which speaks to the ways students may see themselves achieving their own student outcomes and preparing for future employment.

    Davies and Lee (2006) were able to identify themes from student, parent and teacher interviews. One of these themes was that "in contrast to professionals (and in contrast to much of the existing literature), students do not see the content of the curriculum as a problem for them".

    The curriculum in Manitoba is determined by the government. It is important that the outcomes presented in the curriculum are relevant and important to students' lives. This is a structuralist area as curriculum outcomes are mandated by provincial Education ministries.

Each of the factors discussed above can influence student attendance at school or they can accomplish the opposite; that is, to give students reasons *not* to attend school. It is important that, as professionals, we use these factors to our advantage.

Functionalism.

A functionalist perspective also can be adopted to examine the personal, academic and social deficits of students and their families to explain the reasons why students miss school. Skrtic (1995) argued that:

> …functionalist social science is firmly grounded in the sociology of
> regulation, takes a more or less microscopic view of social reality,
> and studies its subject matter from an objective point of view.
> Using an approach to science premised in the tradition of
> positivism, it seeks to provide rational explanations of social action
> of the purpose of prediction and control (p.31).

The following paragraphs describe the current literature on several individual and family factors that inhibit attendance and discuss how changing these factors may lead to improved attendance.

School phobia. School Phobia was identified by Rettig and Crawford (2000) as "fear and anxiety associated with going to school". If it is left untreated, it can result in a student missing significant amounts of school. As Tyrrell cited:

> Those with true school refusal attempt to persuade parents to let
> them stay home from school, exhibit extreme anxiety about
> attending school, and are usually willing to complete schoolwork as
> long as it is done at home (Fremont, 2003, p.148).

Knowing the difference between school phobia and truancy is important because many students that are truant do not want to complete work either at school or at home. Students with school phobia will often be willing to complete the work at home.

Consequently, students anxious about attending school may require different strategies to aid them, as compared to students who do not attend because they just want to hang out with friends.   Tyrrell stated that 1% to 5% of elementary students are affected by school phobia (2005).   Many genetic and environmental factors contribute to school phobia. For instance, many parents of students with school phobia also have anxiety, which may affect or influence the anxiety levels of the students. Recent events such as moving, going to a new school, returning to school after a school holiday and a death or divorce in the family may result in school phobia (Tyrell, 2005). Tyrrell (2005) described using the school nurse and counselor at the school to help determine if a student has school phobia.

As stated in Sheppard's (2005) study "attendance problems are usually indicators of more complex conduct and/or anxiety disorders and should be investigated in the same way as other behavioral problems, which come about through interaction with the social environment especially parents". These are complex issues that various school professionals can work together on in order to help students and their family.

School phobia is seen as a Functionalist idea as it is the student who has school phobia which affects them and prevents them from attending school. Addressing school phobia is important because it can assist the student in overcoming the issues that are affecting him or her.

Anti-social behavior. Students learn anti-social behavior from a variety of places in their communities. As Sheppard (2005) stated, "Almost all behavior is learned as a result of a complex interaction between the child, with his/her inherent characteristics, and the social environment around him/her, which encourages and

discourages ways of behaving".   Researchers have shown that it is difficult to

understand why one student goes to school while another chooses to be truant but it is

possible that anti-social behavior is a factor. Research in this area will need to continue

in order to better assist these students.

Anti-social behavior is a functionalist idea because it is believed that the students

learn these behaviors from their families or in the communities. Therefore the problem is

located within the student, who then needs to be "fixed". Working with the community to

understand this issue can hopefully lead to improvement in behavior and school

attendance.

Poor parental involvement and supervision. Baker (2000) described some

reasons why "parents did not send their children [to school that] included failure to wake

up in time, being out of town, and needing children home for child care purposes."

Sheppard (2005) completed a study with 209 questionnaires and 35 interviews

with students who were both good attenders and poor attenders:

> …results showed that parents of good attenders were expected to
> show anger, or related strong emotion, and question their child
> about missing school than parents of poor attenders, although good
> and poor attenders were equally likely to receive a
> punishment…The parents of good attenders would try and talk out
> the problem and come up with a solution and the students who
> were poor attenders only five parents talked to them and of those
> only one had tried to understand the problem (p.23).

In Sheppard's study, four types of parental reactions to truancy were identified:

(a) inconsistent, (b) "gave-up," (c) enforced attendance, (d) problem-solving.

Parents of students with good attendance usually fell into the categories of

enforced attendance or problem-solving and the parents of poor attenders fell into the

categories of inconsistent and "gave up" types of parenting. These results demonstrated that parents of poor attendees might need guidance on ways to deal with and react to their children missing school.

Proponents of the functionalist perspective would say that this is a problem with the parents and that is why the student misses school. It seems that working with the parents might greatly assist in students attending school.

Family mobility. Not being able to provide transportation to and from school can cause students and families grief when it comes to attending school and may be a factor in ongoing nonattendance. Proponents of the functionalist perspective would argue that it is the families' responsibility to ensure children arrive to school and that the issue of transportation is a family issue. Working with the parents and guardians to help with alternative methods of transportation could lead to improved attendance.

Structuralism and Functionalism. In the previous sections, I provided examples of how various ideas are rooted in either structuralist and or functionalist frameworks. However, some ideas are not so clearly separated. Bullying and peer influence provide examples of ideas that can be viewed from both structuralist and functionalist theoretical perspectives.

Bullying. There is conflicting information in the research about whether or not bullying is an issue or not. Pellegrini (2007), noted that "pupils' accounts gave clear indication that their refusal to attend school stemmed from persistent bullying and social isolation in school and in their neighbourhoods". Pellegrini (2007) also suggested that "parents of children without attendance problems, as well as parents of non-attenders,

believed that bullying was the principal reason why their children did not want to go to school".

When Davies and Lee (2006) identified themes from student interviews and data from parents and professionals, they found that "bullying and intimidation by other students was seen as a problem for many of those interviewed and often precedes the decision not to attend school".

The issue of bullying can be considered from both structuralist and functionalist perspectives. Structuralists would argue that schools need to address bullying at school to teach strategies for both bullies and victims. Functionalists would argue that parents need to work with their children at home to develop positive peer relationships.

Peer influence. Peers have a huge impact on other students' lives. Sheppard (2005) interviewed 35 students and found that "social reasons for school absenteeism were given more often by poor attenders, which might suggest that this group had poor social relationships, making school less enjoyable and increasing their liking for absence" (2005). Many people have taken for granted, that teaching social skills are a huge aspect of schooling.

 A functionalist would argue that it is the fault of the student's that they do not have peer connections when they do not attend school. However, especially in Elementary school, the school does play a role in teaching students how to be friends and model appropriate behaviors towards each other. This can be seen as a structuralist approach to addressing this problem.

Between the two paradigms, it appears that the two paradigms disagree where the problem lies. Rivkin (2010) stated:

school authorities, dominated in truancy work by social workers, often tend to view the problem as one of family dysfunction or, in extreme cases, dependence and neglect. Child welfare authorities look to schools as the driving force of the problem. Without resources or services of their own to address truancy, law enforcement and prosecuting authorities look to schools, the child welfare system and the juvenile courts for solutions (p.6).

