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## Project Based Learning for Chronically Absent Students

Amy Lynch

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Project Based Learning for Chronically Absent Students

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

Like most teachers, I have moved grade levels and schools more than I would have preferred. Luckily though, my circuitous route took me back to a team at an International Baccalaureate (IB) elementary school that I truly enjoy. My initial short call reserve position at this school is where my interest in IB began. I am hopeful that I found a home here to continue my IB work. At this school, I also must focus on chronic student absences. I encountered these absences in my previous position here and more intensely upon my return. This Capstone Project will dovetail the IB teaching methods of Project Based Learning with the devastation of chronic absences by answering, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*”

Project Based Learning means students will actively create projects that are meaningful to them. Learning requires students to work with others and reflect upon their work individually, with the teacher, and ultimately through publicly sharing their project. Chronically absent students include those who miss 15 days or more days of school per year, which typically amounts to at least 10% of the school year. A classroom of students can represent a wide range of socioeconomic status, cultures and values. These are just a few elements that affect a student’s attendance. Chapter One will discuss my personal interest in this subject, including the definition of International Baccalaureate, the professional significance of this subject and what I hope to learn by studying this topic.

## **Personal Interest**

I am a second-grade teacher at an International Baccalaureate (IB) elementary school. Through IB teaching I emphasize growth of the whole student through inquiry based learning. I teach through a transdisciplinary lens, linking many standards throughout each day. I am passionate about this project because it defines my IB work by incorporating reading, writing, math, science, and social studies into projects that can more flawlessly incorporate the learning of students with chronic absences.

The students in my class have remarkably low attendance. This is not just my story, but the story of so many of my colleagues across the Minnesota public school districts. In my 2021 - 2022 classroom, 41% of students attended 91%+ of the time, 33% of students attended 85% - 90% of the time and 25% of students attended 50%-84% of the time. I had one second grade student who arrived at our classroom two hours late with a pass that read, “overslept”. She has missed every morning meeting and 50% of every math class. Another student left 45 minutes early every day. This student missed 100% of 2nd grade science or social studies. These 59% of students that attend school less than 90% of the time are the students that inspire my Capstone project.

Students with chronic absence are also often those that are non-readers and non-writers, as they don't attend school regularly enough to get the necessary literacy instruction. Students with chronic absences struggle socially and emotionally, as they feel out of touch with others who have built relationships throughout the year. These students are not comfortable with the daily rituals and routines, creating confusion of the expectations and therefore heightened behaviors. As teachers, it is obvious to us that school for a child with chronic absence is a continual, new experience, where they feel

disconnected and academically insufficient. As a teacher, I also struggle to teach these students. The uncertainty of daily work preparation, the constant interruption of comments like, “I wasn’t here yesterday”, “I don’t get it”, “Where do I turn in my paper”, “What are we doing?” is energy consuming. More importantly, the undertaking of trying to keep these students up on learning, while fairly progressing the students with 90% or more attendance is massive.

One student I will use as an example will be called Kaitlyn for the purposes of this paper. Kaitlyn attended school just 51% of the time. According to the Child Protective Services ruling, she was moved, without notice, from her mother to her auntie, and back again. Her stay with auntie could be one week to one month long. She also suffers from asthma, and the COVID rules have consistently confused mom. She does not understand when to send Kaitlyn to school or when to quarantine her at home. I have been in regular contact with both guardians, continually encouraging Kaitlyn to return to school. Still, her attendance is 51%. Kaitlyn is a native English speaker, she is not a child with diagnosed emotional or physical disability. She is a genetically bright, curious, engaged child with a desire to learn. She has what she needs to be a successful student, but she is a student with chronic absences.

