



Examining Chronic Absenteeism in Elementary Schools Among Minority Students Utilizing the Systemic Questioning Evaluative Framework

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Abstract

An estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent within the US. Chronic absenteeism (CA) is highly correlated with academic success, achievement, grade retention, and dropout rates. Further, low income and minority students are more likely to be chronically absent, contributing to academic achievement gaps. Few studies have explored the impacts of CA on low income and minority students due to the lack of universal reporting systems for attendance. My purpose was to identify the primary drivers and effects of CA among low income and minority students. The Systemic Questioning Framework (SQF) was used to critically examine CA and its assumptions to identify effective evidence-based interventions to reduce CA and narrow academic achievement gaps.

Keywords: Chronic absenteeism; Attendance; Truancy; Absence; Systemic Questioning framework; K-12 education; Education policy; Education evaluation

Abbreviations: CA: Chronic Absenteeism; SQF: Systemic Questioning Framework; K-12: Kindergarten through 12th grade

Introduction

Students cannot learn if they are not physically present in the classroom and chronic absenteeism (CA) is highly correlated with academic performance [1-10]. CA occurs when students miss 10 percent or more of the school year [4,2]. CA disproportionately affects low-income students and students of color and widens academic achievement gaps [1,4,10].

Numerous studies have linked CA to reduced academic performance and dropout rates [1,4,10]. Education is the key to accessing life improving opportunities including better employment and earning, among others [12]. Stemming CA early,

especially among the most vulnerable students is important, because “the pathway from poverty to adult success runs through [the] schools” [5] P.8. The Systemic Questioning Framework (SQF) serves as a tool to critically assess CA and identify evidence-based interventions. It is important to note CA is distinctly different from truancy. Truancy refers specifically to unexcused absences or excessive tardiness, i.e., 30 minutes or more. However, CA focuses on any absence for any reason, i.e., excused absences, unexcused absences and suspensions [4,2]. Schools are only mandated to report average daily attendance rates which mask CA. Schools can have 90% daily occupancy and still have a quarter of students be

chronically absent, because different students miss on different days [5-6]. The lack of reporting systems and a standard definition make studying CA difficult, because researchers do not have the data to study CA and its trends.

Material and Method

The authors used the Systemic Questioning Framework to inform a structured review literature, policy, and programmatic interventions regarding CA among students' kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12). Developed from systemic family therapy, SQF incorporates techniques to broaden perspectives, highlight differences and change behaviors [14]. The goal here is to use SQF

to critically evaluate CA and its implications to identify potential mechanism to reduce CA. To study the impacts of CA using the SQF approach first requires framing questions to focus on: [1] time or analyzing how CA affects students' academic trajectories; [2] level of abstraction or identifying the best level to intervene to reduce absenteeism (i.e. individual, family, school, community and/or policy levels); and [3] speculation or evaluating previous CA interventions, while attempting to understand the challenges facing families, schools and communities who attempt to combat CA. The systemic questions are detailed below and the SQF diagram is presented in (Figure 1 & 2).

