

## ABSTRACT

### Attachment theory as a lens for examining the school avoidant student

The purpose of this study is to better understand why a school avoidant student has a difficult time staying attached to a school community. For a school avoidant student, the school environment is too challenging to manage resulting in an emotional and physical disengagement from school. A school avoidant student will seek to protect themselves from intense feelings of anxiety and will detach themselves from the school community as a protective measure. Specifically, this study seeks to understand a school avoidant behavior within the lens of attachment theory.

Attachment theory helps to explain why a student doubts or questions the responsiveness of the school community during times of emotional crisis and need. How a student regulates their attachment to a secure school base will determine whether a student is willing to take risks to learn and socialize. This study used a newly developed instrument titled the School Personnel Perceptions of a Quiet Student Scale or SPPQSS and reliability was tested using a correlational, cross-sectional quantitative study using a 5-point Likert Scale. Data were gathered from a non-probability sample of school psychologists, school social workers, guidance counselors, school nurses and teachers. Results indicated that although school avoidance can be defined through the lens of anxiety, at its root, it is about how a student cannot regulate their feelings of attachment which causes them to disengage and isolate from the school community to protect from feeling anxious

Attachment theory as a lens for examining the school avoidant student

By

Monica L. Mandell, LMSW

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Yeshiva University New York

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By

Monica L. Mandell

The Committee for this doctoral dissertation consisted of:

Advisor's Name: Dr. Ronnie Glassman, MA, DSW, LCSW, Clinical Professor Yeshiva University

Committee Member: Dr. Charles Auerbach Ph.D., LCSW Professor, Yeshiva University

Committee Member (outside Yeshiva University): Dr. Andrew Bell, PhD., program director Community Support Services, Westchester County DCMH

Committee Member: Dr. Sari Skolnik-Basulto, PhD, LCSW, TEP, Yeshiva University

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **PROPOSAL OVERVIEW**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study examines how a disorganized attachment to a school community affects a school avoidant student using attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) as the framework for the study. Understanding how a disorganized attachment to a school community affects the school avoidant student will help to address emotional, academic, and social concerns more effectively for the student and the school community. A school avoidant student's poor attachment to a school community can be a result of multiple reasons that will be identified below.

The specific aim of this study is to better understand a school avoidant student's poor attachment to a school environment by better understanding the perceptions of school personnel regarding a student who may be at risk for school avoidance. In this study, a school avoidant student is defined as a quiet student. A quiet student is a student who is unassuming, who sits quietly in a classroom in a subdued and unresponsive manner almost disappearing from view. This student does not present with overt maladaptive behaviors and seems to be unattached to the school community because they do not seek out social relationships. The student's quiet demeanor reflects a withdrawn nature of someone not actively seeking to be engaged.

The type of study being proposed is a correlational, cross-sectional quantitative study using a 5-point Likert Scale research design to measure opinions, beliefs, or attitudes as described by DeVellis, (2017). With WIRB approval, the data were gathered from a non-probability sample of school psychologists, school social workers, guidance counselors, school

nurses and teachers. The scale was disseminated to the office of Pupil Personnel using an electronic survey supported by Qualtrics. Snowball sampling was used to locate all members of the target population. A selected member of the school community was contacted via email to provide consent and a link to send to the other members of the target population.

A school avoidant student can be understood within the lens of three social work values as described in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. The three values are the value of social justice, the value of the dignity and worth of the person and the value of recognizing the central importance of human relationships (NASW, Code of Ethics). These three values reflect the idea of ensuring equal access to an education on behalf of a student who is not able to self-advocate. At the heart of these three values is the notion of respecting the dignity and worth of a student who is not able to attend school because of their disorganized attachment to a school community which has led to an inability to modulate or self-regulate feelings of anxiety.

#### RELEVANT IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

Daily school attendance is the foundation upon which a student's ability to succeed later in life rests. For some students, however, the school environment is an uncomfortable setting which the student wants to avoid leading to and resulting in a disengagement from the school community and loss of a school experience. A school avoidant student's desire to become detached and alienated from their school community leads to multiple detrimental outcomes such as lifelong medical concerns, mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression and dropping out of school (Sobba, 2018; Heyne, 2018; Allen, et al 2018).



School avoidance is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that has interrelated causes. There are many definitions and reasons for school avoidance (Kearney, et al, 2007, Libbey, 2004). This study operationalizes school avoidance not within the lens of anxiety or depression or due to externalizing concerns such as bullying. But rather, the study conceptualizes school avoidance through the lens of attachment. Many students experience school as a positive relationship in which they are supported and encouraged to take educational risks and to benefit from social activities and interactions. For some students, these experiences are overwhelming and difficult to manage. These students begin to disengage from a school experience of learning, teachers, and peers.

These students avoid school because they doubt and question the responsiveness of the school community during their times of emotional crisis and need. And, as a result, the school avoidant student will utilize a variety of strategies to deactivate their attachment to a school community. For a school avoidant student, the act of detaching themselves is a self-protective measure to shield them from the feelings of stress and anxiety (Winterheld, 2017). A school avoidant student chronically conceals their emotions or worries and will refuse to express their distress to school personnel. They become quiet and unassuming, often disappearing into the background, easy to lose sight of in a busy and interactive classroom or school building.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **STUDY PROBLEM**

This is a true story. A fourteen-year-old male began the 9th grade in a school district known for its academics, sports and school spirit. He entered the school building on the first day of school and went to his homeroom to start the school year. For several weeks, he followed this routine. Then, at some point, early in the school year, he remained in the library through one whole period, and no one noticed. He tried this again and again, disappearing into the school bathroom, school library or cafeteria. He was so quiet that it was easy for him to disappear from public view. This slow walk towards self-isolation in a large and boisterous school community went on for nearly a year and a half. Then, his mother began to see dropping grades, answered phone calls from the school about missed classes and noted an uptick in the number of days her son complained about feeling too sick to attend school. The mother also noted how her son remained at home rarely going out with peers or with family. By this point, the now 10th grader had missed nearly an entire year of school and was in danger of failing once again.

Why did this student decide to disengage and disconnect from their school community?  
Why did this student decide that self-isolation was better than interacting and engaging with a school community that he had known since kindergarten?

#### **DEFINITIONS OF A SCHOOL AVOIDANT STUDENT, TRUANCY and CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

A school avoidant student is defined as a student who refuses to attend school (Ingul, H., et al, 2019). Kearney (2007) defined a school avoidant student as a student who is missing large amounts of school time because of internalizing and externalizing behaviors and emotions.

He further noted (Kearney 2007) that the school avoidant student can also be defined as someone who skips classes, habitually arrives late, presents with somatic complaints, or who is having feelings of dread about attending school. In general, a school avoidant student seeks to avoid aversive social or evaluative situations and will attempt to avoid or escape a school setting (Kearney & Albano, 2004).

Although similar in behaviors, school avoidance is defined more broadly for students who are truant or chronically absent. Truancy is defined as frequent, unexcused, or prolonged absence from school (Havik, et al 2015). Truancy can also be considered as either a student's or parent's decision to miss parts or all a school day, i.e. being absent for a reason that the school district had not defined as legitimate (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017). Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least ten percent or nearly one month of instructional time of a school year, which may or may not be a result of a mental health issue (Attendance Works; US Department of Education 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection).

There are no clear data regarding how many students are specifically school avoidant. Often, data on school avoidant students are subsumed by data on truant or chronically absent students. As reported in Attendance Works, a not-for-profit organization that studies chronic absenteeism, prior to the nation-wide school closures due to COVID-19, there were an estimated 8 million students who did not attend school in the 2017-2018 school year. As per the US Department of Education 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection, every grade level at over 800 US school districts coast to coast is plagued with chronic absenteeism. National rates are similar for males and females, although the reasons may differ (Allen, et al 2018). Students who are new English speakers are less likely to be chronically absent than non-English speaking students, and students with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent (Allen, et al,

2018). Attendance Works further noted that students in poor health, who are experiencing economic hardship, have limited access to Wi-Fi or have unequal access to school are more likely to be chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism or a truant student can be defined simply as a third grader who is having difficulty mastering grade level reading skills and refuses to attend school, a sixth grader who is in danger of failing and unable to pass into 7<sup>th</sup> grade, or a tenth grader who may be experiencing homelessness and is not able to maintain daily attendance.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

School districts define school avoidance within the context of compulsory education. In the United States, every state requires parents to enroll their children in a public or state accredited private school (appendix #2). In New York State, the State Department of Education mandates in Article 65, Part 1, section 3205 that in each school district throughout the state, minors between the ages of six to sixteen shall attend school to receive instruction (N.Y. Educ. Law, § 3205 (2019)). The law continues to stipulate that a parent shall ensure that their child attends school for instructional purposes (N.Y. Educ. Law, § 3212 (2019)). If a parent does not send their child to school, according to section 3212, a parent can be charged with violating the law and will be fined or placed in jail for each violation. Section 3205 (N.Y. Educ. Law, § 3205 (2019)) also provides some exemptions for not attending school such as for parents who place their child in a private or parochial school, parents who prefer homeschooling, students who are emancipated minors, students who already received a high school diploma or for religious exemption.

Under New York State's compulsory education law (N.Y. Educ. Law, § 3212 (2019)), there is no state mandated process or policy for addressing problems of school avoidance, truancy or chronic absenteeism. Instead, each school district develops and implements its own

attendance policy in which decisions about lateness, unexcused absences and school discipline regarding excessive absences are developed as part of local school policy. Individual student handbooks for every school district explain in writing attendance rules and policies. As per the New York State Attendance Regulation Commissioner's Regulation 104.1 (Regs. tit. 8, § 104.1 (2019)) the purpose of daily attendance records is to ensure the maintenance of adequate records by verifying attendance of all registered students in a school district. Daily attendance records confirm that students are meeting compulsory attendance requirements, that the school district knows the whereabouts of each student, can identify patterns and provide data for interventions and to ensure the maintenance of daily attendance for state aid purposes. Students with many unexcused absences may face in school disciplinary actions or be referred to juvenile court as a minor in need of supervision (N.Y. Educ. Law, § 3212n (4), 3233 (2019)). There is no policy recommendation to follow up with the mental health status of a student who has a history of unexcused absences.

The history of compulsory education in the United States reflects the English Poor Laws promulgated in 1601. The English Poor Laws required that destitute youth receive vocational training in schools (Katz, 1996). In the United States, the first compulsory education law was enacted in 1642 by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The importance of the establishment of the compulsory education law by the Massachusetts Bay Colony was that it transformed the provision of education from a moral imperative to a legal imperative (Katz, 1976). The law required that supervisors, known as selectmen (Katz, 1976) were charged with ensuring that parents did not neglect their obligations and were to report to the court any offenses committed by the parent if they neglected their parental duty towards educating their children. This education law was the first attempt at codifying moral and social values as the law aimed both to

train children for labor purposes while, at the same time, maintaining Puritan religious values (Katz, 1976). Additionally, these laws became the framework for establishing systematic educational standards that required parental supervision.

By the 1800's, the social landscape of the nation began to change very quickly due to industrialization and increased immigration which led to bigger and more crowded cities and straining Puritan values. To help integrate the immigrants, the idea for a common school became vitally important as it would intertwine Puritan/Christian values with democratic values thereby teaching immigrants how to be patriotic and productive American citizens. From 1852 to 1918, compulsory school attendance was enacted in all states. However, there was little uniformity from state to state for the enforceability of these laws and parents took their children out of school when needed at home.

As the 19th century rolled into the 20th century, there was a movement to reform child labor laws to ensure compliance with compulsory education. However, due to the lack of uniformity in the implementation of child labor laws and compulsory education throughout the nation (Shuman, 2017), many reformers believed that it was time for Congressional action. However, pushing child labor and compulsory education laws through Congress became difficult as it was felt by Congress that this was a violation of state rights and was therefore unconstitutional (Shuman, 2017). As Congress debated, children were moving between states for jobs in factories or mines and ignoring state law for compulsory education. With increasing public support for curtailing child labor laws so that children could attend school in their hometown, a law was passed in 1916 using the Commerce Clause of the Constitution. This clause provided the Federal government with a loophole as it gave Congress the authority to regulate commerce between states or with foreign nations. Upon passage, states could no longer

export children to other states for employment which then paved the way for the development of a systematic regulation for school attendance.

By 1930, school attendance was a legal requirement in every state. This allowed schools to hire truant officers with legal power to ensure attendance through the passage of child labor regulations. Moreover, state aid became tied with daily attendance records which documented how many students attended daily, how many parents and children were held legally liable for non-attendance and how many students were sent to correctional institutions for failure to attend school (Katz, 1976). Over the decades and into the 21st century, this policy has remained in place and is enforced on the state level. Data on daily attendance only provide information about who is not attending school but do not provide information as to why the student is not attending. Thus, policy with regards to daily attendance remains punitive and is not reflective of the emotional needs of a school avoidant student. Having a better understanding of the emotional needs of a school student can help to bolster daily attendance, a critical component for school success.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK VALUES IN HELPING SCHOOL AVOIDANT STUDENTS

Research has shown that school avoidant students experience short and long-term negative effects on academic performance, social functioning, and negative health outcomes (Allen, et al 2018, Kearney, et al 2004; & Kearney, Albano, 2004 & Ingul, et al, 2019).

However, for a school avoidant student there is the added emotional stress that the school environment has become difficult to manage and results in an emotional and physical disengagement from school. The disengagement reflects an insecure attachment that the student has with the school community which results in a loss of a school experience with friends, academic pursuits, and other school related activities such as sports or plays.

The assumed emotional turmoil felt by a school avoidant student can be viewed within the lens of three social work values as described in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. As stated in this chapter, the social work Code of Ethics offers a set of values, principles and standards that guide the way for social workers to help their clients in an ethical manner (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Additionally, the purpose of social work is to promote human and community well-being using a person-in-environment framework (Council of Social Work Education, 2015 edition). Thus, social work values focus on engaging all participants in a common and shared goal of promoting, restoring, and enhancing the well-being of the school avoidant student by enveloping them within a caring and supportive strategy for academic and social success. In his article, “The value base of social work,” Charles Levy (Winter, 1973) writes that values commit us to action and often are reflective of the societal values that we may share with others. If we believe that a school avoidant student is entitled to be educated even if the learning takes place outside of school, then there is value that can be shared by all, and the value becomes a standardized reflection of a collective responsibility (Levy, 1973).