When Kaitlyn does come to school, her learning either takes on an individualized, but lonely tone, or a fast paced, confused tone. During guided reading, for example, we may be in the third day of a teaching sequence, writing about the text. Do I read the book to Kaitlyn quickly? Should another student retell the book to Kaitlyn? Is this slowing down a burden to other students who attend school regularly? How does Kaitlyn feel when each month she watches her peers move on to a harder text, while she rotates to the

more emerging group, month after month. This year, Kaitlyn found herself in a 1:1 reading group as all of her peers moved forward. Kaitlyn has missed the fundamental base of math, reading, writing, science and social studies; all due to her attendance. How do I keep Kaitlyn moving forward in her education, help her feel less isolated, and have her join a lesson plan that makes sense to her without slowing the progression of others? Sadly, Kaitlyn is only one example of a chronically absent child. According to the Department of Education, in the 2015-2016 school year, in the Minneapolis Public School District alone, 7,797 students were chronically absent. That means 22.2% of the district's students are like Kaitlyn. What if teachers could fill some of the learning gaps chronically absent children face through PBL?

### **Professional Significance**

My Capstone question, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning?*" has professional significance because it may allow students to imagine, through their own IB inquiry based thinking, about how the project came to be and where it is headed. Chronically absent students can view the physical creations of others, join an active discussion and ask questions to help them visualize the learning others have done. This, in itself, is beneficial to the absent student and naturally creates a mental and visual entry point into the project for absent students. Creating these entry points may also relieve student and teacher frustrations.

Project Based Learning may also allow chronically absent students to more comfortably enter a learning environment. Chronically absent students often come to my room shy, unsure and without peer relationships. PBL allows for group work that is active



and under construction both physically and socially. A student who joins a working environment such as this may find an easier social and emotional pathway to learning.

As elementary teachers we master many academic subjects, we teach social/emotional skills, and we also often act as social workers, nurses, and parents to our students. We know teachers get busy doing several tasks at once, from before school through after school. A teacher is so often rushed, and that lesson planning becomes an afterthought. Project Based Learning is an opportunity to share this daily work load and to share the previously made projects. PBL forces extended collaboration among team members and we know that collaboration is an enormous benefit to elementary teachers.

Project Based Learning takes a lot of planning and a lot of collaboration. However, it also creates a clear pathway to the end goal, with shared effort. Creating a one to three week project requires a study of the “year at a glance” standards for all subjects. Teams need to consider the pacing of each individual unit in literacy, math, science, and social studies, then merge them together. Next is scaffolding. Perhaps one of the most important parts of planning surrounds proper scaffolding across the project. If the project does not correctly build upon itself, there will be gaps in learning, decreasing the final scores. As with all lessons, the short-term planning of the week’s tasks and daily tasks is the next step. Teachers must consider the specific needs of each student and incorporate emerging, advanced and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Teachers must plan to manage partners and anticipate behaviors in the classroom. Finally, generating thoughtful, inclusive materials that engage student interests, and offer choice is critical to the learning process. Collaboration across teams, including classroom teachers, ESL teachers, intervention staff and student teachers can be the key to relieving

work load, creating engaging projects with a clear pathway, connecting the students' thinking throughout their days and weeks.

### **What I Hope to Learn**

I have seen some success using PBL, where students have entered and left the project at different stages due to absences. Some examples of these projects are: Beginning of the year routines and literacy; Geography and math mapmaking; Social studies U.S. symbols and literacy; Non-fiction science and literacy insect research. Throughout this capstone project, I want to refine these lessons, to be sure they meet the critical elements of high quality PBL. I especially want to be sure the projects continually focus on the inquiry question and that develop critical class discussions. Additionally, I would like to better understand chronic absenteeism among my urban students so I can encourage students and families to attend school regularly and express the importance of attending school regularly. A better understanding of chronic absenteeism will also help me to better serve my absent and regularly attending students.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I included my personal and professional rationale for choosing the Capstone Project, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning?*" I discussed how this project makes sense for my International Baccalaureate elementary school's inquiry based learning and for my need to better understand and teach students with chronic absenteeism. I explained the widespread effect of a chronically absent child across the student, the class and the teacher. I addressed how using PBL can share the workload among teachers. I stated how I want to do this project

to create better academic entry points for absent students, without disrupting the progress of others in the class.