It seems as if attendance issues may be more of a "blame game" in which no one wants to take ownership. The following section will look at common elements in successful solutions, including the WSB program, which unify the structuralist and functionalist frameworks to address students' school attendance.

Solutions for Truancy

Truancy is a multifaceted issue with multiple factors causing and affecting it. A "one size fits all" solution will not work in addressing these multiple factors. Therefore, when looking at solutions for truancy, it is imperative that the concept of adaptability be considered. Schools need to provide a variety of different reintegration strategies for students depending on their specific needs. When support services are being used, Bye et al. (2010) stated that "student support staff should take a strengths-based approach to addressing the issue of nonattendance/truancy in schools, as opposed to punitive measures". In other words, using punitive approaches or suspension for truancy, is not helping the student as they are missing more schooling and falling further behind.

Baker (2000) noted that:

commonly, children who do not attend school are punished by receiving in- and out-of-school suspensions, lower grades, extra homework; having to miss recess; or restrictions from special

activities. These forms of punishment do not appear to reduce the number of days the children are absent (para 3).

Students that miss school already have a difficult time accomplishing the regular workload and punishing them with more work is counterproductive. As well, it seems to provide little reason to attend school if the student is going to be removed from the "socialization" times at school like recess and extra-curricular activities.

As well, Kim and Streeter (2008) stated "addressing truancy from three different sides: student, family and school, is the only way to make long-term strides in improved school attendance". The school, parents and community need to work together to create solutions for students that need assistance. Doing so can include law enforcement, business owners and social services. By working together, the stakeholders may be able to help students improve their attendance.

Common elements in successful attendance programs.   Numerous case studies on students with truancy issues have been conducted. The following examples are a few that show some of the common elements of successful programs. McCray (2006) summarized the following from Garry, 1996 and The National Dropout Prevention Center, 2003 as common elements that were noted in effective programs:

- involving parents,

- ensuring that sanctions are firm and consistent,

- establishing ongoing truancy programs, and

- involving the community and social services agencies.

These elements identified some ways that schools can become more consistent and proactive in helping students attend school on a regular basis. This information

highlights that partnering with parents is a vital component in helping students attend school. The common elements in effective programs also help ensure consistent protocols are followed when truancy occurs.

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) looked at 12 elementary schools and found that four strategies used by the schools helped both in changing students' attendance, and addressing chronic absenteeism. The four strategies included giving students awards, communicating well with all families, assigning parents a contact person at school, and offering after-school programs (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). Epstein and Sheldon stated that "research and field studies have suggested that effective programs link partnership activities with important school goals, using six types of involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community".

These effective programs used strategies that linked the family and school. They combined the structuralist and functionalist frameworks to meet the needs of the students. In the section to follow, the WSB Program will be discussed and linked to the structuralist and functionalist frameworks.

Walking school bus program. As mentioned previously, no articles could be found on WSB Programs being used to address truancy issues. The themes that emerged from the articles noted that Walking School Buses were organized to address obesity or for environmental or safety reasons. It is my argument that the WSB program has the unique ability to combine both functionalist and structuralist frameworks to address truancy issues. It is a structuralist solution because it changes the school structure on how students arrive at school. Also, it is a functionalist solution because it changes

families and students routines and introduces a new way for students to arrive at

school. Combining both frameworks in one possible solution incorporates team work

and cooperation between many of the key players, to address the issue of absenteeism.

Research on the WSB discussed one of the issues in providing volunteers for the WSB

Programs (Davison, Werder, & Lawson, 2008; Kong et al, 2009; Mendoza, Levinger &

Johnson, 2009). Many WSB Programs were used to increase physical activity and

social interaction thus, did not always have a volunteer walking with the students

(Davison, Werder & Lawson, 2008; Kong et al, 2009). The goal in these programs was

that the students would continue walking on their own and the volunteers would walk

with them one or two times per week (Mendoza, Levinger & Johnson, 2009). The other

theme throughout the articles was that school officials needed to be more involved for

the programs to be sustainable (Davison, Werder, & Lawson, 2008; Kong et al. 2009).

As Kong et al. (2009) stated "lack of school official support to assist in coordinating the

various program components represents perhaps the most important gap in sustaining

the WSB (2009). Davison, Werder, Lawson, stated that:

> barriers to sustainability of the program reported by parents and
> program organizers included lack of parent volunteers, weather
> (i.e., confusion about whether the WSB would operate during
> inclement weather), road safety, and lack of communication
> between schools and parent organizers (2008, p.7).

As little research has been done on WSB Programs and truancy, knowing

whether or not such programs can make a difference for students' nonattendance is

difficult. As many of the issues would be specific to the students in a school, it is difficult

to generalize from the information obtained from the research of other types of WSB

Programs. If a WSB was used for truancy, one main implementation strategy would be

consistent walkers. More research needs to be done on using a WSB for truancy but the potential is there as it is a low-cost program that can assist students in the early years to get to school.

Chapter 3 Methods

What are key perspectives on the use of the WSB Program in elementary schools to help students who have poor attendance?   The best way to research this question is a qualitative approach that allows the researcher direct access to interview and question the school personnel, students, and parents involved.   It was hoped that this would provide a basis for the analysis of the WSB program. As the WSB incorporates changes in how families and the school 'aid' in encouraging student attendance; it falls within both the functionalist and structuralist frameworks. The WSB is both a community and school based solution that is a low cost initiative. This study provided insight from one school that is operating this program.

Author's Personal Experience

I currently work in a suburban school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and was intrigued to find out that a school was piloting a WSB Program as a response to truancy. Prior to working in Winnipeg, I was employed at a school in a mixed-income area in a small town in rural Manitoba. Schools in the town also used a WSB, but, it was not as structured as the pilot project in Winnipeg. After learning more about this program, the author attempted to seek out information on the effectiveness of the WSB program in combating truancy. Quite interestingly, research showed that many schools in the United States used a WSB for many reasons but none of such reasons were truancy. The themes that emerged when looking through the articles were that WSB programs were used for addressing environmental issues, the obesity epidemic and the safety of students walking to school. In the 365 articles identified on Google Scholar, not one of them listed truancy as a reason for developing or using a WSB Program.

Research Questions

My research question in this study was:

> What are the perspectives of key stakeholders on the use of the
> Walking School Bus Program in elementary schools to help students
> who have poor attendance?

This main research question was guided by the following questions:

1. What are school personnel's perceptions of the rationale for having a WSB?

2. What are school personnel, parents' and students' experiences with the WSB?

3. How might the perceived impact of the WSB Program inform student services at

   the school level and beyond? In other words, might this program open up

   conversations with parents where other relevant issues might be identified?

In order to complete this study, a qualitative research method was used. This allowed

me to gain first hand perspectives from people involved in running a WSB program.