As stated earlier, the three social work values that reflect how to best support a school avoidant student are the value of social justice, the value of the dignity and worth of the person and the value of recognizing the central importance of human relationships (NASW, Code of Ethics). Social justice for a school avoidant student refers to pursuing social change on behalf of a student who does not know how to advocate for themselves. In this value, there is the drive to ensure access to information, services and resources that can best help school avoidant students. Respecting the dignity and worth of a school avoidant student refers to the way we are mindful of the emotional conflict the school avoidant student has regarding their school community. The



emotional conflict may involve many reactions, among them anxiety which emanates from feeling overwhelmed, a fear of failure, frustration, or denial. Working within this value allows us to resolve conflicts and to promote self-determination in a socially responsible manner. And recognizing the importance of human relationships helps to re-engage the school avoidant student with their school community as we help the school avoidant student emotionally recharge and restore themselves.

#### THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER WITH A SCHOOL AVOIDANT STUDENT?

Helping a school avoidant student return to a school community can be difficult to resolve because school communities, outside mental health professionals and parents have different perspectives leading to a disconnected and fragmented set of expectations for the school avoidant student (Eber & Nelson, 1997; Eber et al, 2002; Yu, et al, 2020). Helping to merge the school community, outside mental health professionals and the family system will provide a unified approach that considers the emotional needs of the school avoidant student. This multi-system approach is known as wraparound service provision. Wraparound services consider the student within their environment recognizing and validating the student's complex emotional and behavioral needs (Eber & Nelson, 1997). Eber et al (2002) write that wraparound is not a service or set of services. Rather, it is a process that is collaborative and culturally responsive. The wraparound process focuses on the design, implementation, and coordination of support networks between the school avoidant student, families, school community and mental health professionals (Eber et al 2002& Yu, et al 2020). Developing tailored and targeted supports and interventions will envelope the student in wraparound services that are practical and realistic and, most importantly, reflect the need of the student.

Using wraparound services helps to create an atmosphere of collegiality and shared responsibility to target the specific area of need for the school avoidant student. The integration of different systems emphasizes a strengths-based set of interventions that are committed to blending all perspectives to achieve consensus on desired outcomes (Eber et al, 2002). An effective wraparound team seeks to think outside of the box to address the unique needs for each individual student. Although school avoidant students represent a tiny fraction of a school population, they require a significant amount of time and resources to address their needs. And school communities have begun to recognize that school avoidant students have chronic and debilitating emotional needs that require a support system that is encouraging rather than punitive.

A school community, in collaboration with parents and outside mental health providers can effectively facilitate the wraparound process because a school community can provide structure and daily routine, offer a wide range of student support services, provide special education services via the provision of an Individualized Educational Plan, integrate different models of learning or learning environments and provide positive school interactions (Yu, et al 2020). The wraparound process offers all participants the opportunity to collaborate using positive and strengths-based interventions that consider the specific needs of the school avoidant student, the family system, and the school community.

## CONCLUSION

For this study, school avoidance can best be defined as the student's inability to regulate their attachment to a secure school base. If there is no mechanism to maintain a stabilized relationship or develop a secure inner working model, a school-avoidant student will be unable

to modulate their feelings of anxiety and stress. The insecure and disorganized attachment causes the school avoidant student to avoid school at all costs (Allen, et al 2018, Kearney, et al 2004, Heyne, 2019). The student ultimately will feel that there is no one who can provide a safety net for their emotional distress. And their bedroom at home becomes a sanctuary and a protective barrier from feeling overwhelmed.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

There is neither one profile for a school avoidant student nor is there one definition for a school avoidant student (Kearney, et al, 2007, Libbey, 2004). Although it can be difficult to know how or why a student stops attending school, what can be ascertained for certain, is that for a series of reasons, a student finds it either extremely difficult or absolutely impossible to attend school. Although there are multiple, multifactorial reasons why a student stops attending school, the one theme in common is a student stops attending school for an extended period for complex reasons other than simply not wanting to complete academic tasks. And, as a result, the student feels paralyzed and is unable to access help or engage with the school community.

#### **REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON SCHOOL AVOIDANCE**

This chapter seeks to analyze the research conducted on school avoidant students. Based on a search in YU Find, an EBSCOHost Discovery service, the number of journal articles mentioning school avoidance in the period of 2000 to 2021 yielded 635,537 citations. This search proceeded to systematically narrow down to include only peer reviewed journals and academic journals. This was narrowed down, once again, to only include journal reviews and removing business journals. Changing the search term from school avoidance to using school avoidance in quotes (“school avoidance”) and searching only between the years of 2010 to 2021, yielded 1774 citations. Searching for “school avoidance” + school climate yielded 728 citations which was reduced to 429 citations when adding peer reviewed journals and searching only in

the years of 2010-2021. When searching for “school avoidance” + attachment there were 361 citations with the same criteria of peer reviewed and search years. When searching for school avoidance + school refusal, also with the same criteria of peer review and same search years, there were 236 citations. Using the same search terms in the YU FIND, EBSCOHost Discovery service yielded a plethora of theses and dissertations on school avoidance, truancy or school refusal focusing on mental health, externalizing or social reasons. There were no dissertations that focused on attachment theory. Google Scholar was also utilized after a systematic search conducted on EBSCOHost Discovery service led to related articles on Google Scholar which then led to more found articles on school avoidance.

The literature review presents 22 studies that were all published in peer reviewed journals. The search for journals included studies and samples which focused on students ranging from Kindergarten to 12th grade. All the studies focused on students who experienced some type of school avoidance for a period of time. Both US and international studies were included. International studies concerning students in Canada, Germany, Egypt, England, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Turkey were also included. There was a wide range of methodologies, a mix of quantitative and qualitative studies and reviews of literature on the subject. The authors were faculty members and a few incorporated research completed by others noted in this literature review into their own research. There were a few studies that included and focused on students with a psychiatric diagnosis or psychiatric hospitalizations. Studies that were included in the literature review also had to be reflective of gender, socio-economic status, grade, or academic abilities. However, it should be noted that each study reflected the grades of the building. Elementary students did not mix with middle school students or with high school students. A few of the studies had to have included questions based on the School Refusal

Assessment Scale-Revised as designed by Christopher Kearney (2006) as well as other questionnaires about behavior, depression or anxiety scales and school.

The literature review spanned several different themes which included resilience of students, relationships in the school community, mental health and/or psychiatric diagnoses, the role of the family system, the difference between truancy and school avoidance and how to best provide services using preventive measures. These themes are not independent of one another, each interlacing concepts. As noted by Kearney (2007) school avoidance is an umbrella term that encompasses students who miss large amounts of time at school, students who skip classes, students who habitually arrive late, who present with somatic complaints, and who have maladaptive behaviors or feelings of dread about attending school.

## **Findings**

### **LACK OF CONSENSUS ON A DEFINITION FOR SCHOOL AVOIDANCE**

The literature review illustrates that there is no consensus on how to define school avoidance or even how to refer to school avoidance. Some authors refer to school avoidance as anxiety-based school refusal (Sibeoni, et al 2018; Elliot & Place 2018; Heyne, et al 2011; Secer & Ulas, 2020; Ogilvie, et al 2018). Others, such as Baker and Bishop (2015) define school avoidance as children who fear school and avoid attending. Knollman, et al (2010) view school avoidance within a mental health framework specifically on students who exhibit internalizing and externalizing maladaptive behaviors (Kearney, 2007). Using the mental health framework, some studies sought to understand somatic symptoms (Vesterling & Koglin, 2019) while one analyzed feelings of well-being (Phan & Ngu, 2015). Two studies focused on the role of the parent (Carless, et al 2015; Swanson, et al 2012). Two analyzed preventive measures

(Elsherbiny, 2017; Knollman, et al 2010). And three used the framework of truancy as a means of understanding school avoidance (Ek & Eriksson, 2013; Keppens & Spruyt, 2017; Elliot & Place, 2018). Although there may not be a consensus on the definition of school avoidance, the underlying theme is that a student's decision to stop attending school was not made suddenly and is reflective of multiple interconnected reasons. And, as a result, the student feels paralyzed to access or engage with the school community.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

School avoidance is not particular to one country, one type of student nor socio-economic class. And, although school avoidance, in general, is the same no matter where the student resides, as noted by Elliot and Place (2017), school avoidance is not a diagnostic term used either in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 5th edition nor in the World Health Organization International Classification of Diseases 10th or 11th edition. The key characteristics of school avoidance is its heterogeneity (Kearney, et al 2003). As described by Kearney (Kearney, et al 2003), school avoidant students commonly suffer from externalized behaviors such as noncompliance to parent or school staff, defiance, aggression, eloping or other maladaptive behaviors. They also suffer from internalized behaviors such as depression and somatic behaviors. However, specifically, school avoidance, as per Kearney (2003), is comorbid with anxiety because these students experience problematic levels of stress.

The basis of many of these studies reflected the 4 concepts described in the functional model of school behavior as created by Kearney, et al (2003). The functional model states that students avoid school for four reasons: (1) to avoid negative stimuli in a school setting; (2) to escape aversive social or evaluative situations; (3) to gain attention; and (4) to gain tangible

rewards outside of school. Kearney (2007) tested this functional model in a study involving 222 students who were experiencing school avoidant behaviors and were attending an outpatient clinic specializing in school refusal. The sample included 134 boys and 88 girls with a mean age of 11.69. Students were of different races and socioeconomic status. And, on average, the students had missed 38.2% of school days. Different assessments were utilized which included the Children's Depression Inventory, Fear Survey Schedule for Children-Revised, Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale, School Refusal Assessment Scale-Child. Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children. Parental assessments which included Child-Behavior Checklist and the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Parent were also utilized. Results of the study indicated that understanding the function of the school avoidant behavior rather than the behavior can be instructive in understanding school absenteeism. Specifically, understanding the positive and negative reinforcers may aid in understanding the need to skip school. Although understanding the function to miss school is important, this study did not address the emotional connection that a student has with a school. It analyzed internalized feelings of anxiety and depression, but not of social anxiety or problems related to attachment.

One of the common problems for school avoidant students may be associated with somatoform symptoms. In a systematic review of literature and meta-analysis, Vesterling and Koglin (2019) analyzed the empirical research that studied the relationship between attachment and somatoform symptoms in children and adolescents. Search words included attachment, bonding, psychosomatic, ache or pain. Studies from 1990 to 2018 were included and had to have somatoform as the dependent variable. The authors searched through six databases that highlighted 4994 studies which were then narrowed down to 15 studies and with 10 being used



in the meta-analysis. Findings indicated that there was little research conducted on the association between attachment and somatoform symptoms in children and adolescents. The main reason for the dearth of information is that there is no one definition or operationalization for attachment and somatoform symptoms. This resulted in multiple understandings of the outcomes in the studies analyzed. Although this meta-analysis was one of the few to examine the relationship between attachment style and internalizing behaviors, its focus was on the definition of attachment according to John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992). in their seminal studies on attachment theory in infants and children. And, as a result, the relationship between attachment style and somatoform symptoms was not reflective of students and their attachment to a school community.

As noted by many, mental illness is a significant feature for school avoidant students (Sibeoni, et al 2018; Ogilvie, et al, 2018). Sibeoni, et al (2018) analyzed a qualitative study conducted with French students to understand the lived experiences of these students who received psychiatric treatment for anxiety-based school refusal. The study included 41 participants with 20 adolescents, nine of whom were girls and 11 who were boys and 21 parents, 17 of whom were mothers and 4 were fathers. The adolescents ranged in ages from 13 to 18 years old, had a psychiatric diagnosis and had been psychiatrically hospitalized or received day treatment.

Overall, the study found that both the adolescents and their parents believed that the psychiatric treatment they received with regards to anxiety-based school refusal was valuable. However, the adolescents and parents diverged on what they considered to be valuable. One example is that the adolescents understood that their feelings of internal malaise, distress, feelings of depression, anxiety and even anguish (Sibeoni, et al 2018) contributed to anxiety-

based school refusal. More importantly, this study found that these adolescents felt invisible because no-one believed their feelings. Parents, on the other hand, desired a quick return to school as a return to school was the same as recovery (Sibeoni, et al 2018). Generally, the study's findings found that parents desired a short-term, effective treatment while the adolescents required time to allow for change in thought to help alleviate their feelings of anxiety. Specifically, this study focused on the value of a long-term therapeutic relationship between the student and psychiatrist. It does not address how that long term care can be established as a partnership between the psychiatrist and school system.

Students who were hospitalized because of their school-related difficulties participated in a Canadian study to understand how students' engagement with the school environment affected the severity of their clinical symptoms (Ogilvie, et al, 2018). The study included 161 students with the mean average age of 15.41 and most participants being female. 70% of the participants had no prior admission to the psychiatric hospital while 30%, or a third had one prior admission to the hospital. Results indicated that the reason for admission to the psychiatric hospital was consistent with feelings of intense anxiety due to academic difficulties and poor school engagement. This study focused on “low investment” (Ogilvie, et al 2018) in schoolwork due to emotional difficulties. It did not address how to prepare school teams to help school avoidant students for re-entry into a school system in a supported manner.

Studies also focused on the feelings of well-being and resilience (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Secer & Ulas, 2020; Phan & Ngu, 2015). In a study focusing on four secondary school-age children residing in the South of England, Baker and Bishop (2015) sought to better understand the voice of students identified as school avoidant. These four students participated in an interpretative phenomenological analysis, to better understand their experience. Baker & Bishop

(2015) believed that the voices of the students were not being heard and that this resulted in limited ability to directly address the emotional needs of the students. Student participants ranged in age from 11 to 16, did not attend school for at least one full academic year and were assigned to receive home-based instruction. This study sought to answer how children understand their experiences as school avoidant students, and how this help related service providers address student concerns and needs.