Chapter Two will include the literature review, where I will discuss students with chronic absence and Project Based Learning. First, I will research why students are chronically absent, what the public systems are doing about chronic absenteeism, and the academic, social and emotional effects of chronic absenteeism. Second, I will define Project Based Learning, discuss the academic, social and emotional effects of Project Based Learning and teachers' perception of Project Based Learning. Chapter Three will provide my capstone project description. Chapter Four will provide my reflection of the capstone project and how it may benefit teachers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In Chapter Two, I have reviewed literature on two topics: chronic absenteeism and Project Based Learning. When these two reviews are joined together, it will help to answer my Capstone question, “*How can students with chronic absenteeism learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*”

First, I will discuss why students are chronically absent, what the public systems are doing about this problem and what academic and social-emotional issues arise as a result of being absent from school. Though there are not a lot of records kept in the public school systems highlighting chronically absent students, this has been a long term concern that teachers and nearly 15% of students in the United States face each year. Gottfried (2019) defines chronically absent students as those with dramatic absenteeism, missing at least 10% of the school year. Second, I will discuss Project Based Learning (PBL). I will define PBL in a robust way, explain the academic and social and emotional effects of PBL for students and describe teachers’ perception of PBL.

#### Why are Students Chronically Absent?

First, understanding that though there is a technical difference between absenteeism and truancy, for the purpose of this paper, they will be synonymous. Absenteeism is absence from school, for excused or unexcused reasons, while truancy is only counted as unexcused absences. School districts track truancy, but do not generally have policies to track absenteeism. My capstone question: *How can students with chronic absenteeism learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?* is an intended study for all

students missing school and all teachers trying to teach missing students, regardless of the public record of absence.

Throughout my review of literature, I have found three main reasons that students face absenteeism. They are: living in poverty, having adverse childhood experiences, and being chronically ill. In the next two sections, living in poverty and having adverse childhood experiences, I will discuss how the challenges that parents face have a direct impact on the lifestyle of their children. Then, I will discuss how challenges associated with chronic illness impact student attendance.

### ***Living in Poverty***

Living in poverty correlates with a variety of life challenges, which in turn correlate with absenteeism. A family may only have one adult to provide the necessary income to support basic needs of food and shelter. The inexpensive, processed food can lack nutrition, causing unhealthy diets for students. Students with poor overall health very often also exhibit poor oral health. According to Jackson (2011), poor oral health is a leading health factor relating to absenteeism because of the distracting pain it causes students. Students who experience dental pain and infection are three times more likely to be absent than a student who attends regular dental visits. Morrissey (2014) explains that low income families also often work odd hours, forcing children to be more self-reliant than is desirable for their age. For example, a primary-age student may be asked to wake up, care for their siblings, and report to school on their own. These odd or changing work hours make it further difficult to establish healthy, safe, consistent routines in the household. Without routine, households may be overseen by different adults who are sometimes poor role models, voicing ideas that school is not important. These stressful

physical and emotional circumstances then create conflict, possibly leading to behavioral problems, mental health issues and substance abuse. It is also common for those living in poverty to live in unsafe neighborhoods and witness crime or violence. Parents who are at work in the morning hours are not always comfortable allowing their child to walk to school in a dangerous neighborhood. Furthermore, there are students who face residential mobility and homelessness. Those students who face homelessness are over twice as likely to miss school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). Housing mobility, eviction, foster care, and school changes contribute to these student's absences. It is common for parents to prioritize housing over school.