Site selection. There are many WSB programs in Winnipeg some are formal and

others are informally run. The school selected for this project was specifically chosen

because it had a funded WSB Program that was in its second year of operation.

Significance of the study. The objective of this study is to gain perspectives on a new

program intended to address a problem that has existed since the 1800s.

Theoretical framework. The theoretical frameworks used in this study are those of

structuralism and functionalism. I believe this is a helpful typology to classify different

strategies used in schools and homes. It seems that through reading the research a

blame game is occurring in which the school blames the home and the home blames

the school.

As noted earlier, a Structuralist examines how a given system can change. In this case, the Structuralist perspective asks what school personnel can do to assist students in attending. Research completed by Epstein and Sheldon (2002), identified "three broad strategies can be used to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism: (a) taking a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, families and the community, (b) using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities, and (c) sustaining a focus on improving attendance over time" (as cited in Teasley, 2004). As noted earlier, a functionalist perspective examines the personal, academic and social deficits of the student and their family to explain the reasons a student misses school.

Methods. In this study, a case study was used to look at one response to truancy in elementary schools (Willis, 2007). A case study was chosen as it is in a bounded system and is one specific program.   The specific program identified was the WSB. Due to time constraints of the researcher, only one school could be studied. Prior to seeking permission from the participants or their legal guardians, an ethics application was sent to the Education, Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) at the University of Manitoba. Permission was also sought from the School Division Superintendent before pursuing any research in the division. A copy of the ENREB approval certificate is located in Appendix A. All participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed that they had the right to leave the study at any time.

Participant selection. In order to protect the confidentiality of families and students who might take part in this study, the Ethics Review required that no one at the

school be aware of the families who might be approached to take part in the study. The Ethics Board required families to contact the researcher directly to indicate a potential interest in the study. Sixty nine recruitment letters were sent home by the school division and no one responded to my request. One of the organizers of the program asked if I wanted her to recruit some families and I had to decline as the ethics committee was clear in that families and students had to contact me directly and be interviewed off site. The participants included 6 individuals from a school that had a WSB Program. Due to the Ethics review recommendations, it was not possible to obtain perspectives from students and families as no one responded.

I interviewed six educators. The participants included two "Walkers", the school's counselor, one administrator, and two teachers. It was evident through the interviews that the classroom teachers had limited information on operation of the program. This could have been the reason so few agreed to participate. I had no power relationship with any of the adult participants. I provided an invitation letter about the study which was distributed to 29 professional staff members. Any individuals who wanted to participate contacted me directly.

Protection of human subjects. Participants were informed that participating in the study would not pose any risk of harm. They were also informed that pseudonyms would be used for all participants.

It is now mandatory that all Graduate students and professionals completing research that involves human participants complete an on-line course on research ethics. I completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research

Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE) on August 18th, 2011.

Please see Appendix B.

Consent forms were kept separately from the interview guides and interview notes. All interview notes and questionnaires had no identifying information on or within them. During the course of the study, the transcripts and interview notes were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. Once the research is completed, I will destroy all of the interview notes, interview guides and tape recordings.

Data collection. In this study, I collected data through semi-structured interviews. I hoped to participate in and observe in the actual school bus walk itself, but the ethics review process required that all parents sign permission for me to do so and this did not occur. There were 6 participants in the study and each one was interviewed. The interviews occurred at Ocean View School and were between fifteen minutes and one hour long. The datum was collected between the months of May and June, 2012. All interviews were taped and later transcribed by the researcher.

The semi-structured interview guide is attached in Appendices C, D and E. Using a semi-structured interview process was an effective way to obtain broad perspectives of participants on the WSB.

Validity. Pawson et al's (2007 which appeared in Porter paper), *Validity,*

Trustworthiness and Rigour, research described criteria that identified validity, rigour,

ethics and accessibility in a study. Pawson et al used the acronym TAPUPAS to

identify the following criteria that should be present in research.

> Transparency: is the process of knowledge generation open to
> outside scrutiny?
> Accuracy: are the claims made based on relevant and appropriate
> information?
> Purposivity: are the methods used fit for the purpose?
> Utility: are the knowledge claims appropriate to the needs of the
> practitioner?
> Propriety: has the research been conducted ethically and legally?
> Accessibility: is the research presented in a style that is accessible
> to the practitioner?
> Specificity: does the knowledge generated reach source-specific
> standards? (2007, p.85)

These criteria were used to ensure my research followed appropriate guidelines

and ensured the same standard was achieved as other research in the field. The

research was transparent in that all methods were disclosed and explained to the

participants. No specific claims were made in this project as it is a qualitative project

that expressed the opinions of the interviewees and did not state any statistical data.

The purpose of the research was to find out perspectives of the Walking School Bus

program and the method of interviews and a case study met this requirement. All

ethical guidelines were followed as the University Ethics board had to approve the study

before any work was allowed to begin. Consent letters were offered to and signed by

the participants. If participants declined to sign a consent form, they would have been

removed from the study.   The signing of the consent form was important because it

guaranteed informed consent on the part of the participants. The assent forms for

children were prepared but since no children participated in the study these forms were

not used. Lastly, this information was provided to other practitioners in order to help with

the overall knowledge of truancy in education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the methods that were used in this study and

described how the researcher protected the interests of those participating in the study.

The participants chosen for this study were strategically chosen as they used the

services of the WSB. In the next chapter, I will discuss the major themes that emerged

from my analysis of the data.

Chapter 4: Findings

I sent out 29 recruitment letters to the professional staff at Ocean View School. Six staff responded and attended scheduled interviews. I interviewed two Community Outreach Workers, two Teachers, one Support Services Teacher and one Administrator. The information gathered in these interviews closely mirrored the information gathered from previous research.

 I also sent out 69 student recruitment letters to their parents. I requested that they contact me to set up interviews and received no response. In order to interview a student, ENREB required that the parents contact the researcher directly to set-up a mutually agreeable time to meet. Thus, I was unable to interview any parents or students about the Walking School Bus program.

As a result of the interviews, I gained a more in-depth understanding from the six individuals. It was evident throughout the interviews that this program was viewed in a very positive light. Very few criticisms of the program were raised. I discovered through my interviews that the WSB at Ocean View School was unique to the school it served. The program catered to the needs of the families in the neighborhood. A brief description of this school's WSB Program is included.

Description of the Walking School Bus

The Walking School Bus program contained many of the common elements, discussed in chapter two, that are required for a successful program. The key elements, evident in the Walking School Bus included parent involvement, establishment of ongoing truancy programs and community and social service agency

involvement. Based on participant feedback the WSB program had linked the family and school. This was one of the essential elements in creating an effective program.

According to the participants, the WSB was run differently at different schools. The description that was provided by interviewees was specific to the program at Ocean View School. As one interviewee stated that "I feel like we kind of invented our home grown model at Ocean View School to address attendance needs at our school". Two walkers, each morning, walked to two separate housing complexes to meet students in a central meeting area.   If a student did not meet the group in the meeting area, the walker went to the student's house and knocked on the door to see if she or he would be attending school that day.