Results of the study illustrated how labeling the problem can impact responses from a school team or forms of intervention which may be more punitive rather than therapeutic (Elliot & Place, 2017). All four students expressed that they felt ignored or that their experiences were reframed by school staff. This led to suppressing their emotions which made these students feel lost in the system (Baker & Bishop 2015). These students also expressed feelings of social isolation and anxiety although each student's anxiety was a result of different familial, social, and economic factors. This study was very small as it only included 4 student experiences which is not enough to generalize to a larger population of school avoidant students. Although it provided some points on how to best address the needs of these students, the suggestions emphasize professional development and connecting students to multiple service providers rather than on the underlying issues for student school avoidance.

In a Turkish study, Secer & Ulas (2020) examined whether anxiety, social and adaptive functioning and school refusal affect school attachment and does resilience play a mediator role? The study included 452 high school students ranging in age from 13- to 18-year-old, with a mean average age of 15.13. Of the participants, 47.8% were male and 52.2% were female. Kearney's school refusal assessment scale was used as well as an Anxiety Sensitivity Index, Academic Resilience Scale, Social and Adaptive Functioning Scale and School Attachment Scale. Results

showed that as a student had intense expectations that there will be a negative situation at school, feelings of anxiety can become heightened. However, being academically resilient buffers the student from feeling disengaged from the school environment (Secer & Ulas, 2020). In fact, feeling overwhelmed or anxious will reinforce a student's academic resilience. This study did not address how the school refusal assessment scales and the other scales to determine levels of anxiety, academic resiliency and social and adaptive functioning were normed to address cultural differences and cultural perceptions regarding education.

## WELL-BEING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A SCHOOL COMMUNITY

As with school avoidance, Libbey (2004) states that school connectedness has many terms. The goal of the study is to identify the key words that are associated with a student's relationship to a school community. The key words are positive orientation to school, school attachment, school bonding and school climate. Despite the variety of names, Libbey (2004) found that there were consistent themes such as a sense of belonging to a school community, positive peer relationships, fair and effective discipline and supportive teacher relationships that contributed to a student's ability to be successful in school.

How important is school connectedness to a school avoidant student? Kristen Sobba (2018) states that school connectedness is very important as school connectedness creates and maintains social networks that enable the school community to function efficiently. In her review of literature, Sobba (2018) noted that there is a series of variables that impacts a student's decision regarding school avoidance. These variables are bullying, mental health, low academic achievement, neighborhood, and fear of victimization. However, if there is social capital (Sobba, 2018) in which a social network can consistently provide cohesion and a sense of trust that all members will be taken care of equally, group members can rely on and reciprocate those values

as established by the social network. Sobba (2018) focuses on three component parts of a school community or school social network system which help to maintain a sense of connection. These are participation in activities, closeness to peers and closeness to adults. Sobba (2018) noted that the maintenance of strong and flexible social networks can go a long way in decreasing school avoidance.

An Australian mixed methods study involving 336 students ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old with a mean average age of 15.09 and 71 staff members explored how students experienced school connectedness and peer relationships. Qualitative data were collected via student and staff focus groups and student diaries using a 109-item researcher developed questionnaire (Gowing, 2019). Results showed one meta-theme which is that school is a place of opportunities. Sub-themes include relational opportunities for students with peers, and staff with other staff members. However, for students, peer relationships were an asset and helped to maintain connections. Staff members understand that weak ties can mean a paucity of social connections. And, more importantly, if a student was not connected to other parts of the school community, they were less likely to engage with the school community. Although this study illustrates the importance of maintaining social connections, its limitation is that it is not representative of all students or staff as the study focused on one school.

Although connections to the school community can provide an anchor, equally important is the impact of personal well-being on a student. As noted by Phan & Ngu (2015) school is more than academic achievement. It is also about intellectual curiosity, motivation to learn and to participate in non-educational activities with peers. To determine the role personal well-being plays in student happiness, Phan & Ngu (2015) developed a theoretical framework with corresponding measures titled the Academic Well-Being Experience Questionnaire. The

purpose of the questionnaire was to focus on interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences when relating to others and how those experiences affect emotions and feelings and non-academic functioning. This study, conducted in Australia had 230 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were part of a larger study that included several countries in the Asia-Pacific region. A hard copy of the questionnaire was distributed to the students. Findings suggested that personal well-being is an important component of a student's connection to a school environment. The study did not include the results of the larger study or how students from different school communities differed in feelings and school functioning.

A qualitative study focused on the importance of maintaining a positive and supportive school community. In this study conducted with four Canadian students, one girl and three boys in grades 8 through 11, explored the students' feelings about maintaining school connections (Wilkins, 2008). Students were interviewed several times for a month answering structured questions. At the end and after each transcript was coded, three themes of school climate emerged; academic achievement, discipline, and relationships with teachers. Each of these four students had left their respective schools and was placed in this school due to school avoidance. Each of the students felt that the school climate in their original schools was not a safe learning environment. By switching to a new school, with a smaller setting, these students felt connected and safe and were able to collaborate both academically and socially with peers and staff. Although informative, this study represented a small sample of students who had specific reasons for leaving their original school and may not be reflective of all students who feel disconnected from a school community.

Each of these studies was important in understanding how a student can maintain school connectedness. However, each of the studies explored a variety of different themes that were

reflective of the cultural norms of that student body. How to implement these suggestions in other cultures or in any classroom was not addressed in any of the studies.

## ROLE OF CAREGIVER

School avoidance affects the family system. Family systems that maintain ill-defined roles, enmeshed relationships, and high levels of conflict between and among members of the family system can be considered a predictor for school avoidant behaviors (Carless, et al 2015). Additionally, this is compounded if the parent suffers from a psychopathology such as depression or anxiety. If a parent feels competent in their parenting, they will show resilience in dealing with challenging behaviors from their children. Careless, et al (2015) sought to examine how a parent's sense of efficacy affects their child who is a school avoidant student. The study sought to answer whether parental self-efficacy differed in families with school avoidant students from those whose students attended school. What are the factors that contribute to parental self-efficacy and does lack of parental self-efficacy predict school refusal?

A total of 60 students and their parents participated in the study. Students ranged in age from 12 to 17 with a median age of 13.68 years and 53% of the students were male. The Beck Depression Inventory-II, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and the Efficacy subscale of Parent Sense of Competence scale was used for the parents. The Children's Depression Inventory-II and the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders were used with the students as well as the General Functioning subscale of the Family Assessment Device to determine overall family functioning. Results indicated that parents with children who were school avoidant had lower levels of parental self-efficacy than parents whose children attended school. Parents with psychopathology had low levels of parental self-efficacy which contributed to family dysfunction. It is unclear as to whether parents with low feelings of parental self-efficacy play a

role in predicting school avoidance. Results indicated that feelings of parental self-efficacy played one part in the family system and although a contributing factor, was one factor out of many problems in the family system of a school avoidant student.

Although not specifically addressing school avoidance, Jodi Swanson, et al (2012) used a cumulative home risk assessment to determine whether the home environment affects achievement, peer and teacher relationships that may lead to school avoidance. In their study, Swanson, et al (2012) sought to determine whether students who had dysfunctional home environments would demonstrate poorer academic performance than peers whose home life was functional. And, specifically, whether these students could regulate their behaviors and emotions using effortful control. Swanson, et al (2015) defined effortful control as the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors to allow for shifting focus and attention towards completion of tasks. Students who exhibit high levels of effortful control can tune out distractions and focus on the teacher or test. The ability to maintain effortful control leads to more favorable teacher and peer interactions.

This study sought to understand the process of effortful control and whether dysfunctional home environments created more risks for students to focus and maintain attention in the classroom. The study consisted of 266 children from two elementary schools in Arizona. The participants were a mix of Mexican American, White, and other identified races, of different socioeconomic status and academic abilities. Results indicated that unsupportive home environments with multiple problems inhibit the child's development of effortful control. Thus, these students are at risk not only for poor academic achievement, but also for developing and maintaining poor relationships with peers and teachers as their behaviors in the classroom can cause problems.



These studies illustrate the connection between unsupportive home environments and lack of effortful control that suggest a range of insecure attachment styles within the family system. Thus, the ways in which home and school environments are connected to each other will determine how safe a student feels to take risks and learn in a school environment.

#### IS SCHOOL AVOIDANCE DIFFERENT FROM TRUANCY?

Kearney (2007) states that school avoidance is an umbrella term that includes chronic absenteeism, school truancy, school phobia or anxiety-based school refusal. Although school avoidance encompasses multiple psychosocial factors, Kearney (2014) defines school avoidance as a student refusal to attend school and/or having difficulty remaining in classes during a school day. Truancy is defined as a student's and/or a parentally motivated act of non-attendance in which a student will miss part or the entire school day without a legitimate excuse or reason as defined by the school or state law (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017). Truancy can also be defined as being related to anti-school sentiments such as the student finds school boring and seeks more rewarding activities outside of school (Havik, et al, 2015).

Truancy, like school avoidance, is multifactorial and may also be a result of poor social and peer relationships and limited access to social networks. One qualitative study in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, interviewed 13 boys and 7 girls, to learn about their experiences as truant students. These students had a history of changing schools, at least once, during their secondary education and resided in low income, single parent homes. Two interviewers conducted the interviews, one being female for the girls and the other male for the boys. The interviewers asked questions in narrative form to gain historical perspective as research suggests that the truancy evolves from occasional to persistent over time (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017).

Results indicated that the adolescents interviewed were able to recall, in detail, the first time they were truant as it elicited feelings of excitement and fear of getting caught. Secondly, there was a push and pull effect in that there were competing compelling reasons to remain in school and to leave school. Thirdly, once the behavior began, it was hard to curtail and only intensified throughout the school year. Overall, the theme that emerged is that truancy, like school avoidance, is the gradual pulling away and disengagement from the school community.

Another study conducted by Havik, et al (2015) sought to better understand school avoidance and truancy by investigating a student's perception of their relationships with peers and the way their teacher maintains structured classroom social interactions and predictability in classroom activities and expectations. This was a quantitative study, conducted in Norway which involved students from 45 schools in seven different municipalities ranging from urban to rural. A total of 3629 students from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade with ages ranging from 11-15 years old participated. Boys represented 51% of the respondents and girls represented 49% of the respondents. Additionally, 38.4% attended primary school and 61.6% attended secondary school. Results of the study appeared to suggest that lack of peer interactions may be a risk factor for school avoidance rather than truancy. Furthermore, a teacher's management of social interactions was important in primary school and classroom predictability was more important in secondary school in the reduction of risk for school avoidance and truancy.

## PREVENTIVE OR THERAPEUTIC SERVICES

Research suggests that the most successful treatment for school avoidant students is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as it utilizes psychoeducation, relaxation and social skills training, gradual exposure, and cognitive restructuring (Elliot & Place 2019). Ek & Erikson (2015) reviewed the literature on school avoidance, truancy, and school phobia. Part of the study

focused on treatment, such as CBT because CBT can be helpful in alleviating anxiety and depression. In another study, the use of CBT was examined in a non-randomized trial. The hypothesis was that using CBT as a treatment model would increase school attendance, reduce school phobia and feelings of anxiety and depression, and increase parental self-efficacy. Participants were referred from an out-patient clinic, schools, social services, general practitioners, and mental health professionals. All the participants were of Dutch origin, were between 11 and 17 years old, with a mean age of 14.6, with average intellectual functioning. Fourteen boys and 6 girls participated. All participants had to have a history of school refusal and met the diagnostic criteria for anxiety disorder. A CBT model was implemented with 10 to 14 sessions, one hour with the adolescent and one hour and a half with parents. Results indicated that significant improvements were made during treatment. School attendance increased with a reduction in school phobia. Feelings of social anxiety were also reduced which led to increased social interactions. Parent self-efficacy also improved.

In a German study conducted by the authors (Knollman, et al, 2010), a sample of 89 patients with a mean age of 14.4 years was part of a child and adolescent psychiatric outpatient clinic specializing in school avoidance/refusal. As per the study, each student felt overly challenged within all areas of their life which included school, peer, and family systems. Feelings of failure both academically and socially, conflicts with peers, conflicts within the family system, poor social integration and the perception of an unwelcoming school atmosphere all contributed to feelings of isolation. The study addressed how to resolve school avoidance within a mental health framework using a cognitive behavioral therapeutic model along with antidepressants. The study concluded with early identification by a school team, the possible use

of a mobile mental health team and early psychiatric diagnosis can go a long way in addressing the chronic needs of a school avoidant student.

Another way of assisting these students is via preventive social work programs. In a study that sought to analyze whether a social work prevention program would reduce school avoidance by decreasing negative stimuli, decrease aversive social situations, decrease tangible rewards outside of school and decrease pursuing attention from others. This study, conducted in Egypt, involved 48 students who were chosen randomly. Twenty-eight boys and 20 girls participated with both the students and parents completing the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised. This group was split into the experimental group of 24 students and a control group of 24 students, and the trial lasted one full academic year. Findings indicated that there is a positive effect of a preventive social work program regarding students who exhibit school avoidance as the results were the same in both groups.

#### SCHOOL AVOIDANCE DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL SHUTDOWNS

Studies are just beginning to emerge on the effects of social isolation on children during the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. As stated in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (January 2021) research is suggesting that there is a correlation between social anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. Unique to this period of school closures due to public health mandates surrounding COVID-19, students who had, prior to the pandemic, been experiencing social anxiety may have experienced a lessening of symptoms while schools were closed. Social isolation became a positive reinforcer that provided the student with permission to maintain limited engagement (Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, January 2021). Because socially anxious and/or school avoidant students had minimal social interactions with a school community throughout the

pandemic and school closures, when schools reopened, these students needed time reengaging and reconnecting to the school community.