### ***Adverse Childhood Experiences***

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) predict absenteeism. In order to further evaluate children who face the aforementioned life challenges, pediatricians survey for Adverse Childhood Experiences. According to Stempel et al. (2017), the screening includes nine questions and scores the excessive hardships of the child. Having one ACE shows correlation with absenteeism, while having two or more ACEs increases trauma and absenteeism accordingly. The nine screened categories are: family income makes it hard to buy food or shelter; guardians who are divorced; a guardian died; a guardian who served time in jail; witnessing physical fighting in the home; witnessing violence in the neighborhood; living with a person who suffers from mental illness or is suicidal; living with a person who has a problem with alcohol or drugs; the student was treated unfairly for race or ethnic group (Stempel et al., 2017). Students with at least one of these Adverse Childhood Experiences will also experience mental health care needs such as

anxiety and depression. Students with anxiety and depression will commonly avoid school, furthering their absences.

### ***Chronically Ill Children***

According to Lum (2019), between 10% and 20% of school aged children have chronic illness. Lum (2019) addresses the fact that chronically ill children are found to be absent a great deal. The article lists chronic illnesses such as cancer, asthma, cystic fibrosis, and gastrointestinal diseases that are reported to have nearly five times as many absences as students without chronic illness. These absences are for frequent medical appointments and because students are too sick from their disease to attend school (Lum et al., 2019).

### **What Public Systems are doing about Absenteeism**

As mentioned earlier, truancy and absenteeism are treated differently in the United States. Truancy records only the unexcused absences. Absenteeism includes both excused and unexcused absences. Again, this Capstone is concerned with all student attendance, regardless of reason. Teachers and families, school districts, communities, counties and the government are making efforts to enact positive changes that encourage students to attend school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Robinson et al., 2018; Washington County, 2022).

### ***Teachers and Families***

National Center for Homeless Education (2017) reports that school data shows success with teacher involvement with regard to student attendance. The teacher/student and teacher/family relationship is critical. Open communication immediately following an absence to learn the cause of the absence and to create a plan to avoid a similar

absence in the future is effective. Teachers can also pair students with mentors to encourage attendance and address absence through a follow up conversation.

Robinson et al., (2018) conducted a study between teachers and families, hoping to decrease absenteeism through communication. This study focused on parental beliefs surrounding the importance of school attendance, especially in elementary grades, kindergarten through fifth grade. The study suggests that parents who had poor school experiences themselves, and parents who harbor distrust in the school system will underestimate the importance of school attendance. Additionally, Robinson et al., (2018) states that parents believe that middle school and high school provide more rigorous learning than the younger grades, deeming elementary school less critical. Robinson et al. (2018) focused on personal communication by way of mailers to combat absenteeism. The study aimed to change the parental belief of the importance of attending school and to highlight the actual attendance of the student, as many parents are mistaken about how much school their child misses. The study mailed letters with the student name attached, including the actual number of absences, an example of the state standard explaining what the child was learning at their grade level, and information for supporting student and family attendance. According to the study, this mailer cost \$10.69 per school, and decreased absences by 15%. Robinson et al., (2018) states that low cost solutions, including personalized student information shared between teachers and families, show positive results in decreasing absenteeism.

### ***School Districts***

School districts can be highly effective in improving school attendance. Rewarding students who have positive attendance is a simple, but effective tool. Offering



before and after school programs can be enticing to students and families from an interest, entertainment and childcare standpoint. Offering dental and health care through the school is an incentive for students and families living in poverty to attend. Finally, removing student suspensions as a punitive measure will help students to attend school all the days they can (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017).

### ***Communities***

Communities can offer visual and oral encouragement to attend school through public advertisement. Public transportation signage and public venue signage are examples. Some communities have enlisted celebrities to record phone calls and voicemails encouraging students to go to school. Social services can create attendance contracts with the schools for a two pronged, team approach to attendance. For students living with homelessness, shelters can offer designated study spaces and regular reminders of school days to children housed with them (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017).