The walkers always wore a special vest to identify themselves. In this particular school, they had two main walkers and a substitute walker so the parents knew who was walking with their children to school. After all the students arrived at the meeting spot, the group started walking to school. Many times the older students walked ahead of the group. The group of students walked to school and other students that were on route to school joined them on their way. The walker then stayed with the group until the bell rang for school. This support was only provided in the morning. Next year, the school's goal is to have after school walkers as well.

In the winter months, when the temperature was considerably lower, the school hired a school bus to pick up the students from the two specific housing complexes. In order to ride the school bus, a student must live in one of the two specific housing complexes. The school hired a bus because these areas were at the furthest points within the division that are deemed close enough to walk to school. However, many of

the students did not have appropriate winter clothing and would have been uncomfortable walking in the winter temperatures. For the months of January, February and March, the walkers were used as supervisors on the school bus.

School Division Transportation Policy

In this particular school division, a student qualified for transportation within the school division from Kindergarten to Grade Six, if she or he lived further than 1.6 kilometers from the school. The specific areas that this school targeted for the WSB was just within the guidelines of the divisional policies, thus these students did not qualify for free transportation. As one interviewee stated that "the community we are addressing is a far distance from the school. The housing communities (there are two of them we are targeting) they are at the very perimeter, of the range that school division considers to be within walking distance, so they live the farthest from the school, and their parents have limited access to private transportation and limited funds for public transportation" as a result the school provides a riding school bus during the cold winter months.

Who were the Walkers?

The individuals that were employed as Community Outreach Workers for the WSB at the school were recruited from the University as students. When the school first started the program, they hired parents from the two specific communities being targeted. However, the school found the parents to be inconsistent in terms of showing up and walking with the students to school. As a result, the school advertised at the University. At least one of the walkers was a trained social worker and the other walker

had a degree in psychology. Both of the walkers were reported to have had good

attendance, which helped to provide consistent and reliable service for the students.

Funding

The WSB program was a community-funded program. Currently it did not have

funding for the 2012/2013 school year. The original funding organization provided funds

for only two years. As a result, the school was trying to obtain another community grant

to be able to continue to provide this service. With inconsistent funding, it is difficult to

plan for, implement and sustain this program. The WSB morning program costs

approximately $10,000 per year to operate. However, the school wanted to incorporate

an after-school walking component, and thus had applied for approximately $15,000 to

implement that program for the next school year. This included funds to hire a school

bus during the winter months.

The WSB program appeared to be a low cost initiative when compared to the

average cost of truancy reduction programs, which was documented at approximately

$100,000 a year. However, even at $100,000 a year, the National Center for School

Engagement argued it was a sound investment as the average cost of a high school

drop-out was $200,000 (National Center for School Engagement, 2005).

Purpose of the Walking School Bus

Overall, the school incorporated the WSB into their programming because they

wanted students to attend school. As one interviewee (Administration) stated, "It was

looking at the most at-risk children and looking at what can we do to get them to school

so that they have a chance at success. If they are not here, there is not any intervention

that can help them so getting them here was key". Another interviewee (Student

Support Services) stated "we are deliberately targeting the students most at risk

because of poverty issues and racism and we need to, we need to because without

additional supports those students will continue to fall through the cracks." This

correlated with research in the School Attendance Report that stated that 90% of truant

students had the following three risk factors: involvement with Child and Family

Services, a teen mother and reliance on income assistance. It appeared that the

targeted area at Ocean View School fell within this definition.

> Another interviewee (Administration) stated that the:

> > overall goal would be to increase attendance. We can't increase
> > academic achievement if we don't have children here regularly. It is
> > to increase connection for many of our families: The WSB has
> > increased the level of trust and confidence that the families have in
> > our school. We are willing to work with them to support their
> > children. And I don't know if that has always been evident. It has
> > always been true, but I don't know if it has been evident to families.

It is important that the interviewees recognized that their perceptions and those

of the parents may be different. The overall interviewee response identified that the

WSB provided a way for targeted students to attend school and to have equal

opportunity for education. Several times interviewees mentioned that when students did

not attend school, they fell behind their peers and became discouraged.

Limitations of the Walking School Bus

After reviewing the information provided by the participants, it was evident that

there were some limitations to the WSB program. The limitations included the use of the

riding school bus in the winter, the limited availability of the WSB for Kindergarten

students and, lastly, the limited manpower to run the program.

Riding school bus. In the winter, the school hired a riding school bus because the attendance dropped off even though the walkers had continued to go to the targeted areas. One interviewee stated this was because of the cold weather. The students did not have the proper clothes to wear for the very cold weather. As an interviewee (Administration) stated that "in the winter we know that attendance drops off until we can put a vehicle in place and the reality is that these kids don't have the clothing to be walking in -35. They don't have boots many of them. Their winter coats are bought from Giant Tiger and the wind blows right through them, they are not good". However, when the riding school bus was used in the targeted area, the walkers did not knock on doors, they waited for the students on the bus. The outreach component of the Walkers position was lost and the connection with the parents decreased. The walker stated that "I went from being an outreach worker or a friend for a lack of a better term with these kids to someone who just wanted to ensure that there was rule on the bus". The walkers just became supervisors and lost the outreach and community aspect of their position.

Cost. According to one interviewee (Student Support Services), the cost of using the riding school bus was $50 a day. The school had to pay for a "one way field trip" to provide a bus for the students in the WSB targeted area. This was the way the school was able to get a bus scheduled to go to that specific area to pick up the students. The funds for the bus came from the grants Ocean View School received for the WSB and did not affect the budget of the school for other programs, such as field trips that required buses. The riding school bus in the winter was a very expensive use of funds,

but a necessary expense in order to assist the students in the WSB targeted area in getting to school.

Behavioural issues on the bus. In the winter months of January to March when the school hired a school bus to pick up students, the walkers were used as the supervisors on the bus. According to one interviewee, even with this supervision, the students had difficulty following the rules. I was informed during the interviews that the school division's transportation department had many discussions with the administration about behavioral concerns and some students were not allowed to continue to ride the bus. In an attempt to decrease behavioural concerns, one of the administrators also went on the bus to help supervise.

Kindergarten students. Kindergarten students at Ocean View School attended school for half a day, morning or afternoon.   Although Kindergarten students were welcome to join the WSB each morning, this support was not provided for them to go home at lunch time. Furthermore, WSB support was not available for the students who attended afternoon Kindergarten classes. The WSB program had a limitation in not being able to provide the same support for this grade level due to the half-day attendance of the grade. The school had not made plans to provide this service.

Human Resources. One interviewee (Student Support Services) stated that one of the reasons the school is unable to provide the walk home was due to limited human resources. It was difficult to find someone to do the after school walks. Throughout the interviews it was evident that the school personnel recognized that more staff needed to be hired to provide this walking service, including after school as well.

Why are students missing school?

In this study, as no parents were interviewed, it was not possible to obtain their perspectives as to why students missed school. However, the school staff members interviewed identified reasons they believed families did not send their children to school. These included issues with marginalization, academics, organizational skills, adequate food, safety, finances, transportation, younger siblings, health and adequate clothing. One interviewee stated that "we quite often have parents saying I can't pick up my child up because I have younger children".