Nathwani, et al (2021) writes that there is a paucity of research on the impact of school closures on school avoidant students. It may be that research will indicate that there was an increase in school avoidance due to parental concerns of the transmissibility of COVID-19 and the risk of a resultant diagnosis of multisystem inflammatory syndrome (Nathwani, et al 2021). Or research may indicate that the increase in school avoidance in low-income school districts with older school buildings may be attributed to difficulties in maintaining social distancing in those structures. Nathwani, et al (2021) suggest that future research should focus on redefining school attendance and possible curriculum changes to be more adaptive to current student needs and to help prevent student absenteeism.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all students were homeschooled. A recent study focused on teachers' perceptions of how students with a history of school avoidance prior to the pandemic responded to homeschooling during school closures for all students (Havik & Ingul, 2021). Homeschooling is a tool and intervention that is used to help a school avoidant student return to a school environment in a controlled and gradual reintegration into a school community (Havik & Ingul, 2021). This study, conducted in Norway, used a questionnaire developed by Havik & Ingul (2021) and was sent to teachers throughout the country. The scale was disseminated via email and utilized snowball sampling. A total of 248 teachers answered the survey.

The study found that there was a lack of structure which led to students not connecting and participating less in classroom activities and learning. Students also lacked motivation, needing close monitoring to complete tasks. This was a problem for all students. However, for a

school avoidant student, whose lack of motivation was a common problem prior to the pandemic, a teacher was not able to provide either monitoring or adapt to new circumstances. On the other hand, some school avoidant students participated more during remote learning. These students felt more relaxed and felt that they could accomplish schoolwork within the quiet environment of their home.

## CONCLUSION

Research on school avoidance illustrates that there is no consensus on what causes a student to decide to stop attending school. Neither does the research provide a unified definition of school avoidance. What is known is that a student, for reasons other than academic performance, decides to stop attending school for multiple reasons, each interlacing with the other. As stated by Kearney, et al (2003), a school avoidant student experiences heightened feelings of anxiety. And, as a result, the feelings of anxiety overwhelm, perhaps even overpower, the student. Studies found that there was a lack of structure which led to students not connecting and participating less in classroom activities and learning. Students also lacked motivation, needing close monitoring to complete tasks. The purpose of the avoidance is to avoid negative stimuli, tests, or evaluations, to gain attention or to gain tangible benefits outside of school. There is a push/pull effect that sustains compelling reasons to leave school (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017). Once the maladaptive coping mechanisms take root, it is hard to curtail as the feelings only intensify. School avoidance is a gradual process of pulling away and disengaging from school and thereby losing the sense of attachment.

School avoidance research found that mental illness (Sibeoni, et al 2018; Ogilvie, et al, 2018) is another reason for school avoidance. Psychopathologies such as anxiety or depression and feeling socially isolated from both peers and staff were contributing factors for school

refusal. Research seems to suggest that parental efficacy is also important when considering the psychopathology of the student. A stressful home environment can lead to poorer academic performances and strain the student's ability to modulate internal feelings of stress (Swanson, et al 2015). When the student lacks the ability to control those feelings, it may lead to compromised relationships with teachers.

At the same time, research on school avoidance also seems to suggest that students who are academically resilient or who have positive relationships with their school community can overcome feelings of social isolation. If the student has developed social capital (Sobba, 2018), then it is easier for the student to develop reciprocal social relationships in which they can trust the community to take care of their needs. There is a shared sense of togetherness. Additionally, personal well-being (Phan & Ngu, 2015) played a very important role in maintaining a connection to school. Feeling like a member of the group, positive peer relationships, fair discipline and supportive teacher relationships are all vitally important in a student's ability to be successful in a school environment (Libbey, 2004). Lastly, research on school avoidance highlighted the use of therapeutic interventions such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy as a useful treatment option (Ek & Erikson 2015). Or ensuring that early identification by school staff and implementing a mobile mental health team can help to re-engage the student back into the school community (Knollman, et al 2010).

Research indicates that there is an imprecise definition of school avoidance and truancy. School attendance is defined as a student motivated decision to refuse to not attend school while truancy is either a student or parentally motivated decision to not attend school. Both definitions can be understood to be interchangeable and involve multiple psychosocial factors. As described in the study conducted by Keppens & Spruyt (2017) and Havik, et al. (2015) truancy and school

avoidance represent the gradual pulling away from a school community. The difference lies in the nature of the decision. Is the decision to stop attending school and to not return or is the decision to not attend school for a few hours or a few days with the intent of returning.

Although there is plenty of research on school avoidance that seeks to understand contributing factors, there is little information as to why a student decides to disengage or become unattached to a school community. Little is known about how a student develops a healthy attachment to a school community. If the attachment to the school community is weak, how can a student tolerate stress, anxiety or develop social relationships that will allow the student to take academic and social risks. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how attachment theory describes the process of withdrawal by a student from the school community. Specifically, the research focuses on school personnel and how they perceive and interact with a disengaged student who may or may not be at risk for school avoidance. What are the perceptions about attachment and are school personnel missing an important window of opportunity to maintain engagement with a student when the student is becoming disengaged, and no-one notices?



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown that school avoidant students exhibit strong and overwhelming feelings of stress and anxiety (Sibeoni, et al 2018; Elliot & Place 2018; Heyne, et al 2011; Secer & Ulas, 2020; Ogilvie, et al 2019, & Kearney, 2007). School avoidant students present with externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Kearney, 2007) that can become chronic and debilitating and can cause the student to become detached from a school community. Although it can be posited that anxiety helps to explain the feelings of the school avoidant student, the theoretical framework that underpins the diagnosis of anxiety is attachment theory.

#### **AN OVERVIEW OF ATTACHMENT THEORY**

Attachment theory can be understood as relational in which the instinct for safety and protection guides and informs the relationship. The fundamental component of attachment is the need to be close to a specific person or caregiver whose proximity helps to calm feelings of insecurity or fear (Bowlby, 1969; Page, 2017). If an infant or a young child can use the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore and return to for reassurances it will affect the quality of social interactions (Bretherton, 1992). There is a dyadic interaction for the infant or young child in which there is fear of exploring but also curiosity. As the infant or young child explores, the hope is that the curious exploration can be a positive, stress-free experience because

the child has learned to rely upon and trust the base to reassure and protect. This interaction provides an opportunity for the infant or young child to develop social skills with an ever-widening world and becomes the foundation for future social interactions (Page, 2017).

One of the central components of attachment theory is the concept of attachment as a behavioral system in which the child learns that a variety of behaviors can provide and allow for proximity to the caregiver. This behavioral system teaches the young child to be flexible in their responses to environmental changes (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, 2008) as the goal of maintaining proximity to the caregiver never changes. Another component of the behavioral system is the role of emotion as emotion regulates the response, communication, and regulation of feelings of stress or anxiety by the attachment figure to the child. When a caregiver can modulate the emotional response, it enables the young child to re-regulate their feelings of stress and anxiety. This behavioral system is in constant motion as it seeks to maintain homeostasis between the need to explore and the fear of wandering too far from the caregiver (Page, 2017). This need for homeostasis will provide the bases from which the child learns how to regulate their emotions.

The strength of the attachment and its ability to continuously fulfill exploration and secure base functions is based on what is termed internal working model (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). An internal working model is a mental representation of self and others and is based on day-to-day interactions between the young child and caregiver in which the young child learns that the caregiver is both dependable and consistent in meeting their needs (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). This relationship is complementary and mutually affirming as the caregiver is loving and protective and the young child/self feels loved and secure (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). As the young child continues to grow, the relationship between the child and caregiver evolves allowing for reciprocal adjustments and revisions of the

internal working model. This constant revision helps the young child to learn how to adapt and cope with stress especially if the caregiver's response to the change is positive and supportive (Bretherton and Munholland, 2008).

There are four attachment styles that can delineate how the internal working model will regulate emotional needs and maintain secure attachments. These are the secure attachment, the anxious-ambivalent attachment, the anxious-avoidant attachment, and the disorganized-disoriented attachment. Each of the four can be conceptualized on a continuum from secure to disorganized-disoriented. Young children with a history of secure attachments will develop an internal working model that allows them to feel valued and self-reliant. Securely attached children have greater resiliency, relate with peers and adults in a functioning manner and can control their emotions appropriately. They are also more focused, participate in school activities and maintain higher grades (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). As adolescents, they have a better integrated sense of self, appropriate and satisfying social relationships and trust that others will help them relieve stress and anxiety.

Young children who experience insecure attachments are at a higher risk for internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). These children will most likely develop an internal working model of self as being unworthy or incompetent (Bretherton, 1992). These children and adolescents are not able to develop effective strategies to manage stress and anxiety. They do not feel able to depend upon a social network or view others as undependable and feel socially and emotionally isolated. And, as a result, these children or adolescents cannot cope with the stress, and become restless and easily frustrated.

Another way of understanding attachment theory as it pertains to a school avoidant student is linking a weak attachment structure with a fragile ego. Ego functions are how

individuals adapt to the world and their environment (Goldstein, 1984). The ability to modulate, control and tolerate without becoming overwhelmed is necessary to function and relate to others. These functions allow individuals to communicate their thoughts and feelings clearly and in a logical and organized fashion that is oriented towards a shared reality. One of the most important psychological developments is the maturation of thought (Goldstein, 1984) in which there is a shift from primary process thinking to secondary process thinking. Primary process thinking is characterized by wishful thinking, is illogical and has no conception of time. Secondary process thinking is goal-directed, organized, and oriented to reality. Thought processes are affected by stress and anxiety which can lead to an inability to adaptively defend against those feelings.

Defenses protect against feelings of anxiety by keeping the intolerable away from conscious awareness (Goldstein, 1984). A defense mechanism can be used to restore emotional equilibrium and will not impair a person's ability to test reality. However, for others, the fragility of the defense mechanism will cause an individual to feel overwhelmed and disorganized. In this instance, the defense mechanism is rigid and will activate immature defenses and thought processes and distort reality. Efforts at modifying defenses may intensify feelings of stress and anxiety. And, while it may seem that the individual wants to change, the maladaptive defense also acts as a buffer, protecting them from intense feelings (Goldstein, 1984). When the ego functions of a school avoidant child are weak and impaired or are too fragile to withstand intolerable feelings, the defense maintains a rigid set of thoughts which focus on the past rather than the future. The school avoidant student's defense mechanism can distort reality which allows room only for primary thought process rather than secondary thought process and for repressing any unwanted thoughts or feelings out of conscious awareness.

## A DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT AFFECTS A SCHOOL AVOIDANT STUDENT

Attachment between the young child and the caregiver does not terminate at a certain age. It is an integral component of the developmental process, and its success early on can dictate the success or failure of later attachment, especially during the adolescent phase. During this developmental time frame, the adolescent evolves from being a receiver of care to becoming a self-sufficient adult profoundly changing the attachment relationship (Allen, 2008). As adolescence begins, there is a change in cognitive and emotional thinking, providing the adolescent with an opportunity to redefine a sense of self and their relationships with their caregiver or other adults in their lives. In other words, Allen (2008) writes that an adolescent begins to reconstruct what attachment means as they process and balance the need to explore outside the confines of the safety of their caregivers while determining their own autonomy.

This balancing act can and often results in conflicts with caregivers. Teens with secure attachments will handle conflicts in a productive manner using problem solving skills while others, with insecure attachments, will handle conflict in a disorganized/disoriented manner (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008). And, as Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz (2008) state, a disorganized/disoriented attachment can result in low academic self-esteem and metacognitive deficits.

Although attachment theory is defined by the dyadic relationship between a young child and caregiver, attachment theory can also apply to the relationship between a child and their school environment that includes teachers, peers, and staff. If a student has a secure base with their school environment, a student can build a repertoire of patterned internal responses when feeling stressed to help them regulate their feelings to better tolerate social, academic and performance challenges they face throughout the school day (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004).

These students will be able to develop an internal working model that provides a solid framework for the student to experience fewer behavior problems, have more secure social network systems and demonstrate higher academic achievements. Students whose internal working models are based on insecure or disorganized-disoriented relationships with the school environment will experience increased behavioral problems, poor academic performances and social isolation from the school community, peers, and staff. And even a student with a secure attachment can experience similar challenges if the school system maintains disorganized-disoriented attachment styles between members of the system. If the school system or school community is not a sanctuary and is inflexible in meeting a student's needs, that student may become disillusioned and disengaged.

School avoidant students with insecure or disorganized-disoriented attachments to a school community will hide their emotions, their fears, and anxieties to avoid interacting with their school environment. Winterheld (2017) referred to this attachment avoidance as protective buffering. Protective buffering is an emotional barrier that is erected when hiding one's worry or anxiety from others. Hiding their feelings of distress enables a school avoidant student to protect themselves against possible rebuff from others or from actively engaging with their school environment. In essence, attachment avoidance is the degree to which a student doubts or questions the responsiveness of the school community during their times of emotional crisis and need. And, as a result, the school avoidant student will utilize a variety of strategies to deactivate the attachment system (Winterheld, 2017) as a self-protective adjustment to their feelings of stress anxiety or anticipation of feelings of stress and anxiety.

A student's relationship with a teacher is as important as the relationship they may have with a caregiver. A secure attachment between a student and a teacher will encourage and

support the development of self-confidence, encourage resilience, and promote autonomy (Marcus, 2001; Howard & Medway, 2004; Kennedy & Kennedy 2004; Bretherton and Munholland, 2008). When a student begins school during the elementary school years, the student learns how to behave and what to expect in a relationship with their teacher because the teacher has provided a secure base from which the student can explore and take risks. The student learns that the teacher, and thereby the school environment, is a solid anchor that will help the student to regulate emotions, understand how to relate with peers and learn to regulate their behaviors during times of stress. Even children who may have entered school with insecure attachments to their caregivers will be ready to learn and take risks when there is a secure attachment with a teacher at school (Marcus, 2001). Insecure attachments to a teacher can result in poor school performances and becoming socially distanced from peers (Marcus, 2001; Allen, 2008 & Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008). How the adolescent defines their attachment relationships with the school community, teachers and peers will determine how the adolescent copes with stress and anxiety. Does the attachment enable the adolescent to modulate, control and tolerate stress and anxiety without becoming overwhelmed or does the adolescent resort to maladaptive coping responses when feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious (Goldstein, 1984)?

A solid attachment to a school environment provides a student with the knowledge that there are a few select individuals who can be considered safe havens (Kammrath, et al 2020). Each of these select individuals will be ranked by importance in the ability to ensure proximity, support and security. For a school avoidant student, there are no select few individuals who can provide safety from the emotional turmoil they are experiencing in a school building. Thus, a school avoidant student disconnects from a stressful, anxiety producing school environment.