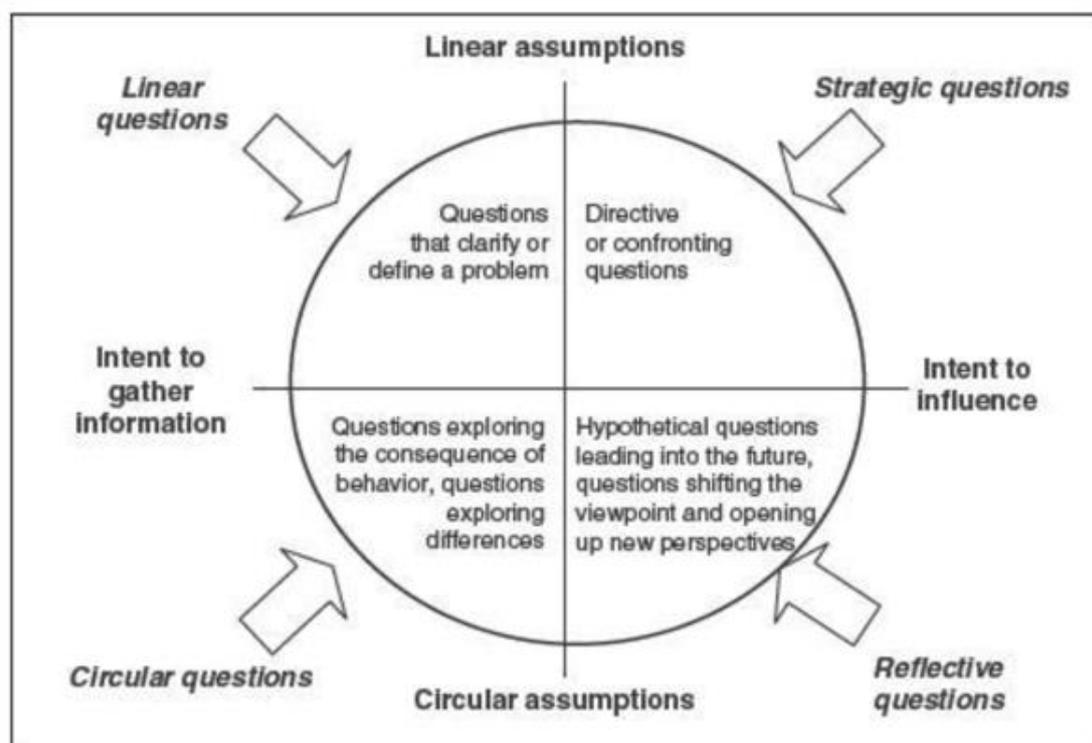
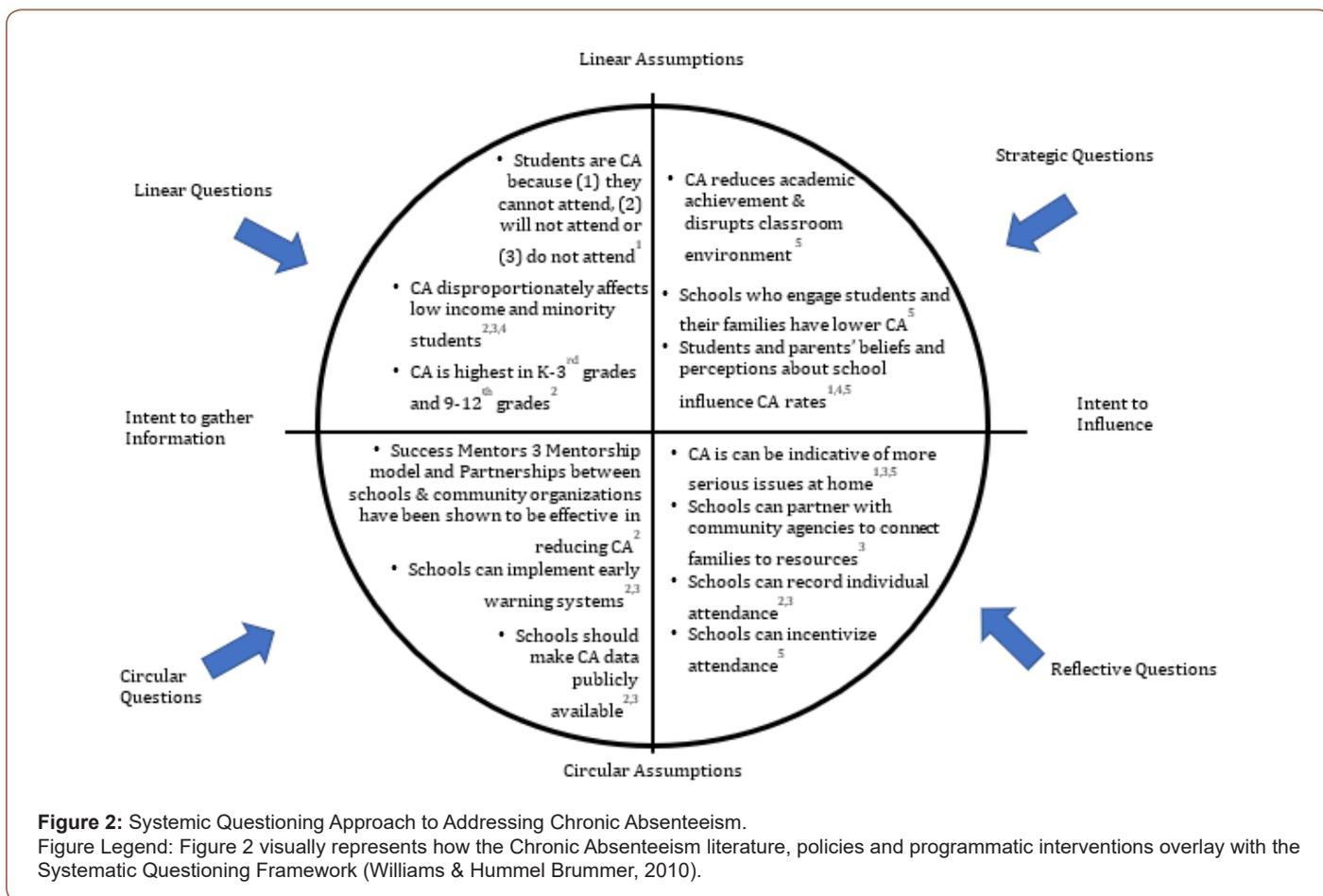