Marginalization. One walker identified that a few parents had initially mentioned feeling marginalized or discriminated by the school system. The walker reported that these same parents had later seemed to embrace the school system more as a result of the WSB program that helped them with the challenge of getting their children to school. As previous research had shown, sometimes parents who had difficult school experiences may feel a level of distrust with schools and, as a result, programs that support them can help to change such feelings. One interviewee stated that:

> I think the key is relationship building. Reactive letters that tell parents to send their children to school are never received favorably and I don't think have a really strong positive impact and may even create some animosity towards the school. So I would say anything that builds relationships and connection to the school community in a positive way will positively influence attendance.

The administrator, who was interviewed, also mentioned that many of the families that were supported by this program had a level of distrust. As noted by this interviewee, some parents "don't trust schools in wanting the best for them therefore they (the school) can't want the best for their children."

Academics. One walker mentioned that sometimes children complained about going to school because they were behind in their work and in basic skills such as reading and writing and, as a result, they did not want to go to school. The walker stated hearing "other kids talk about things that they have learned and talk about things that they did at school and the other kids just don't get it. Some of the other kids that haven't been around don't get it, they are confused, they don't like it, it frustrated them, and it doesn't make them want to come and then the parents see how badly they don't want to go and they figure why make them go anyways." When the children complained, the parents gave in and let their children stay home. The children talked about being confused, feeling frustrated and not attending because they did not understand what they were learning. When the children complained, the parents did not make them go to school, which perpetuated the problem.

Limited organizational skills of parents. Many of the interviewees stated that some of the parents in the WSB neighborhood needed help with basic day-to-day tasks including getting up on time, and having their child ready to go to school. Some parents, needed assistance in making a schedule in order to be able to complete such tasks.

One interviewee (Administration) stated that some of the families had a lack of connection with the larger community. "They are sort of in survival mode most of the time and they don't really think about what is happening beyond their home and the complex that they are living in." The interviewee stated that the school believed that these families wanted the best for their children and were trying to do all they could at

the present time. It appears from these comments that, some of the families lacked the skills necessary to manage the time of the family effectively.

Food. One reason, identified by interviewees for children not attending school, was the inability of their parents to provide them with an adequate breakfast and lunch. One interviewee (Administration) stated that it was a pride issue. This interviewee stated that "sometimes they don't have the food to feed them. There is a pride attached to it for some of our families and they don't want to say I don't have food for my child for breakfast or lunch so I am not going to send them to school." The school had informed parents that the school would be able to provide breakfast and lunch for children if they came to school. However, interviewees stated that the staff at the school identified that they need to be more communicative with parents to tell them about the assistance they can provide.

Safety. According to one interviewee (Administration), some of the families living in the targeted area came from war-torn cities, such as Bagdad. They would make comments to the WSB walkers about not being able to send their children to school alone. The interviewee stated that:

> people who move here from Bagdad where there are bombs going off all the time and they were like our children will never leave the house without somebody to watch out for them. How can I trust them to go on their own to school. I can't go because I have a baby that is sleeping…

In addition, some of the parents were scared to send their children with a WSB walker because they had come from countries where people had to be very careful of bombs and other explosives, and had a difficult time understanding it was safe to allow your children to walk to school.

Financial expense of going to school. One of the walkers mentioned that parents often identify the amount and number of school fees as being an issue of concern. These include fees for school supplies, lunches, and field trips, as well as the cost of the supplies that students are expected to take to school. This walker stated that parents were saying things like, "the kids are not coming to school because I am afraid I cannot pay the fee". The walker mentioned there is a stigma attached with being unable to pay for school fees. The school has made provisions for such expenses by setting criterion that had to be met in order for families to receive such funds. This interviewee was unable to directly state the criterion; he just mentioned it seemed difficult to communicate with these parents to have support provided. It appeared that even the walker did not know the exact criteria which would be difficult for him to even explain to the parents. It appeared that parents preferred not to ask to be excluded from school fees as it has an attached stigma to it when having to ask not to pay.

Younger siblings. Interviewees commonly mentioned that younger children at home were one of the reasons why students did not attend school. Parents were not able to walk their children to school because they had to watch their younger children. Some of the parents had difficulty planning how to get more than one child to school on time.

Interviewees stated that many of the parents had difficulty coping with coordinating multiple tasks and were unable to plan ahead. One interviewee (administration) stated she met with a parent and offered an alarm clock as the family was not waking up in time to be ready for school. The parent had never seen an alarm

clock before and turned down the offer because she stated she did not know how to use it, as she had never used one before. The parent implemented her own strategy, asking a neighbor to call every morning to wake her family up, to address the issue.

Health issues. The interviewees in the study mentioned that illness was a reason why students did not attend school.

Another issue that affected attendance was lice. The school policy is to send a student home with lice in order for it to be treated. The student is allowed to return to school once he or she has been treated. However, the lice treatment and supplies are expensive and pose financial hardship for some families. As well, home cleaning is required in addition to the lice treatment. This is a difficult undertaking for families. Inadequately cleaned homes result in lice remerging in the student's hair and, having the student sent home again. In one situation, the family requested that the WSB walker not come for the entire week.

Mental health issues were also identified. Some of the families were described as trying to make it through daily life; they commented that day to day challenges were difficult, and when they reached out to social services for assistance, they were not provided with adequate support. Sometimes they received no support at all. It was possible that some of the families were in crisis and were just trying to meet the basic needs of life in order to survive.

Communication. One teacher interviewee identified that communication with families was difficult as phone numbers were constantly changing or were out-of-service. Interviewees mentioned, many of the parents do not come to the school for

school events such as parent teacher interviews, concerts and "Meet the Teacher"

evenings further limiting communication between the school and parents.

Benefits of the Walking School Bus

According to the perspectives of the study participants, the benefits of the WSB

program included: increased attendance, decreased behavioural concerns, increased

respectful behavior, increased safety, enhanced trust, improved fitness and additional

registration of students in Ocean View School.

Increased attendance. According to the interviewees, the students in the WSB

targeted area had increased their attendance. Every one of the interviewees, from the

specific classroom teachers to the support services staff, acknowledged that attendance

had increased for the at-risk students. This may not be the case in all classrooms as

only two teachers were interviewed.

They stated they used the attendance monitoring system to monitor the students

in the WSB area but they did not look at the student population as a whole. No firm

numbers were provided to state how much the attendance increased by. In addition to

improved attendance, interviewees identified some unexpected benefits to the WSB

program.