And, although school avoidance is about anxiety, at its root, it is about how a student is unable to regulate their attachment to a secure school base. If there is no ability to maintain a stabilized relationship or develop a secure inner working model, a student will be unable to overcome an attachment that is insecure and disorganized. The student ultimately will feel that there is no one who can provide a safety net for their emotional distress. And their bedroom at home becomes a sanctuary, a protective barrier from feeling overwhelmed.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

This study focuses on school avoidant students. A school avoidant student is defined as a student who refuses to attend school, skips classes, habitually arrives late, presents with somatic complaints and with internalizing and/or externalizing behaviors and emotions. The research question in this study seeks to understand whether a quiet student is more at risk for school avoidance than a student who is actively engaged within a school community. Specifically, the research question asks how school personnel who are defined as school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, school guidance counselors and teachers perceive and interact with a quiet student within a school community. A quiet student is defined, for purposes of this study, as a student who is unassuming and not showy. This is a student who quietly sits in a classroom in a subdued and unresponsive manner. This student does not present with overt maladaptive behaviors. Instead, the student is unassuming, almost as if they are disappearing from public view. This quiet student seems to be unattached to the school community because they do not seek out social relationships. Although it would appear as if this student could be considered to have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, rather, the student's quiet and withdrawn nature impacts on social engagement. This quiet student will sit unassumingly for the duration of the class, does not seek to ask questions, clarify instructions or to engage with peers. The research question seeks to understand the perceptions of school personnel, and how will their perceptions be reflected in how they respond to statements describing a quiet student in a variety of situations? Will the data provide the likelihood that school personnel can predict school avoidance in a quiet student? The following two research questions and their hypotheses will seek to test this question. The first research question asks how school personnel perceive

and interact with a quiet student, and the second research question seeks to understand the factors that may influence a student to become disengaged from a school community.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**RQ 1:** How do school personnel perceive and interact with quiet students who may be at risk for school avoidance.

Hypothesis 1: School personnel who maintain social relationships with a quiet student are more likely to provide an anchor encouraging the student to remain engaged.

**RQ 2:** What factors influence a quiet student to become disengaged from the school community.

Hypothesis 2: Quiet students who are engaged are more likely to remain connected to the school community.

Hypothesis 3: Quiet students who are quiet throughout a school day hope to not gain the attention of school personnel.

Hypothesis 4: Quiet students whose whereabouts are monitored during a school day are more likely to remain connected to the school community.

Hypothesis 5: Quiet students who do not engage in any school related activity are more likely to be school avoidant.

Hypothesis 6: Quiet students who chronically miss school days are more likely to not seek to engage in a school community.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

##### **Purpose of study:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the perceptions of school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, teachers, and guidance counselors regarding a quiet student by using a newly developed instrument titled the School Personnel Perceptions of a Quiet Student Scale. The methodology used to evaluate this new instrument had a two-fold purpose. The first was to test for reliability and validity of this new instrument, and the second was to better understand and determine what factors influence or impede a quiet student in a school community. This section will be divided into four parts. The first will provide the rationale for the research design. The second part will provide information on the context, data, and subjects in the sample. The third part will focus on the measures and the fourth will analyze the procedures.

#### **Section One**

##### **RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research study is a correlational, cross-sectional quantitative study that was completed electronically using a 5-point Likert Scale research design. The scale was disseminated anonymously to different school districts and individuals in Westchester, Rockland

and Orange Counties, NYC, New Jersey, Rochester, Maine, Ohio, Connecticut, Florida, and Pennsylvania using Qualtrics, a web-based on-line survey tool (appendix 3). The research study sought to obtain information on whether school personnel perceive and understand a quiet student who may be at risk for school avoidance. The rationale for using quantitative research methods is that it produces precise and generalizable statistical findings to measure the opinions of school personnel towards quiet students who may be at risk for school avoidance (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). Quantitative research is about inferring information based on numbers and statistical models (Gerring, 2017). It is based on random sampling and is focused on features that can be generalized to larger populations. Observations are analyzed within a formal model to reach a descriptive or causal relationship (Gerring, 2017). Thus, using a quantitative method will assist in better understanding how the theoretical framework of Attachment Theory relates to the relationship between a school community and a disengaged student and will add to the body of research and promote the development of reliable strategies that can best address the issue (DeVellis, 2017).

There are multiple reasons why a school avoidant student stops attending school (Elliot and Place, 2018, Heyne, et al 2001, Kearney, et al, 2007, Libbey, 2004, Ogilvie, et al 2018, Secer & Ulas, 2020 Sibeoni, et al 2018). As a result, these multiple reasons or multifaceted variables are too complex to be measured with just one item on a questionnaire (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). A more reliable method to obtain data on student functioning can be gathered and measured using a scale. As noted by Rubin and Babbie (2016), scales allow for the representation of complex variables using scores that provide greater likelihood for variance than would a single item. DeVellis (2017) defined a scale as a “measurement instrument that are collections of items

combined into a composite score and intended to reveal levels of theoretical variables not readily observable by direct means” (pg. 15).

This research study collected data using a specific scale known as a Likert Scale which is a psychometric response scale that is used to obtain a participant’s degree of agreement with a statement or set of statements. Participants respond to a sentence which is followed by response choices reflecting the degree of their feeling or opinion (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). Likert scales are the most popular to use as it is simple to construct and easy to use and complete by the participants. A Likert scale is also used when measuring opinions, beliefs, or attitudes (DeVellis, 2017).

The response items in a 5, 7, or 9-point scale are equal so that any adjacent pair of responses is the same for any other adjacent set of responses, allowing for a continuum of responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree (DeVellis, 2017). The most used is the 5-point scale with a strongly disagree on one end and strongly agree on the other with neither disagree nor agree in the middle. Using an odd number of responses, such as the 5-point scale, allows the middle category to be considered a neutral point. This neutral point gives the respondent an opportunity to neither agree nor disagree because they may have a neutral feeling to the statement (Taherdoost, 2019). Each respondent is assigned an overall score that represents the summation of the scores for all the responses to each item (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Individual responses are ordinal data because respondents do not know the difference between agree/disagree and strongly agree/disagree or neutral. An area of limitation when using the Likert scale is that validity may be difficult to demonstrate (Taherdoost, 2019). Additionally, participants may avoid extreme responses which may cause a central tendency bias, or they want to please the experimenter causing acquiescence bias (Taherdoost, 2019).

The primary goal of the research in this study is to validate the development of a new scale that measures school personnel perceptions of a quiet student who may be at risk for school avoidance. Historically, scales have been administered to measure levels of anxiety of a school avoidant student. These scales include the Children's Depression Inventory, Fear Survey Schedule for Children-Revised, Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale, Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised, the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children. Parental assessments included Child-Behavior Checklist and the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Parent. Kearney (2007) created a School Refusal Assessment Scale based on a functional model that he developed to measure the function or maintenance of four different variables of avoidant behavior. The four variables or functions are: the avoidance of school-based feelings of anxiety or depression; to escape evaluations, social functioning, or tests; to pursue attention from others; or to pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school. Along with the School Refusal Assessment Scale, there is also the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) with a subscale for school phobia and the Reasons of School Non-Attendance Scale which was developed to assess functional types of reasons underlying school non-attendance. Galle-Tessonneau & Gana (2017) created a scale, The School Refusal Evaluation Scale (SCREEN) to measure and assess for school avoidance. All the scales measure anxiety or depression and not perceptions of attachment between school personnel and a quiet student.

## Section Two

### CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY, DATA AND SUBJECTS

#### Context for Study

This study was completed in two parts. The first part was a pilot study to test the internal validity of the School Personnel Perceptions of a Quiet Student Scale or SPPQSS and if the scale was an appropriate tool to measure perceptions. The pilot study (appendix 1) was completed and reviewed for any research discrepancies. Permission was granted by the WIRB to conduct the pilot study. Emails to local school superintendents and to school directors of Special Education and Pupil Personnel in Westchester and Rockland County were sent requesting that the scale be disseminated throughout the district with the information describing the nature of the study and the inclusion of the WIRB permission. Embedded in the first page of the scale, the participant was informed that their participation was anonymous and a waiver for consent was provided indicating that the participant had the right to stop at any time. Excluded participants included administration, custodial, paraprofessionals, teacher assistants and secretarial staff.

The second part of the study was the administration of the scale once the initial data review from the pilot study concluded that the scale was reliable and valid. As with the pilot, permission was granted by the WIRB to disseminate the scale and participants were informed that their participation was anonymous and a waiver for consent was provided. Emails with the link to the scale were disseminated anonymously to different school districts and individuals in Westchester, Rockland and Orange Counties, NYC, New Jersey, Rochester, Maine, Ohio, Connecticut, Florida, and Pennsylvania. Excluded participants remained the same in the second administration of the scale.

## Data and Subjects

For both the pilot study and the second study a non-probability sample of school psychologists, school social workers, guidance counselors, school nurses and teachers were conducted. Specifically, snowball sampling was used because it was too difficult to locate all members of the target population. A selected member of the school community was asked via an email to provide the information and link to the other members of the target population (appendix 3).

## **Section Three**

### MEASURES

This chapter will describe the measurement for assessing school avoidance using a 5-point Likert scale applying correlational research methods, specifically confirmatory factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis, or CFA, is used when developing a new measure or instrument which seeks to evaluate psychometric properties and examining the effects of the method (Harrington, 2017). CFA measures factors that are abstract and unobservable (Conway, 2020) such as perceptions of attachment to a school community. DeVellis (2017) explains that there are four related purposes to CFA. The first is that it determines how many latent variables underlie a set of items; second is that it explains variation among many variables; third, it defines the meaning of the factors; and fourth, identifies items that are performing better or worse for either identification or elimination. CFA, as one method of factor analysis, seeks to assess the association among individual items that a single concept, such as perceptions of a quiet student, can explain. CFA identifies concepts using a correlation matrix to examine the patterns of covariation among the items to gain an accurate representation of causal relationships.



The dependent variable is school avoidance, and the independent variable is the staff perception of risk for school avoidance using the following as variables: engagement, social relationships, missed school days, monitoring movement during a school day, no engagement in any school activity. The statistical analysis is based on ordinal data because participants will not be able to differentiate between agree and strongly agree or disagree and strongly disagree. Median, mode, and range will be factored in as well as central tendency and Chi Square as well as Cronbach's alpha.

## RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY

To compute the scores, Stata 17 software was used to analyze the data from the pilot study. The SPPQSS scale was emailed to five local school districts in Westchester and Rockland County which yielded a very small sample size of 18 respondents. Although the small sample size did not permit CFA analysis, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the SPPQSS scale. Using Cronbach's alpha is the most common way to assess reliability of this newly developed scale. For all the 33 scale items, Cronbach's alpha computed the inter-item correlation or covariance for all the variables in the list. The statistical analysis of Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating an internally consistent scale (Prevalin & Robson, 2009). Thus, a value of 0.70 or higher is generally considered to be an acceptable scale. When the alpha range was computed, the internal consistency of the SPPQSS scale measured 0.8874 indicating a strong internal reliability.

The 33 observed variables were broken down into 6 subgroups or concepts which were labeled as (1) engagement, (2) withdrawn, (3) monitoring, (4) avoidance behaviors, (5) intervention and (6) safety/environment. Again, using Cronbach's alpha it was noted that two concepts of engagement and intervention had high internal validity. Engagement had an internal

validity of .7686 and intervention had an internal validity of 0.9005. Safety and environment at 0.5471, monitoring at 0.5329 and avoidance behavior at 0.4379 indicated weaker internal validity. Withdrawn was removed as a concept as there were only two latent variables in the category and, as a result, these two latent variables were folded into the others to help boost internal validity. Additionally, observed variables were moved in between the 6 concepts to see about boosting internal validity in all remaining categories. As a result, three observed variables regarding bullying remained but were noted for their weak Alpha Cronbach scores and 6 questions had to be reworded to be better understood by the respondent. The below scale (table1) illustrates the hypotheses and the observed variables that were combined when using Cronbach’s Alpha. Level of Measurement was ordinal, and all were dependent variables.

Figure 1

Hypothesis	Variable Names	Definition	Level of Measurement	Variable Use	Analysis
1.School personnel who maintain social relationships with a quiet student are more likely to provide an anchor encouraging the student to remain engaged.	Engagement Safety and Environment	How do relationships impact a quiet student and how does that contribute to the feeling of safety in the environment	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha Cronbach SEM
2. Quiet students who	Engagement	What is the importance of	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha

are engaged are more likely to remain connected to the school community.	Monitoring Safety Environment	engagement and monitoring to a school community			Cronbach SEM
3. Quiet students who are quiet throughout a school day hope to not gain the attention of school personnel.	Withdrawn Monitoring Avoidant Behaviors	Are quiet students noticeable to others or are they withdrawn with avoidant behaviors	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha Cronbach SEM
4. Quiet students whose whereabouts are monitored during a school day are more likely to remain connected to the school community.	Monitoring Intervention	Should we monitor quiet students for whereabouts throughout a school day and determine possible interventions	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha Cronbach SEM
5. Quiet students who do not engage in any school related activity are more likely to be school	Avoidance Behaviors Withdrawn	Quiet students who are not engaged avoid and are withdrawn	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha Cronbach SEM

avoidant.					
6. Quiet students who chronically miss school days are more likely to not seek to engage in a school community.	Avoidance Behaviors Monitoring Intervention Withdrawn	High rates of absenteeism may require monitoring and intervention due to withdrawn behaviors	Ordinal	Dependent	Alpha Cronbach SEM

## RESULTS OF THE REVISED SCALE

### Description of the sample

The scale was sent out for the second time and over a three-month period (February to April 2022). One-hundred twenty-three respondents answered the questions on the scale (appendix 4). A description of the sample illustrates that most respondents were female (n= 87; 73.95%). The age range that had the most respondents was 35-44 (n=35; 30.77%) followed by 45-54 (n=32; 27.35%) followed by 25-34 (n=30; 25.64%). The majority respondents had a master’s degree (n= 85; 75.22%) followed by PhD (n= 20; 17.70%). Many worked in Westchester County, New York (n=52; 45.30%) followed by Rockland County, New York (n=28; 24.79%), and followed by New York City (n=13; 11.11%). The majority of respondents worked in a high school (n=54; 57.29%), followed by middle school (n=23; 23.96%) and followed by elementary school (n=18; 18.75%).

