

An Ecological Approach to Understanding Student Absenteeism in a Suburban, Kansas School

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Abstract : Student absenteeism is harmful to both the school and the absentee student. One approach to improving student absenteeism is targeting contextual factors within the students' learning environment. However, contemporary literature has not taken an ecological agency approach to understanding student absenteeism. Ecological agency is a theoretical framework that magnifies the interplay between the environment and the actions of people within the environment. To elaborate, the person's personal history and aspirations and the environmental conditions provide potential outlets or restrictions to their intended action. The framework provides the unique perspective of understanding absentee students' decision-making through the affordances and constraints found in their learning environment. To that effect, the study was guided by the question, "Why do absentee students decide to engage in absenteeism in a suburban Kansas school?" A case study methodology was used to answer the research question. Four suburban, Kansas high school absentee students in the 2020-2021 school year were selected for the study. The fall 2020 semester was in a remote learning setting, and the spring 2021 semester was in an in-person learning setting. The study captured their decision-making with respect to school attendance through semi-structured interviews, prolonged observations, drawings, and concept maps. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that peer socialization opportunities, methods of instruction, shifts in cultural beliefs due to COVID-19, manifestations of anxiety and lack of space to escape their anxiety, social media bullying, and the inability to receive academic tutoring motivated the participants' daily decision to either attend or miss school. The findings provided a basis to improve several institutional and classroom practices. These practices included more student-led instruction and less teacher-led instruction in both in-person and remote learning environments, promoting socialization through classroom collaboration and clubs based on emerging student interests, reducing instances of bullying through prosocial education, safe spaces for students to escape the classroom to manage their anxiety, and more opportunities for one-on-one tutoring to improve grades. The study provides an example of using the ecological agency approach to better understand the personal and environmental factors that lead to absenteeism. The study also informs educational policies and classroom practices to better promote student attendance. Further research should investigate other school contexts using the ecological agency theoretical framework to better understand the influence of the school environment on student absenteeism.

Keywords : student absenteeism, ecological agency, classroom practices, educational policy, student decision-making

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