Decreased problem behavior. The WSB provided supervision on the walk to

school. As a school employee, the walker was able to assist with management of

behavioral issues as they arose on the walk to school. As a result, according to the

administrative participant, the school noted a dramatic decrease in behavioral issues on

the walk to school and in the school yard in the morning due to having extra adults

outside for supervision. The participant stated that "…when parents were walking their students they may have seen unsafe things happening but didn't feel they should intervene, if it didn't involve their children. So, our WSB facilitators, have no problem if they see something happening, even if they aren't directly involved with the student with the WSB program, they will intervene"

Increased safety. Having adults walk students to school provided an opportunity for someone to teach them about road safety. One walker mentioned that, when they first started, the students would run across the street without looking for cars. He was very concerned as they were crossing a major road during rush hour traffic. As a result of participating in the WSB, the students' knowledge of road safety has increased tremendously. Now many of the older students walk to school on their own and are following the road safety rules they had learned.

Enhanced trust. The WSB program created an opportunity for a school employee to connect with parents on a regular basis. If the parents had any questions or concerns, they had an opportunity to ask the walkers whom they had developed a trusting relationship. The walkers helped them find out the information that they required. Special events such as barbeque and the Seasonal Feast were held in the family's community setting. This provided an avenue of communication between the school and community and improved the trust between the families and school. One interviewee stated that many of the parents "feel comfortable letting them walk with a hired supervisor." Interviewees identified the sense of trust families developed with the WSB walkers, walking their children to school enhanced the overall relationship between the families and the school.

Improved fitness. The Walking School Bus provided students with the daily opportunity to be physically active. As one participant stated "walking is good for these children. Many of them don't get outside and get fresh air, and exercise on a regular basis, not just targeted students, and our student population in general". However, the physical activity benefit was lost when the riding school bus picked the students up in the winter.

New registrations of students. In September, when the WSB program started, the walkers went to every house in the targeted communities to inform parents of the program. The walkers introduced themselves to all registered families in that area and informed them about the WSB program. They informed parents that the WSB participants were to meet at a predetermined location daily. To ensure students knew who the walkers were, they let parents and students know they would be wearing a special vest. While completing their rounds this past school year, the walkers reported meeting two families who were unaware that school had started. The walkers were able to assist in registering the students at Ocean View School.

Increased respectful behaviour. The WSB protocols provided an opportunity for students to learn respectful behavior. One interviewee provided an example where students were not allowed to pick flowers off of other people's lawns. Some of the students tried to make bouquets of flowers for their teachers but did not understand that it was not respectful to take the flowers from other people's property. The student's parents initially allowed their children to do this so it took the Walking School Bus walker to help them understand it was not okay. One interviewee stated, "so we talked about respecting the adult, about safety and about what crossing the street looks like and

what walking on the sidewalk looks like, and we also talked about community respect."
This included picking apples off of trees and taking flowers from people's lawns.

Enhanced sense of community. As a result of participating in the WSB, a sense of community had been created by the students in their group. Many of the students in the program considered the WSB as an extra-curricular club to which they belonged. As many of the students were friends this encouraged them to remain participants in the WSB program.

Importance of Relationships

Throughout the research it was apparent that the relationships between the student, the teacher and the Walkers are essential in developing a strong and effective program. It is important for the teacher to have a positive outlook on their students and to not have a negative stereotype for any reason.

Student/teacher relationship. The student/teacher relationship is extremely important when students are in the primary years of education. This relationship should include the families. It is critical that the teacher shows his or her students that he or she cares. Students may not have huge numbers of positive role models in their lives. As mentioned in Chapter 2, "a trusting, respectful relationship is an important first step in reducing truancy" (Bye et al, 2010). Creating this relationship early, could assist in providing a solid education foundation in a student's life and may foster a successful lifelong learning pattern.

Negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes were discussed as many of the students came from disadvantaged homes. According to the interviewees, many of the students in the WSB program lived in subsidized housing, and were of Aboriginal decent or new immigrant families. Many came from single-parent households. Stereotypes are held by some individuals regarding these characteristics and thus can place a student at a disadvantage. Teachers may have lower expectations for these students and might not assist them or encourage them to reach their full potential.

Interviewees acknowledged these factors, and noted that they needed to learn more about the values and beliefs of some students and families who have different life experiences and cultures than their own.

Walker/student relationship. Finding the right walkers was extremely important for Ocean View School. Initially, the school had hired members of the community as walkers but those members were unable to be consistent, which affected the integrity of the program. Since Ocean View School hired new trained walkers, the program has been consistent. Therefore, if your goal is to improve attendance, then trained walkers are needed. If the goal of your program was recreation then having trained walkers would not matter as much. Trained, dedicated staff was a key component to creating a successful program.

The selected staff must model what they expected the students to do, for example to come on time and go to school. The walker/student relationship was vital as both the students and their families respected the walkers. One walker mentioned it was difficult for families to ignore you when you were knocking on the door and they knew who you were. When families knew you came every day, they had a difficult time not

answering the door. As the Walker stated "I found that it was a lot more difficult with time, as I got to know the family, for them to ignore me at the door and eventually they would expect my arrival at the door. And then after that they would meet me in the park." It was evident that as the sense of trust increased between families and walkers, students would attend regularly. Even if the parents thought it was not important to attend school on a particular day it was difficult to talk to the walker every day and come up with new reasons why their child was not going to school. Innately all parents are aware their children are required to attend school regularly and it was more difficult when they had a relationship with the Walker to ignore them.

Conclusion

Overall, the WSB program fell within both structuralist and functionalist framework. These two lenses were helpful in looking at truancy in two different ways: from the parent's perspective and from the school's perspective. The WSB program was a win-win initiative for all involved. The school was able to get students into the classroom and the parents were able to get their children to school. I think, with the addition of the walk home component to the program, it will meet more of the needs of the people involved. It will meet the school's need to get students to school in the morning and that of the parents wanting their children home safely at the end of the day. With all of the intended and unintended benefits, the WSB was viewed a very useful and successful initiative.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusion

Pulling It All Together

As Sheldon (2007) stated "important correlations between attendance and academic success" underlie the importance of understanding the impact of school non-attendance for 1%-5% of school children. This is key to the importance of the research for my thesis. The term truancy was defined in Chapter 1 and 2 as "a generic term to mean the persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age, or explained absence that can occur with parental knowledge and consent" (Rennie, 2007). A historical perspective was reviewed including an introduction to the importance of tackling truancy in Early Years of school. Two Elementary Absenteeism Initiatives were described and the impact of truancy in Manitoba highlighted. Research on the Walking School bus was summarized.

Chapter 2, focused on a thorough literature review considering factors that affected non-attendance through the two worldview frameworks of structuralism and functionalism. In the case of attendance, a structuralist argued that the school and organization of the school structure needed to change to affect the issue of truancy. A functionalist, on the other hand argued that the family and or students needed to change their behaviour to affect attendance. The details considered by both perspectives were outlined. As reflected in the research, truancy is a multifaceted issue. A one- size- fits- all solution may not address all the factors affecting truancy. Common elements of successful attendance programs were identified, and the Walking school Bus was introduced as a strategy, crossing both structuralist and functionalist frameworks, to address truancy in the early years.

In Chapter 3 details on the research question, methodology and site selection were highlighted. As part of the participant selection information on the protection of human subjects was described. Personal information related to the author's experiences was described to provide a context to help describe the background to the selected research topic.