Figure 1: Overview of The Systemic Questioning Framework.

Figure Legend: Figure 1 displays the four components of the Systemic Questioning Framework and its assumptions (Williams & Hummelbrummer, 2010).



Result and Discussion

The authors began with employing the linear questions which focus on simple causal relationships. These questions clarify and define problems through an investigative approach to secure obtaining a large volume of information [14]. The linear questions are: [1] who experiences CA? Free and Reduced Meal (FARM) eligible, or low-income students, and students who attend school in urban districts or economically depressed communities are more likely to be chronically absent [4,10,5]. African American and Hispanic students are more likely than white students to be FARM eligible and attend high poverty schools, increasing risk for CA [9,7,8]. [2] Where is CA prevalent? A primary indicator of CA within communities is not gender, race/ethnicity or urban/rural, it is poverty [4]. CA disproportionately affects high poverty communities [5]. [3] Why are students chronically absent? The three primary reasons students are chronically absent are because they [1] cannot attend school due to chronic illness, familial obligations, etc [2] they will not attend “to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment” [4]. p. 5 and [3] they do not want to attend, because school is not a priority, “or nothing stops them from skipping school” [4] p. 5). And [4] When are the highest rates of CA? CA is highest in kindergarten and twelfth grade,

and lowest in fifth grade [4].

CA Strategic Questions: Investigating, Changing and Judging

Strategic questions build on the information revealed through the linear questioning process and are designed to invoke shifts in thinking through directive and confrontational approaches [14]. The CA strategic questions include: [1] How does CA affect students' performance? Chronically absent students have lower grade point averages, and lower pass rates on standardized exams compared to regularly attending students [4]. [2] How does CA impact non-CA peers and teachers? Students in schools with high levels of CA are more likely to have lower academic performance [10]. When students miss significant portions of curriculum, teachers must divert their attention from regularly attending students to help chronically absent student catch up [1]. [3] How does CA impact schools and communities? CA reduces human capital within communities, because decreased school completion rates can limit the future economic potential. Chronically absent students are more likely to be suspended. Reducing CA may also reduce disciplinary problems within schools and communities [4]. And [4] how does the school environment and culture impact CA? Many chronically absent students believe no one will notice or care when they are

not present [5]. Students who experience bullying are more likely to be chronically absent [4]. Schools must work to create inclusive cultures where every student feels valued and safe [5].