## A quiet's student risk for school avoidance

As previously stated, the 33 observed variables in the pilot study were narrowed down to 13 observed variables regarding a quiet student's risk for school avoidance. The 13 observed variables were placed with a latent variable that best represented the observed variable. Possible responses for all 13 observed variables were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree (see appendix 4). The first latent variable was monitoring with four observed variables of (1) helping a student who has missed multiple school days (n=100, A=52.00%), (2) helping a student who has missed multiple assignments (n=98; A=57.14%), (3) helping a student who has missed therapeutic days (n=98; A=60.20%) and (4) providing a student opportunity to make up missed work (n=97; A=57.73%). The largest group of respondents reported that they agreed that monitoring a quiet student was helpful. Specifically monitoring a quiet student who has missed multiple therapeutic days is important. The second latent variable was intervention with five observed variables of (1) helping a student who has chronically missed school days (n=98; A=48.98%), (2) engaging parents in problem solving (n=103; A=52.43%), (3) meeting with family and student in problem solving to reduce risk of school avoidance, (n=97; A=56.7%) (4) teaching a student appropriate coping skills (n=101; A= 61.39%) and (5) engaging with outside service providers (n=101; A=61.39%). The largest group of respondents reported that they agreed that providing an intervention with a quiet student was helpful. Specifically, both teaching a student appropriate coping skills and engaging with outside service providers were important. The third latent variable was connection with 4 observed variables of (1) having a school connection to a teacher (n=103; SA=58.25%), (2) having a school connection to an after-school activity (n=102; SA=47.06%), (3) quiet students

who maintain school engagement/connections (n= 101; A=60.40%) and (4) feeling safe at school (n=97; SA= 62.89%). The largest group of respondents strongly agreed that a connection to the school community and feeling safe was very important for a quiet student.

### Validation of the SPPQSS Scale

Table 1. SPPOSS Scale Responses

Perceptions of a quiet student	Analysis			
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>95 % confidence</i>
<b>Monitoring:</b>				
Q21: Helping a student who has missed multiple days	.925118	.0335263	27.59	.8594078 .9908282
Q22: Helping a student who has missed multiple assignments	.8492913	.0385217	21.97	.77079 .9217925
Q23: Helping a student how has Missed therapeutic days	.5230045	.0768893	6.80	.3723042 .6737048
Q24: Providing opportunities to Make-up missed work	.4315242	.0886188	4.87	.2578347 .6052138
<b>Intervention</b>				
Q16: Teaching a student appropriate coping skills	.7068995	.0578153	12.23	.5935837 .8202154
Q17: Engaging parents in problem solving	.5613742	.0745022	7.54	.4153526 .7073957
Q19: Engaging with outside service Providers to reduce risk	.6284377	.0675892	9.30	.4959654 .7609101
Q25: Helping a student who has chronically Missed school days with a referral to Special education	.6984689	.0644149	10.84	.5722181 .8247197
Q27: Meeting with family and student who chronically missed school days	.6463528	.067479	9.58	.5140693 .7785823

Connection

Q13: Having a school connection to a teacher	.625449	.0846516	7.39	.459535	.7913631
Q14: Having a school connection to an after school activity	.5637586	.0925482	6.09	.3823675	.7451498
Q18: Quiet students who maintain school Engagement reduce risk for avoidance	.6363876	.0830014	7.67	.4737077	.7990674
Q30: Feeling safe at school	.5348158	.0944654	5.66	.349667	.7199645

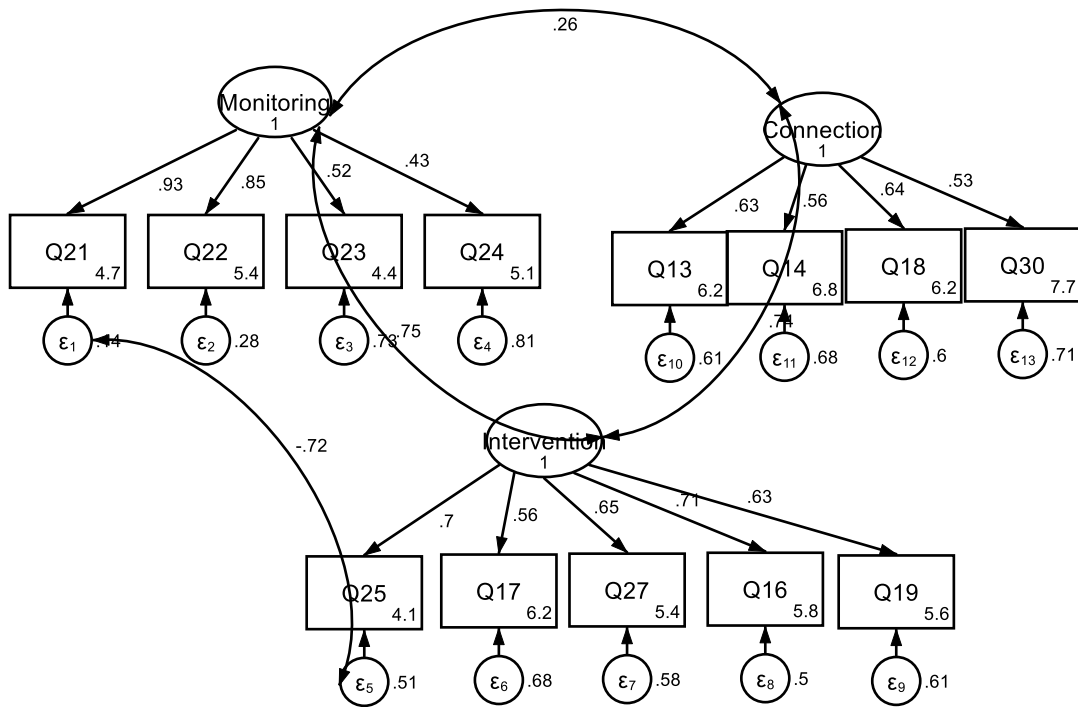
CFA: A CFA was used in this study to develop an acceptable measurement model as this is this a newly developed scale (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The total number of cases used in the analysis was 123, which is adequate for a CFA. However, the probability of obtaining a significant  $\chi^2$  increases when the sample size is larger than 200 (Auerbach, et al 2013). A smaller sample size may lead to an incorrect decision to accept the validity of the model (Auerbach, et al 2013). As a result, additional fit statistics were utilized. These included the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). A CFI value that is greater than or equal to 0.92, a TLI of greater than 0.95 and a RMSEA with a value between 0.05 and 0.10 are acceptable. For the RMSEA with, a CI lower bound should be lower than 0.05 and upper bound be less than or equal to 0.10 (Auerbach, 2013). Table 2 shows that CFI was greater than 0.92 (0.940), the TLI was nearly 0.95 (0.924) and the RMSEA had a value of 0.063 with a lower bound at 0.026 and an upper bound of 0.092. Thus, the three latent variables, monitoring, intervention, and connection indicated an adequate fit when the n was below 250.

Table 2 Goodness of Fit Statistics

Model 1	Description	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI for RMSEA
1	One Factor	0.940	0.924	0.063	[0.026, 0.092]

Note: CFI= Comparative Fit Index, TLI= Tucker Lewis Index, RMSEA= Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

As SPPQSS is a newly constructed scale, it is important to ascertain content validity. Content validity is the degree to which the content covers the range of meanings that are included in the concept (Rubin and Babbie, 2016). Testing for content validity uses convergent validity which tests whether the constructs or the items on the scale that should be related are related or correlate with one another and for discriminant validity which tests whether the unrelated constructs are unrelated or independent of one another (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). The convergent validity is tested by examining factor loadings where a high factor of  $\geq .50$  indicates the presence of convergent validity (Auerbach et al, 2013). Illustrated in Figure 1, the standardized loadings ranged from 0.41 to .077 indicating stability. Discriminant validity looks at the relationship between the latent concepts in which correlations less than 0.85 indicate a good discriminant validity. The correlation between monitoring and connection is .26 and between connection and intervention is .74 and between intervention and monitoring is .75 indicating a good discriminant validity.





## Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha was used to test for reliability. The following cutoff values were used to test for reliability:  $\alpha \geq .90$  is excellent;  $\alpha \geq .80$  is very good;  $\alpha \geq .70$  is adequate (Auerbach, et al 2013). For this model, the Cronbach Alpha was adequate indicating a strong enough reliability for this newly developed scale. Table 3 illustrates the Alpha Cronbach score for monitoring is 0.7623, for intervention is 0.6788 and for connection is 0.7741. When all three latent variables were combined in one Cronbach Alpha computation, the Cronbach Alpha co-efficient for the final model was in the excellent range as the score equaled 0.8421.

*Table 3 Cronbach's Alpha Scores for Measurement of Monitoring, Intervention and Connection*

Measurement models	Number of items	Covariance	Cronbach's alpha
Q21-24	4	.2972086	0.7623
Q25, 17, 27, 16, 19	5	.2307542	0.7741
Q13, 14, 18, 30	4	.1508126	0.6788
Q21-24, Q25, Q17, Q27 Q16, Q19, Q13, Q14, Q18, Q31	13	.1620455	0.8421

## One-way ANOVA computation and results

One-way ANOVA is used to compare the mean differences between one independent variable and one dependent variable (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). In this study, the comparison of the mean differences is between the dependent variable of school avoidance and the independent variable of either what school building the school personnel work on or in what county the school is located. When computing the results, there are two numbers that are central to a one-way ANOVA, the F statistic, and its associated P value. The P value should be less than 0.05 to be statistically significant. And, if it is statistically significant, a post hoc test can be

conducted. A post hoc test identifies which group in the independent variable shows significant mean differences.

In this study, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with the dependent variable of school avoidance and with the independent variable of what school building the school personnel worked in using the three latent variables of intervention, monitor and connection. With intervention, there was no significant effect of an intervention in the school building a school personnel worked in on school avoidance,  $F(df2, df83) = 0.21, \geq 0.05 (0.783)$ . With monitor, there was no significant effect of monitoring in the school building a school personnel worked in on school avoidance,  $F(df2, df81) = 2.40, \geq 0.05 (0.490)$ . With connection, there was no significant effect of connection in the school building a school personnel worked in on school avoidance,  $F(df2, df84) = 2.19, \geq 0.05 (0.275)$ . As a result, the null hypotheses for all three was accepted thereby avoiding the need for a post hoc test.

A one-way ANOVA was also conducted with the dependent variable of school avoidance and with the independent variable of what county the school was located. Before analysis of the data could begin, it was noted that there was only one respondent in Orange County, New York. Thus, the data were recoded by removing Orange County resulting in four remaining counties of Westchester, Rockland, New York City and other. With intervention, recoding indicated that the county in which the district was located did not affect school personnel and the school avoidant student. P scores for Westchester County equaled 0.591, Rockland County equaled 0.986 and NYC equaled 0.916. With monitor, there was no significant effect of monitoring in the school building a school personnel worked in on school avoidance,  $F(df3, df96) = 0.99, \geq 0.05 (0.062)$ . With connection, there was no significant effect of connection in the school building a school

personnel worked in on school avoidance,  $F (df3, df99) = 0/76, \geq 0.05 (0.194)$ . As a result, the null hypotheses for all three was accepted thereby not necessitating the need for a post hoc test.

Table 4 ANOVA results

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	
School Avoidance		
Latent Variable:		
Intervention	School Building	$F (df2, df83) = 0.21, \geq 0.05 (0.783)$
Monitor		$F (df2, df81) = 2.40, \geq 0.05 (0.490)$
Connection		$F (df2, df84) = 2.19, \geq 0.05 (0.275)$
Latent Variable	County	
Monitor		$F (df3, df96) = 0.99, \geq 0.05 (0.062)$
Connection		$F (df3, df99) = 0/76, \geq 0.05 (0.194)$

Notes :D F=two degrees of freedom, F= F Test statistic, P Value is in ( )

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient or PWCORR was also conducted to ascertain all the correlations in the data even if some of the data are missing. PWCORR is a measure of the strength of a linear association between two variables. A PWCORR is a line of best fit between the two variables and analyzes the distance of the two variables from the line of best fit. Values range from +1 to -1 with a value of 0 meaning no correlation. A value of greater than 0 is a positive association which indicates that as the value of one variable increases so the does the value of the other. Conversely, a value less than 0 indicates a negative association so that as the value of one variable increases, the value of the other variable decreases. A small weak association is .10, a medium association is a.3 and a strong association in a .5. When analyzing the observed variable of age, PWCORR values indicated that the older the staff member was the less likely they would intervene (-0.3648) have a connection (-0.2280) and monitor (-0.1858).

Thus, intervention had a medium association while connection and monitor had weaker associations.

What do the results mean?

The results of this study indicate that the SPPQSS scale with three latent variables of *monitoring, intervention and connection* can lead towards a prediction of a quiet student's risk for school avoidance. The CFA showed adequate content validity as marked by adequate convergent and discriminant validity. Thus, when a school psychologist, school social worker, schoolteacher, school nurse or guidance counselor are working with a quiet student, the SPPQSS scale can be helpful in indicating whether there is a risk for school avoidance. Specifically, of the 13 observed variables, five were helpful when assisting a quiet student. These five included monitoring a quiet student who had missed multiple therapy sessions with either a school psychologist or school social worker, providing interventions such as teaching coping skills and engaging with outside service providers, and ensuring that the quiet student had school connections and felt safe in school. Additionally, one-way ANOVA results rejected the null hypothesis indicating that neither the school building nor the county affects how school personnel perceive a quiet student. Results of the PWCORR indicated that the older the staff member was, the less likely they would intervene. This may mean that an older staff member has more patience and experience to work with a quiet student.