In Chapter 4, the walking school bus program at Ocean View School was described. This chapter looked at the data gathered from the interviews completed at the participating school as well as the identified reasons students were missing school. Many of the identified reasons correlated with the research summarized in chapter two including the financial expense, younger siblings, medial issues, food, and complex family issues. This chapter provided a summary of themes that were gathered from the interviews.

In the final chapter, I looked at what were the big ideas; the global areas for improvement and the next steps in the development of the Walking school Bus, one initiative in addressing the issue of truancy. Furthermore, the next steps in research for teachers were noted.

Summary of Research

The research for my thesis focused on gaining the perspectives of key personal on the use of the Walking School Bus in elementary schools to encourage student attendance. A qualitative approach was selected and invitations were sent out to administration, teaching staff, support services staff, the Walkers, along with parents and students. Due to ethical guidelines, as noted earlier, the researcher was required

to send recruitment letters asking the potential parents and student participants to

contact her directly. Unfortunately, no potential participants contacted the researcher.

Due to this, only the school perspective was provided in this body of research. However,

the Walkers of the program were able to provide some insight into the parental

perspective as they had the most contact with them. The research was completed at

the school with one-on-one interviews at convenient times for the participants. Overall,

valuable information was gained about the program and the impact of its'

implementation.

Big Ideas

When looking at the targeted communities of the WSB Program at Ocean View

School, it was noted that many of the families demonstrated similar characteristics to

those identified by Reid (1999). These were previously described in Chapter 2. The

interviewees noted that many of the families lived in low-income housing, had

involvement with social workers, lived in poverty, and were single parents. As well,

some families came from countries that were war torn. One of the goals of the school

system is to provide the supports necessary for children of all socio-economic levels to

have a sound educational foundation that can lead to improved opportunities for

advancement as they become adults.   Focusing on children in the early years, as was

identified in Chapter 1, is important; given that most of the research regarding truancy

Programs has been completed in the middle and high school years..

According to the participants in this study, the WSB Program is one intervention

that appeared to be assisting in getting at-risk students to school. No hard numbers

were collected to back up this observation, but all six interviewees stated that they

believed that the WSB program was helping students get to school. The WSB offered the school a low-cost initiative to provide a transportation option for a specific location. Throughout all the interviews, it was evident that Ocean View School focused on getting early years students to school. The WSB program allowed anyone to walk with the Walkers but it was clear that the majority of the students going on the bus were in Kindergarten to Grade 3. It was stated that the early years are essential years of school, and it is during these critical years, when the students develop habits, such as attending school. When the administration participant was asked about the attendance of the older students, she stated that many of the older students come to school but they have issues with being late. I would argue that at the very least they are attending school, even if it is late, which demonstrates a habit has been formed.

One very interesting point made by an interviewee was that with increased attendance, academic achievement improved. This has yet to be shown in direct research but it can be argued that schools could see improved achievement when students come regularly. This is a critical reason why this particular school was spending so much time and resources on this program. They firmly believed that students do better academically if their attendance improves.

Limitations

One limitation to this research was that this was my first study, so I was an inexperienced researcher. Another limitation was that I was not able to recruit families or students to take part, and thus I missed their perspectives entirely.

Number of participants. Another limitation of this research project is that there were only six people interviewed. This is partly due to the researcher being unable to contact parents but instead having to ask them to contact her. Although, this was part of the ethics process, and is understandable and important in maintaining confidentiality, if the researcher had been able to contact parents directly, the number of student and parent participants might have been increased. It was also discovered, after completing interviews with the school personal, that many of the families, who received notice asking that they consider contacting the researcher, did not have access to phones or lacked the problem-solving abilities to organize responses, which would have made it difficult to contact the researcher. To address the lack of participation from parents and students future researchers might provide compensation to participants for their time. Another consideration could be to work closely with the school to have a collaborative commitment to the study. This would allow the researcher to benefit from the relationships the school staff already have with these families.

Number of programs reviewed. Another limitation of this research project was that only one WSB Program was studied. However, in discussions with other educators, it was apparent that multiple WSB Programs exist in forms that are tailored specifically to the clientele and schools they serve. Another example of a tailored WSB is a program that is volunteer run. If interviewed, participants of this program may have provided an entirely different perspective.

Research experience.   These interviews were the first interviews the researcher had ever conducted, and thus, they provided an opportunity for me to implement the skills and best research practices learned.

Education Participants Role in the WSB Program

The school personnel involvement in the program created a limitation. From the interviews completed with the two teaching staff at the school, it was evident that they were not heavily involved with the program. As was stated by one of the teachers, they believed they also had to take an active role in the program, to help to better it. It was important for the school to connect the teachers with the WSB program participants through community events, such as the BBQ's and family feasts.

Implementation of the WSB Program

It appeared, based on the comments from the individuals interviewed, that the WSB program was successful. Many schools have housing complexes that are located around the perimeter of the school. A WSB program would assist in getting those students to school. It was a low-cost program in comparison to other initiatives and had positive results in terms of improving attendance.

As well, you cannot overlook the additional benefits of this type of program. The benefits included increased safety, physical activity, trust, registration of new students and a sense of community. These side effects had huge implications for creating a positive space for these students, and bridging barriers between the specific neighborhood and school.

It was evident throughout the interviews, that a lot of the gains were made when the WSB had dedicated and reliable staff. The success of this type of program was tied to having Walkers that understood the goals of the program and the diversity of the clientele in the targeted area.

Future Implications

As noted earlier, Ocean View School needed to secure funding for the upcoming school year to establish some long-term funding plans to ensure this program continued. Although this research was helpful, it was difficult to identify the full effect of the program since it had only been operating for two years and had to make significant changes to meet the needs of the students. As well, without speaking with students and parents, the full scope of benefits of this program are not understood.

It was also helpful that the school recognized the importance of students attending school for 10 months of the year. During the warmer months, the distance to walk to school was acceptable and even enjoyable but in -35 degrees Celsius, the distance was too far for these students. It was noted throughout the interviews that attendance for the WSB Program significantly dropped in the two housing complexes when the weather was cold. It was mentioned numerous times that many of these students were inadequately dressed and that made it even more difficult to walk the distance required to go to school in such temperatures.

A few of the interviewees stated that the School Board for Ocean View School had some of its own specific goals around academic achievement and graduation rates. In order to achieve these goals, the school stated that students needed to be in school

and that together the School Board, the school and the students, needed to find a solution that allowed all students to attend on a consistent basis.

In Chapter 4, the financial aspect of going to school was discussed and this aspect needed to be further reviewed to ensure that students were not missing school because of the expense of school. Such a review provided a way for Community Social Services agencies to become involved in providing school supplies to students. Many organizations provided school supplies to low-income areas but sometimes these organizations neglected the fact that not all low-income neighborhoods are in one area.