CA Reflective Questions: Facilitating New Perspectives

The reflective questioning process is designed to influence others to examine others' viewpoints. Reflective questions are designed to promote the emergence of new ideologies and perspectives [14]. The CA reflective questions are: [1] what are parents' beliefs and attitudes surrounding attendance? Parents' beliefs, attitudes and school experiences shape how and if they support their child's education [1,6]. For example, some parents view kindergarten as a transitional period into formal schooling rather than the beginning of formal education, leading to the perception absences in kindergarten to not matter [1]. [2] What are the barriers to attendance facing students and their families? CA increases when families face barriers to attendance including but not limited to lack of reliable transportation, lack of clean clothing, maternal depression, food insecurity, and involvement in foster care [1]. Mobility is also associated with CA as student miss school days transitioning between schools [1]. [3] How can schools and communities prevent students near or at risk for CA from becoming chronically absent? Schools need to emphasize the importance of attendance to students and their families. CA decreases when schools provide enriching and engaging learning experiences and actively involve parents and families in the learning process. Parents who are in open communication with schools and are more involved are better able to see how absenteeism impacts their student's performance [1]. And [4] How can teachers and schools' incentive attendance? Teachers should encourage attendance and recognize students with improved attendance. Schools can incorporate financial and nonfinancial incentives to reward students with high attendance [4].

CA Circular Questions: Changing Communication and Behavior Patterns

Circular questions are employed to allow researchers to gain enhanced insight into communication and behavioral patterns [14]. CA Circular questions include: [1] What are effective strategies to improve attendance? A taskforce in New York City implemented the Success Mentors Program to combat CA within City schools. Students who were chronically absent in the previous school year were assigned three mentors: an individual from a non-profit partner (i.e., external mentor), a staff or faculty member from their school (i.e., internal mentor) and a high school senior from their school (i.e., peer mentor). Success mentors were assigned at the beginning of the school year and worked with the mentees throughout the school year. The internal mentors worked on improving school attendance and developing an inclusive culture. Peer mentors called students when they were not in school.

External mentors worked with students and their families to address barriers to attendance through connecting families to local resources where needed [5]. Researchers found chronically absent students were "52% more likely to remain in school the following year than comparison students who did not have a Success Mentor" [5] p. 39). [2] How can schools identify warning signs for students experiencing or at risk for CA? School districts should implement individual attendance tracking systems to measure the number of total days per school year a student misses which will allow educators to monitor trends in the frequency of CA over time [1,4]. Such a database can flag students who are nearly chronically absent and chronically absent so schools can be aware of whom to target [5]. [3] How can teachers and schools work with parents of children identified as chronically absent or at risk for becoming chronically absent? Teachers should contact parents when their children are not in school. This sends a message to students and their family's attendance is important, and absences are noticed [1]. And [4] what is the best way to communicate resources to students and families to reduce barriers to attendance? Building relationships with parents and families will also allow schools to be aware of potential barriers families may be facing and provides an opportunity to connect families to personalized resources [1]. Schools can create a system to link students and families to resources they need through collaborations with the Department of Education, Department of Health and other nonprofit organizations and state agencies [5].

Conclusion

Although the SQF is useful for studying CA and its impacts, it does not always offer concrete actions. For example, SQF has revealed that engaging parents and community organizations decrease CA, as well implementing mentorship programs [1,5]. However, such engagement and program development may not be possible for under staffed and underfunded school districts.

CA Summary and Policy Implications

CA is a significant factor in academic achievement gaps and graduation rate disparities, especially within low-income communities. Educators and policy makers cannot mitigate educational attainment gaps without understanding and addressing the role of CA [5]. The lack of data makes studying CA difficult and developing effective interventions further difficult. Schools should implement individual reporting systems. The aggregate data should be publicly available to enable educators monitor CA overtime. CA data would also allow researchers to compare interventions across school districts and study national trends [1]. Schools should partner with community organizations to develop comprehensive interventions to combat CA. Partnerships should aim to create networks to connect families to local resources and establish mentorship programs between schools and agencies [1,5].

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None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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