Use of these findings will lead to the further development and improvement of the SPPQSS scale. Although the SPPQSS scale showed strong reliability, it should be noted that this is a newly developed scale. Thus, one notable limitation to the SPPQSS scale is that the sample size had a N=123 which may lead to an incorrect decision to accept the validity of the model. It is easier to obtain statistically significant results in a larger sample size. The Cronbach

Alpha score suggests that for the SPQSS scale, it is both valid and reliable and can be replicated for future use. Lastly, further development and improvement of the SPQSS scale will require distribution to a larger, national audience as well as including a question as to what professional role the respondent plays in the school building.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION

One hypothesis this study sought to examine was whether school personnel believed that the quiet student may be at risk of school avoidance and whether maintaining social relationships with the school community provides an anchor for the quiet student. A second hypothesis sought to understand whether school personnel believed a quiet student who is engaged in school is more likely to remain connected if the school examines this student's engagement or lack of engagement, and if the school monitors the student's whereabouts as well as absences during the school day. Results indicate that there is a relationship between the dependent variable of school avoidance and the independent variable of school personnel perceptions of students' risk of school avoidance, in those students who missed school days or came to school but missed classes, and lacked engagement in school activity, would benefit from having their movement monitored during the school day.

Thus, monitoring a quiet student specifically for missed therapy sessions, teaching the student coping skills, engaging with outside service providers to meet student needs, making opportunities available for students to connect, and providing a way of feeling safe in school elicited the most responses from the 33 questions in the SPPQSS scale.

Findings from this study appear to be consistent with the results from past studies. As per Kearney, et al (2013), understanding the function of the school avoidant behavior can help in formulating a plan that best meets the needs of the school avoidant student. The first question of this study focused on social connection as an anchor for the school avoidant student to the school. The results of the present study are consonant with prior research in that the positive

reinforcers that help to keep a school avoidant student anchored to a school community are a sense of belonging, positive peer relationships, and supportive teachers (Libbey, 2004). Another factor, school connectedness, relates to the second research question. A positive social network within the school can provide belonging that fosters participation in activities, thereby creating opportunities for close relationships to peers and adults. Weak ties mean a paucity of connections leading to feeling alone and isolated. Two studies also supported both research questions (Wilkins, 2008, Havik, 2015) in which school climate and predictability in classroom and social expectations allow students to feel the safety needed to take academic and social risks.

The results of both research questions in this study are supported in Sobba's study (2017) that focuses on students who have social capital. Social capital allows the student to become academically resilient and capable of overcoming feelings of social isolation which furthers the development of positive relationships with their school community. The student who has developed social capital or has had the opportunity and support to maintain connections, finds it easier to develop reciprocal social relationships in which they can trust the community to take care of their needs. There is a shared sense of togetherness in these relationships. Lastly, monitoring for missed therapy sessions and reaching out to outside service providers will ensure early identification by school staff to implement a mental health team that re-engages the school avoidant student and helps the student learn better coping skills.

What is known from the research on school avoidance is that school avoidance is caused by feelings of anxiety that overcome and overwhelm the student, emotionally paralyzing the student's ability to attend school. What is also known is that school avoidance encompasses students who miss large amounts of time at school, students who skip classes, students who habitually arrive late, who present with somatic complaints, and/or who have maladaptive

behaviors or feelings of dread about attending school (Kearney, 2007). Highlighted is the knowledge that different themes will reflect the struggles of a school avoidant student and these themes will suggest future interventive approaches. These themes related to school avoidance are resiliency or lack thereof, relationships with a school community, mental health and/or psychiatric diagnosis, the role of the family system, the difference between truancy and school avoidance, and best practice as the development of preventive and coping measures. Further actions are required to strengthen student's resiliency and positive ties with the school community, to maximize mental health supports and engage positive family features such that the school avoidant student will remain attached by feeling safe in the learning environment.

What is not known is what causes the feelings of intense anxiety and detachment from a school community and school day. One purpose of this study is to better understand the cause or the "why" for the feelings of intense anxiety. The theoretical underpinning of this study is attachment theory which reflects the ability to feel secure and safe to explore the larger world. Although attachment theory is defined by the relationship between a caregiver and child, attachment theory can also apply to the relationship a student has with their school community. Attachment theory suggests that students have to be able to attach to the school environment and that the environment itself has to provide the necessary or good enough care that fosters the attachment. Students who have a secure inner working model are likely to experience fewer behavioral problems, develop a healthy social network system, and demonstrate high academic achievement. However, we must be mindful that not all matches between student and school will be a good fit. A student who has an insecure attachment to the school may not necessarily come with an insecure attachment history. Events, incidents, or people in the school environment may bring about the insecure inner working model. The school avoidant student



will experience increased feelings of stress and anxiety which leads to an escalation in maladaptive behaviors, decrease in academic achievement and may lead to social isolation. When the school community does not feel safe, the student will disengage from the school community. Thus, although school avoidance can be defined through the lens of anxiety, at its root, it is about how a student becomes unable to regulate feelings of attachment which causes them to disengage and isolate from the school community to protect from feeling anxious.

The findings in this study contribute to building knowledge about how to provide a framework for helping a school avoidant student, also known as a quiet student in this study. Results of the study show that framing the problem within attachment theory may help to ensure a secure inner working model that can allow for a healthy attachment to a school community. However, to maximize students' resiliency, the school has to develop an environment that supports a healthy attachment to the school community. Thus, providing the student with effective coping skills to better manage feelings of anxiety, providing opportunities for connection, monitoring missed therapy sessions, engaging with outside service providers, and fostering feelings of safety in school will increase students' abilities to maintain a secure and healthy attachment to the school community.

It is important to provide opportunities to depart from the belief that one educational model fits everyone. In considering how and where potentially school avoidant students are educated places onus on the school itself to meet diverse students' educational needs rather than on the students as the primary advocates for their learning. It may very well be that the school avoidant student detaches because the opportunity to experience the safety of a secure attachment is not available to that student in the unique environment of that school.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Since school avoidance is a multifactorial problem, conceptualizing and understanding its phenomena within the framework of attachment theory suggests a team approach by the school for helping the student to become re-engaged, to feel safe and to develop a secure inner working model. Wraparound service provision enables a fragmented set of systems such as the school, the family, mental health providers, and social networks to be merged so that the school avoidant student's complex emotional needs are not only validated but also addressed.

As noted earlier, three social work values pertain to a school avoidant student. These are: the value of social justice, the value of the dignity and worth of the person, and the value of recognizing the central importance of human relationships (NASW, Code of Ethics). These three values respect the emotional distress of the school avoidant student and ensure that interventions will be person centered and strengths based. Thus, within the lens of attachment theory, school educational policy can focus on a slow and steady approach to reengaging the school avoidant student so that they feel safe and secure to take academic risks and fully engage in a school community. At the same time educators have to recognize that adaptation is two-way between student and environment, and that the school itself bears responsibility for ensuring a goodness of fit between the student and school environment.

## AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

This study used a newly developed scale that was designed to capture school personnel perceptions of a quiet student. A Likert scale is an easy and efficient way to collect large amounts of data with minimum effort. However, there are potential limitations using a Likert Scale. Using a Likert Scale allows for the determination of correlation among the variables, but

not causation. It does not answer why the student became quiet or what the trigger or thought processes were that brought about the disappearance from public view. Since this study sought WIRB approval for the inclusion of human research subjects, obtaining information directly from students would have required parental permission as the students were below the age of majority (18). A future mixed methods study may provide a more nuanced look at a quiet student's relationship to a school community. The qualitative portion of a mixed methods study would have allowed the stories, feelings, and emotions to be interwoven into the graphs and numbers putting a human face to the numbers.

Another limitation in the use of a Likert scale is that as a closed format style designed to provide an answer, the Likert scale forces the respondent to answer one of the 5 points on the scale. The respondent must answer without an option of gradation in opinion, belief, or attitude. Thus, assessing the actual opinion, belief or attitude can be difficult to measure. A Likert scale can be susceptible to response biases (Kreitchmann, et al 2019) which may cause a central tendency bias such as a social desirability bias or acquiescence bias. Another limitation of a Likert Scale is that most respondents use the midpoint as the primary response rather than selecting which the respondent perceives to be a better option.

This is a newly developed scale which has not undergone rigorous statistical analysis prior to this study. As a result, there is a need for replication to refine the scale to better understand the needs of a quiet student and their relationship with a school community. Replication may further determine which questions should remain and which should be removed. Refining the scale would also answer the question as to whether the focus on one type of student is too limiting.

The significance of this study is that it provides a new way of understanding a school avoidant student as a student in great emotional distress and that, likely, wants to return to a school environment but does not have the emotional tools to re-engage. Viewing the student within the lens of a reciprocal relationship where the student can rely upon the school environment to provide a safe space for exploration provides an opportunity to understand the school avoidant student not only as anxious but as a student whose insecure attachment to the school requires tender and patient care.

## CONCLUSION

Using attachment theory as a way of understanding the school avoidant student illustrates that the instinct for safety and protection informs the relationship between the student and the school community. A central component of attachment theory is learning how to be emotionally flexible in responses to environmental changes (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, 2008). In other words, teaching a student how to modulate feelings of stress and anxiety will enable them to return to an emotional homeostasis. A school avoidant student has an insecure attachment to the school community because of their intense and elevated feelings of anxiety. A school avoidant student does not trust the school community to help them manage these intense feelings. If a student has a secure emotional base with their school environment, then the student can build a repertoire of responses that mitigate feelings of stress and anxiety. The student becomes better able to tolerate emotional challenges. A student with an insecure attachment to the school, such as a school avoidant student, will not be able to tolerate feelings of stress or anxiety and will detach themselves to avoid or flee from the elevated feelings of stress.

Attachment theory allows for the opportunity to not penalize the student for their behaviors, but rather to help them re-organize their attachment to the school and to their

education from one of insecurity to one of security. Attachment theory also provides the school with a chance to adapt to the student's attachment needs by changing the environment to maximize that student's opportunities to attach to the school. Attachment theory highlights the interdependent and reciprocal nature of the student and school relationship.

This dissertation has begun to scratch the surface of understanding the school avoidant student within the theoretical framework of attachment theory. Further exploratory research is necessary to offer school personnel and other related service providers both within and out of the school community a variety of different options when confronted with a school avoidant student. To ensure that the at-risk school avoidant student does not experience long term negative effects, further research is necessary that focuses on best practices for preventing protracted school avoidance and redirecting the student's return to a school community.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1

#### School Personnel Perceptions of a Quiet Student Scale (SPPQSS scale)

***Q1. Which of the following best represents your gender identity? “Cis” indicates a person who identifies with the gender assigned at birth. “Trans” indicates a person who identifies with a gender other than that assigned at birth.***

1. Cis Male
2. Cis Female
3. Trans-female
4. Trans-female
5. non-binary
6. Other

***Q2. In which county is your district located:***

1. Westchester County
2. Rockland County
3. Orange County
4. NYC Department of Education
5. Other

***Q3. What is your age***

1. 25-34
2. 35-44
3. 45-54
4. Above 55

***Q39. What is your professional degree?***

***Bachelors***

***Masters***

***PhD***

***What school age population do you work with?***

1. Elementary school students
2. Middle School student
3. High School students

***Q5. Quiet students are more likely to be overlooked in the classroom***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q6. Quiet students who do not seek to engage in classroom activity are at risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q7. .Helping a quiet student understand content and keep up with assignments helps a quiet student to feel connected to the school community?***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree

3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q8. A quiet student is easy to engage in an active classroom***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q9. A quiet student should be monitored for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q10. A quiet student's frequent breaks during a school day, such as requesting to use the bathroom or to go to the school nurse, is a cause for concern for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q11. A quiet student ignoring classroom rules is cause of concern for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q12. student who actively participates in classroom activities and absorbs the attention of the teacher or related service providers can take away the focus from a quiet student***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q13. Monitoring a quiet student's whereabouts throughout the day decreases concerns for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q14. For a quiet student, having a school connection to a teacher can help to decreases school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree

3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q15. For a quiet student, having a school connection to a school psychologist or school social worker help to decrease the risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

***Q16. For a quiet student, having a school connection to an after-school activity can help to decrease the possibility for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q17. A quiet student's behaviors prevent attachments to the school community***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q18. Teaching a quiet student appropriate coping skills decrease cause for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q19. Engaging parents of a quiet student in problem solving reduces risk of school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q20. Quiet students who seek to engage with the school community reduce the risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q21. For a quiet student, engaging with outside service providers reduces the risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree

3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q22. Creating an alternative learning space can be helpful for a quiet student at risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q23. Helping a quiet student who has missed multiple school days decreases the likelihood for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q24. Helping a quiet student who has missed multiple assignments decrease the likelihood for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree



***Q25. Helping a quiet student who has missed multiple therapeutic sessions with the school social worker or school psychologist decrease the likelihood for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q26. Providing a quiet student with opportunities to make up missed work alleviates feelings of isolation for a student at risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q27. Helping a quiet student who has chronically missed school days with a referral to related services providers (school nurses, school psychologist, school social worker or counselor) decrease the risk of school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q28. Meeting with a quiet student and their family because the quiet student has chronically missed school days decreases the risk of school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree

2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q29. Creating a system of support between school psychologists and school social workers with outside psychologists and social workers can be helpful for a quiet student to maintain school connections***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q 30. Allowing a quiet student to be marked present, even when arriving late to school, helps reduce risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q 31. Overall safety of the environment outside of the school building reduces the risk of school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree

4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q 32. Students who have been bullied by peers avoid attending school***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

***Q 33. Is DASA an effective tool in helping a student at risk for school avoidance***

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

Thank you for answering the questions.