The other financial aspect that was examined was the medical issue of lice and the expense of getting rid of them. It was not mentioned in this research project but the province of Manitoba was having outbreaks of bed bugs and this could also cause a huge financial expense for families and affect the attendance of students at school. It is important for schools to know the agencies and referral processes to help families affected with these two costly issues. It is also important for Ocean View school to recognize the financial burden for these families and to reduce fees for them and to limit the amount of extra money needed to come to school for events like fields trips, terry fox run and pizza lunches.

Future research. One suggestion for future research would be to complete a longitudinal study that follows students over a period of time to see if attendance patterns continue to increase or stabilize. Following such a study, it would be important to look at the academic achievement of these students before and after the implementation of the WSB program to identify whether or not such a program helped to

improve academic achievement for students accessing it. This could be correlated with actual attendance data to show triangulation.

Other studies in Manitoba could include looking at the relationship between truancy and poverty, truancy and parerntal school experience and truancy and the ghettoization of groups. These studies would allow researchers to understand how life experiences and situations of parents affect their children's school attendance.

Since many of the interviewees mentioned that these families seemed to need assistance with some basic life skills, such as organization and planning, conducting a study that looked at supports available to and needed by families and parents would be helpful. For instance, such a study could look at identifying such supportive programs that not only taught organizational skills but also promoted the importance of school and regular attendance. Offering classes during the day from community members for community members could potentially help these families. These classes could include nutrition, money management and time management skills. During this time it would be important to have a drop-in center for the younger children to attend so the parents could go to the classes. Having parent and child drop-in classes are also beneficial in teaching parents developmental milestones and teaching new games and songs for parents to use with their children when they go home.

Another study that looked at real attendance numbers would be beneficial in determining the effectiveness of this program. As mentioned before, one concern is that schools have different definitions of late, of informed absence and of absence. Standardizing these definitions would help in understanding what exactly the attendance records show. The school staff interviewees mentioned, they looked at the

students using the WSB program attendance but looking at school-wide numbers would also be beneficial.

Another use of the WSB program would be to implement it in another way. It was mentioned that the Walkers only walk in the morning which serves the purpose of achieving improved school attendance but the school was looking into hiring Walkers for after school, as that would serve the purpose of supporting parents in receiving their children home safely. However, one issue was brought forward that there were no mid-day walkers to take the kindergarten students home or to bring the afternoon kindergarten students to school. These types of programming changes could be something the school could look into for the future.

To help with attendance the division could assist with eliminating the 1.6 km rule in order to have a seat on the school bus. With this the division would be funding the program instead of community donors. If the division did not want to provide a bus and insisted on keeping the 1.6km rule they could provide adequate winter clothing for these students so that they could walk comfortably in cold weather. The side benefit of continuing to walk would be the outreach part of the walkers position along with exercise for the students.

For educators. One teacher interviewed identified that "I don't have a lot of knowledge about aboriginal culture". Given this perspective and the reality that this teacher was unlikely alone in her sense of lacking knowledge, it would be important for the divisional Aboriginal Consultant to assist in this type of specific programming, as it could bridge the gap between the school and the community, and create some empathy and understanding from the teachers to further support the students and families. One

of the Walkers also identified that prior to the WSB, some parents felt marginalized by the school system. It is important that all students and families feel respected and valued in a school community.   Bringing in speakers that have had experienced marginalization to come and speak to the staff may provide a way for staff to provide examples of what would have helped them may help teachers develop their own strategies for their classrooms.

I think that the community events should be a priority for the staff in the school. As one teacher stated, "the teacher has to put in some effort then to go out to those things to make connections. The WSB doesn't automatically do it for us but it gives us, it opens a door and gives us an opportunity to do that". The WSB program opened a door for teachers and, from the perspectives of the two teachers interviewed, it seemed that they appreciated the program but had little direct contact with it. If parents saw their children's teachers at special events, it fostered communication in a more open, friendly and less formal environment.   One interviewee stated

> Just because we go to them, and you know we set up a BBQ in their neighbourhood so the whole neighbourhood can come. It is not just limited to just the students and their parents. It is a neighbourhood celebration. So I think it puts the school in a positive light so that if you are in a situation, where there is a challenge, there is money in the bank so to speak. The parents know you have made an investment in their community and you have their um you know their best interest at heart

These events acted as investments or money in the bank so to speak, for when the teacher had to have tough conversations with parents.

Educators could also assist with the low academic rates by providing lunch time activities that allow practice for reading, writing and math skills so students have someone to try and help them catch up to the required grade level. This could be

completed during lunch time as these students have a designated arrival and departure time.

For parents.   The WSB program provided a service that allowed parents to have some assistance in getting their children to school on time and safely. It allowed parents to have access to school staff on a regular basis and to talk to someone who was easily available to listen. If parents had any problems or concerns they were able to let someone know about them and receive assistance, if needed. Bringing parents into the program and sharing information and encouraging them, allowed them to have ownership and pride in helping their children get to school and have a solid education. Parental support of this program was essential because it showed their children they cared and that school was important.

Conclusion

Overall, not one person interviewed identified a negative observation about the WSB program. All feedback was positive. The WSB provided one more way to help students that were missing school. The WSB added one more strategy to help solve the puzzle of truancy. Throughout this process I have learned that families, schools, staff and school divisions need to work together to help educate all students. Schools are not always about having the newest teaching tools. Education is about having caring people in schools who take time to help. Students did not remember what teachers exactly taught them but they remembered the skills and how the staff made them feel. I have learned that it is easier to judge but a better use of your time is to help solve the problem and be positive. Lastly, it is important to remember parents are sending you the most important asset they have; their child and they are doing the best

they can at that particular time. It is our role and responsibility as the school system is to

help as much as we can and to stay positive and encouraging.

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Appendixes

Appendix A ENREB Approval Certificate

Human Ethics
208 - 194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB
Canada R3T 2N2
Fax 204-269-7173

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA | Office of the Vice-President
(Research and International)
Research Ethics and Compliance

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

May 7, 2012

TO: **Chantal Muzyka**   (Advisor Z. Lutfiyya)
              Principal Investigator

FROM: **Stan Straw, Chair**
              Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: **Protocol #E2012:034**
              **"Truancy: Perspectives of Key Individuals in the Use of a Walking School
              Bus Program at an Elementary School to Address Attendance Concerns"**

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by
the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to
the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2).   **This approval is valid for one year only**.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the
Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

   -      If you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you
submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to the Office of Research Services, fax
261-0325 - please include the name of the funding agency   and your UM Project
number.   This must be faxed before your account can be accessed.

   -      if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with
you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year
approval;   otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Quality Management Office may request to review research documentation from
this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of
Manitoba *Ethics of Research Involving Humans*.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at:
http://umanitoba.ca/research/orec/ethics/human_ethics_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order
to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.

umanitoba.ca/research/orec

Appendix B Core Certificate

TCPS 2: CORE :: Print my Certificate   Page 1 of 1

Print Certificate

PANEL ON
RESEARCH ETHICS   **TCPS 2: CORE**
Navigating the ethics of human research

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Chantal Muzyka

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: August 18, 2011

http://tcps2core.ca/course/printCertificate   8/18/2011