### ***Counties***

Counties take a more punitive approach when addressing poor attendance. Some truancy (only accounting for unexcused absences) laws include \$50 to \$2,000 fines for families, court referrals, truancy prevention program referrals, and even time in jail (Conry, 2018). Washington County, Minnesota, in 2022, reports on their website that under Minnesota State Statute 120, “Children must attend school from age 7, or upon enrollment in school, until age 18, each and every day for all class periods.”

Washington County consequences include:

A child can be placed on probation, a child may lose their driving privileges until age 18, child care be ordered to pay a fine, a child can be ordered to undergo evaluation and treatment for chemical dependency or mental health issues, a child can be assigned community work service hours, a child can be placed on home detention and not allowed to leave the residence without a parent/guardian unless at school, a child can be removed from their home and placed in shelter care/foster care/ residential treatment facility at the parent's/guardian's cost, a child's cell phone or any other electronic devices can be removed from their possession, a parent/guardian can be ordered to take their child to school at the beginning of each school day, a parent/guardian can be ordered to participate in evaluations and receive services, any other services or conditions deemed appropriate. (Washington County, 2022, p.1)

### ***Government***

The state government has increased their attendance reporting requirements for school districts. This helps with accountability and provides resources for study and improvements of the problem. The government also began providing funding for school districts with low attendance problems. The National Center for Homeless Education (2017) provides staggering examples of gained and lost funding. In Colorado, a school district decreased their chronically absent students by 51, gaining \$350,000 in state funding. On the other hand, a San Diego district who had 473 chronically absent students lost \$350,000 in extra funds. The article continues, highlighting that these funding dollars can multiply greatly. For example, over five years, San Diego County missed

\$624 million dollars in funding, due to poor student attendance (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017).

### **Effects of Chronic Absenteeism**

#### ***Academic***

Academic success is dependent on student attendance. Drake (2017) confirms that chronic absenteeism affects student achievement on formal and informal tests, standardized tests, class grades, and grade point averages. Gottfried (2019) states that chronic absenteeism not only affects the absent student but also affects the absent student's classmates. Gottfried (2019) found that urban students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more academically affected by their own absences and by classmate absences than those wealthier families living in the suburbs. Drake (2017) mentions a study of a six week summer session where above average results in reading were achieved for those students who missed two days or less. Only average gains were made by those missing three or more days of the summer session. Similar results were found in another elementary study, concluding that students who attended less than 80% of the school days scored 20 points lower on literacy tests than those with near perfect attendance (Morrissey, 2014). Morrissey (2014) contributes the significantly lower scores to missed direct teacher instruction, missed teacher modeling, and missed peer interaction.

Gottfried (2019) confirms the research of others, that both reading and math scores for chronically absent students suffer. He further studies the effect of chronically absent students on their classmates. In a classroom where students attend regularly, the instruction smoothly follows a scaffolded trajectory, allowing learning to continually

build upon itself. When a chronically absent student comes to school, this process is interrupted with what Gottfried (2019) refers to as the “congestion effect”. The congestion effect stops the forward progress of the learning, across the classroom. Chronic absent students require more of a teacher’s devoted attention, time and resources. While the chronically absent student receives this attention from the teacher, the regularly attending students do not receive attention and their learning stops. The road to learning is congested. Furthermore, regularly attending students increase their negative behaviors when disengaged from their normal learning environment. Together, the shift in teacher attention and increased behaviors result in classroom management issues. Gottfried (2019) has found that there is a relationship between the percentage of chronically absent students in a classroom and the amount of decreased academic performance for regularly attending students, in both math and reading. Because chronic absenteeism is prevalent in elementary school, the academic growth of the entire class can exponentially decrease as the school years go on.