## Appendix 2

### Compulsory school attendance laws, minimum and maximum age limits for required free education, by state: 2017

State	Age of required school attendance	Minimum age limit to which free education must be offered	Maximum age limit to which free education must be offered
Alabama	6 to 17	5 <sup>1</sup>	17 <sup>2</sup>
Alaska	7 to 16 <sup>3</sup>	5	20
Arizona	6 to 16 <sup>4</sup>	6	21
Arkansas	5 to 18	5	21
California <sup>5</sup>	6 to 18	5	21
Colorado	6 to 17	5	21
Connecticut	5 to 18 <sup>6</sup>	5	21
Delaware	5 to 16	5	21
District of Columbia	5 to 18	5 <sup>7</sup>	† <sup>8</sup>
Florida	6 to 16	4	—
Georgia	6 to 16	5	19
Hawaii	5 to 18	5	20
Idaho	7 to 16	5	21
Illinois	6 to 17	4	21 <sup>9</sup>

State	Age of required school attendance	Minimum age limit to which free education must be offered	Maximum to which free education must be offered
Indiana	7 to 18	5	22
Iowa	6 to 16 <sup>10</sup>	5	21
Kansas	7 to 18	5	† <sup>11</sup>
Kentucky	6 to 18	5	21
Louisiana	7 to 18	5 <sup>12</sup>	20 <sup>13</sup>
Maine	7 to 17	5 <sup>14</sup>	20
Maryland	5 to 18	5	21
Massachusetts	6 to 16	3 <sup>15</sup>	22
Michigan	6 to 18	5	20
Minnesota	7 to 17	5	21
Mississippi	6 to 17	5	21
Missouri	7 to 17 <sup>16</sup>	5 <sup>17</sup>	21
Montana	7 to 16 <sup>18</sup>	5	19
Nebraska	6 to 18	5	21
Nevada	7 to 18	5	21 <sup>19</sup>
New Hampshire	6 to 18	—	21

State	Age of required school attendance	Minimum age limit to which free education must be offered	Maximum age limit to which free education must be offered
New Jersey	6 to 16	5	20
New Mexico	5 to 18	5	—
New York	6 to 16 <sup>20</sup>	5	21
North Carolina	7 to 16	5	21
North Dakota	7 to 16	5	21
Ohio	6 to 18	5	22
Oklahoma	5 to 18	5 <sup>21</sup>	21
Oregon	6 to 18	5	19 <sup>22</sup>
Pennsylvania	8 to 17	6 <sup>23</sup>	21 <sup>24</sup>
Rhode Island	5 to 18 <sup>25</sup>	5	21 <sup>26</sup>
South Carolina	5 to 17	5	22 <sup>27</sup>
South Dakota	6 to 18 <sup>28</sup>	5	21
Tennessee	6 to 18	5	—
Texas	6 to 19	5	26
Utah	6 to 18	5	—

State	Age of required school attendance	Minimum age limit to which free education must be offered	Maximum age limit to which free education must be offered
Vermont	6 to 16 <sup>29</sup>	5	†
Virginia	5 to 18	5	20
Washington	8 to 18	5	21
West Virginia	6 to 17	5	22
Wisconsin	6 to 18	4	20
Wyoming	7 to 16 <sup>30</sup>	5	21

— Not available. In this state, local education agencies determine their maximum or minimum age, or the information is not available in the statute.

† Not applicable. State has not set a maximum age limit.

<sup>1</sup> In Alabama, the parent or legal guardian of a 6-year-old child may opt out of enrolling their child by notifying the local board of education, in writing, that the child will not be in school until he or she is 7 years old.

<sup>2</sup> In Alabama's city school systems, students are entitled to admission until age 19.

<sup>3</sup> Alaska requires that students attend until they are 16 or complete 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>4</sup> In Arizona, students must attend until they are 16 or complete 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>5</sup> In California, no school district may receive school district appropriations for independent study by students 21 years of age or older, or by students 19 years of age or older who are continuously involved in kindergarten, or any of the 1st to 12th grades, inclusive since their 18th birthday.

<sup>6</sup> In Connecticut, the parent of a 5- or 6-year-old child may opt out of enrolling their child until he or she is 7 by signing an option form.

<sup>7</sup> District of Columbia students who are at least 3 years old by September 30 are eligible for admission to the preK-3 program. Students who are 4 years old by September 30 are eligible for the preK-4 program. Students who are 5 years old by September 30 are eligible for kindergarten.

<sup>8</sup> An adult student who is a resident of the District of Columbia is eligible for free instruction in the schools, as long as the student meets all other criteria and prerequisites for admission.

<sup>9</sup> In Illinois, reenrollment is denied to any child 19 years of age or older who has dropped out of school and who cannot, because of age and lack of credits, attend classes during the next school year and graduate before his or her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

<sup>10</sup> In Iowa, children enrolled in preschool programs (4 years old on or before September 15) are considered to be of compulsory attendance age.

<sup>11</sup> Adults in Kansas have access to an education if they enroll in a public school. However, school districts are not required to provide educational services in a regular school setting to a person who has reached 19 years of age and who is not currently enrolled in a school district. If a school district elects not to provide a person with educational services in a regular school setting, the district must offer the person educational services in an alternative setting or program.

<sup>12</sup> Each Louisiana city and parish school board may provide for a child younger than 5 to enter kindergarten if that child has been identified as gifted by the state guidelines.

<sup>13</sup> In Louisiana, admission must be granted to any student who is 19 years of age or younger on September 30 or 20 years old on September 30 and has sufficient course credits to graduate. The student will be able to graduate within one school year of admission or readmission.

<sup>14</sup> In Maine, students must be at least 5 years old before October 15, or 4 years old by October 15 if they are enrolled in a public preschool program prior to kindergarten (where applicable).

<sup>15</sup> Each school committee in Massachusetts establishes its own minimum age for school attendance, provided that it is not older than mandatory minimum age established by the state.

<sup>16</sup> Missouri requires attendance until 17 or the completion of 16 credits toward high school graduation.

<sup>17</sup> A child between 5 and 7 years old in Missouri may be excused from attendance at school if a parent or guardian submits a written request.

<sup>18</sup> In Montana, attendance is required until students are 16 or complete 8th grade.

<sup>19</sup> In Nevada, students may attend a comprehensive public school until age 21; or, from age 18, they may attend an adult high school program. There is no upper age limit for adult high schools.

<sup>20</sup> In New York, the boards of education in the Syracuse, New York City, Rochester, Utica, and Buffalo school districts are authorized to require children who are 5 years old on or before December 1 to attend kindergarten unless the parents elect not to enroll their child until the following September, or the child is enrolled in a non-public school or home instruction. New York local boards of education may require 16-and 17-year old students who are not employed to attend school until the last day of the school year in which the student turns 18.

<sup>21</sup> In Oklahoma, children who are least 4 years old but not older than 5 on or before September 1 may attend either half-day or full-day programs in their district free of charge if the district has the physical facilities and teaching staff to accommodate the student.

<sup>22</sup> In Oregon, a district may admit a student who has not yet turned 21 if he or she requires additional education to receive a diploma.

<sup>23</sup> The board of school directors in any Pennsylvania school district may establish kindergarten programs for children between the ages of 4 and 6.

<sup>24</sup> In Pennsylvania, a child who reaches age 21 during the school term and who has not graduated from high school may continue to attend the public schools in their district free of charge until the end of the school term.

<sup>25</sup> In Rhode Island, the compulsory age is 16 if a student has an alternative learning plan for obtaining a high school diploma or its equivalent.

<sup>26</sup> Although some Rhode Island districts allow students to complete the school year after they turn 21, this practice is not universal and not required.

<sup>27</sup> In South Carolina, individuals older than 21 years old may attend night schools.

<sup>28</sup> In South Dakota, the compulsory age limit is 16 if a child enrolls in a general education development test preparation program that is school-based or for which a school contracts with a private provider. If a child successfully completes the test or reaches the age of 18.

<sup>29</sup> Vermont requires students to attend school until they are 16 or complete 10th grade.

<sup>30</sup> Wyoming requires students to attend school until they are 16 or complete 10th grade.

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### Appendix 3

Contact	Query Date	Location	Notes
C M	2/17/2022	Rochester	Sent via Linked In
K C	2/19/2022	Nyack	professional
S B	2/22/2022	NJ	Friend
Colleague	2/23/2022	Maine	YU
JC	2/23/2022	Maine	YU
KM	3/1/2022	NYC	Friend
CR	2/23/2022	Ohio	YU
DM	2/24/2022	Richland SD	YU
MD	2/24/2022	Florida	YU
SH	2/24/2022		YU
JM	2/24/2022	Connecticut	YU
LW	3/1/2022	Suffern	Professional



MB	3/1/2022	Mamaroneck	Friend
MC	3/1/2022	Nyack	Linked In
MF	3/4/2022	New Rochelle	Professional
LF	3/6/2022	Rye Brook	Friend
CLB	3/8/2022	Lakeland	Professional
CA	3/9/2022	Yorktown	Professional
LR	3/10/2022	NYC	Friend
TW	3/11/2022	Rye Brook	Friend
DA	3/11/2022	White Plains	Professional
AS	3/14/2022	Valhalla	Professional
RC	3/16/2022	Connecticut	Professional
LW	3/17/2022	Harrison	Professional
AG	3/20/2022	New Rochelle	Professional
NB	3/20/2022	PA	Linked In
NB	3/24/2022	BOCES	Professional
KC	3/23/2022	Peekskill	Friend
AC	3/28/2022	Ossining	Professional
SS	3/30/2022	Ardsley	Professional
JW	3/30/2022	NW BOCES	Professional
DD	3/30/2022	Bedford	Cold Send
EF	3/31/2022	Promesa	Professional
CA	3/31/2022	NYC	Professional
MF	4/1/2022	Peekskill	Professional
JD	4/2/2022	Elmsford	Professional
RH	4/7/2022	NYC	Friend
MT	4/11/2022	Edgemont	Professional
CSE	4/11/2022	Dobbs Ferry	Cold Send
CSE	4/11/2022	Greenburgh	Cold Send

#### Appendix 4

Gender: male 28 Female 87 Rather not say 4

County: Westchester 52, Rockland 29, Orange 1, NYC 13, Other 21

Professional Degree: Bachelor 8, MA 85, PhD 20

Age: 25-34 (30) 35-44 (35) 45-54 (32) 55-65 (16) less than 25 3

Grades: Elementary 18, Middle School 23 High School 54

N is represented by a number in parenthesis and percentage are below the N

SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N=Neither agree nor disagree, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

Variable	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD	OB S
Q1 Gender						1.864407	.794374	118
Q2 County						2.327586	1.564697	116
Q3 Professional Degree						.0714286	.2586969	112
Q4 Age						2.396552	1.163797	116
Q39 Grades						2.378947	.7879268	95
Q5 Overlooked	(3) 2.73	(17) 15.45	(14) 12.73	(65) 59.09	(11) 10.00	3.581818	.9614765	110
Q6 Did not engage	(1) 0.94	(15) 14.15	(33) 31.13	(46) 43.40	(11) 10.38	3.481132	.8968849	106
Q7 Understand Content	(2) 1.89	(3) 2.83	(10) 9.43	(57) 53.77	(34) 32.09	4.113208	.8317595	106
Q8 Easy to engage	(3) 2.83	(47) 44.34	(36) 33.96	(18) 16.98	(2) 16.98	2.707547	.8504003	106
Q9 Monitored	(1) 0.96	(12) 11.54	(43) 41.35	(40) 38.46	(8) 38.46	3.403846	.8304781	104
Q10 Frequent Breaks	(3) 2.86	(16) 15.24	(17) 16.19	(55) 52.38	(14) 52.38	3.580952	.9978916	105
Q11 Ignoring class rules	(2)1.92	(23) 22.12	(35) 33.65	(34) 32.69	(10) 9.62	3.259615	.9753784	104
Q12 Where abouts	(2) 1.92	(32) 30.77	(39) 37.40	(30) 28.85	(1) 0.96	2.961538	.8467307	104
Q13 Connection to a teacher	(1) 0.97	(2) 1.94	(2) 1.94	(38) 36.89	(60) 58.25	4.495146	.7259043	103
Q14 Connection to after-school			(9) 8.82	(45) 44.12	(48) 47.06	4.382353	.6455348	102
Q15 behaviors prevent	(5) 4.90	(35) 34.31	(36) 35.29	(22) 21.57	(4) 3.92	2.852941	.9481306	102
Q16 coping skills		(4) 3.96	(10) 9.90	(62) 61.39	(25) 24.75	4.069307	.710738	101
Q17 Engaging parents		(2) 1.94	(8) 7.77	(54) 52.43	(39) 37.86	4.262136	.6854391	103

Q18 maintain engagement		(2) 1.98	(11) 10.89	(61) 60.40	(27) 26.73	4.118812	.6676396	101
Q19 Outside providers		(4) 3.96	(14) 13.86	(62) 61.39	(21) 20.79	3.990099	.7140735	101
Q20 Alternative learning space	(1) 0.99	(4) 3.96	(21) 20.79	(52) 51.49	(23) 22.77	3.910891	.8258209	102
Q21 Helping a student missing days	(1) 1.00	(5) 5.00	(12) 12.00	(52) 52.00	(30) 30.00	4.05	.8453677	100
Q22 Missed multiple assignments		(5) 5.10	(56) 9.18	(28) 57.14	(24) 28.57	4.091837	.7609914	98
Q23 Missed therapeutic days	(3) 3.06	(5) 5.10	(16) 16.33	(59) 60.20	(15) 15.31	3.795918	.8729519	98
Q24 Time to make up assignments		(6) 6.19	(11) 11.34	(56) 57.73	(24) 24.74	4.010309	.7838852	97
Q25 Referral to CSE	(1) 1.02	(9) 9.18	(20) 20.41	(48) 48.98	(20) 20.41	3.785714	.9109868	98
Q26		(4) 4.08	(16) 16.33	(55) 56.12	(23) 23.47	3.989796	.752931	
Q27 Meeting with family		(3) 3.09	(17) 17.53	(55) 56.70	(22) 22.68	3.989691	.7287953	97
Q28 Using therapeutic models		1 1.02	6 6.12	65 66.33	26 26.53	4.183673	.5805603	98
Q29 To be marked present	6 6.12	15 15.31	27 27.55	39 39.80	11 11.22	3.346939	1.065891	98
Q30 Feelings safe at school			5 5.15	31 31.96	61 62.89	4.57732	.5922248	97