Research shows that children living in poverty often show lower performance in school because families lack the resources to help the child learn or to help the child to catch up after lagging behind (Morrissey et al., 2014). Poor families also lack the time for a parent and teacher relationship. Family involvement in school is a large factor in school attendance and school success (Drake, 2017). Once a student has fallen academically behind, an exponential decline occurs as the years go on. The challenge of catching the student up to grade level becomes increasingly difficult and the deficit worsens. High levels of absenteeism happen in kindergarten, making first through twelfth grades a continual challenge for the student (London et al., 2016). Poverty can also lead to poor

health, and Jackson et al. (2011) reports that “Children with both poor oral and general health were 2.3 times more likely to perform poorly in school than were those with good oral and general health” (Jackson et al., 2011, pp. 1900-1901).

In extreme cases of poverty, such as homelessness, the National Center for Homeless Education (2017) reports that just 12% of chronically absent homeless children are proficient on standardized tests. Also, homeless children who are absent more than five days per year are three times more likely to repeat a grade. It is important to understand that homeless students who perform poorly in school do not do so because they are homeless. Rather, they perform poorly because they are absent as a result of homelessness. The National Center for Homelessness (2017) states that this chronic absenteeism makes it less likely that students will attend higher education and therefore more likely to repeat the cycle of poverty.

### ***Social and Emotional***

Students with chronic absenteeism show high social and emotional needs and create social congestion. The student teacher relationship is a critical element for all students. Teachers provide a safe physical and psychological environment and encourage students through positive reinforcement and promote self worth. These are feelings that make students want to attend school, increasing attendance (Drake, 2017). Absent students miss these social and emotional opportunities provided by a trusting, healthy adult and are likely to be in emotional distress and lack social confidence (Gubbels et al., 2019). When students are unavailable to build such relationships, they miss critical and age appropriate social and emotional learning. This begins a cycle of school behavioral problems, resulting in continued low attendance, leading to poor academic performance,

increasing the chance of dropping out of school entirely, and repeating the cycle of poverty (Snyder et al., 2009).

Gottfried (2019) confirms that chronically absent students feel utterly disconnected from other students, teachers and the school as a whole. This disconnection causes negative interaction, disrupting the learning environment for all students (Gottfried, 2019). The arrival of the chronically absent child has created social congestion. Project Based Learning may be an effective tool for students to join the learning.

### **What is Project Based Learning?**

#### ***Definition***

A basic understanding of Project Based Learning (PBL) is to understand that it is not rote learning. Though the rote process of teaching and learning is still very present in our classrooms, and although there is still a time and place for rote learning, this is not Project Based Learning. Rather, PBL is a process in which students and teachers engage in creation, discussion, and reflection. Teachers guide while students inquire independently and with peers. Learning is acquired through questioning, choice and action (Helle et al., 2006).

Portions of PBL were addressed years ago with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Development (1978) and Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1952).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Development argues that cognitive abilities are socially guided (Vygotsky, 1978). We see socially guided learning in PBL when students orally guide a partner or group through a project, when students learn from peers, when teachers discuss feedback with a learner, and through the presentation process of the

student creations. Piaget's theory of cognitive development argues that people form meaning based upon their experiences (Piaget, 1952). When a student inquires and creates, based on their own interests and beliefs, we see Piaget's theory shine through in PBL. Both of these theories are solid building blocks that make up the more modern version of PBL.

### ***Academic Elements of Project Based Learning***

Project Based Learning contains several elements that make it a unique way of teaching and learning. Duke (2015), in her article, "Project Based Learning in Michigan" consistently follows what she calls the eight gold standard elements of PBL throughout her research. This is an overview of the eight gold standard elements. The project should be aligned to the core curriculum; the project should address a meaningful problem; the project should be sustained over a period of time; projects should address issues of the student's outside of school world; the project should offer choice and an opportunity for student's to use their own voice; the project should be reflected upon; students should receive feedback and make revisions to their project; and the project should be shared with an appropriate, public audience (Duke, 2015).

Looking through a broader lens, educators will notice that all Project Based Learning is built with three cornerstones in mind. In the following section I will define the three cornerstones and give working examples for each. First, PBL is centered around a question, next, the project is created and third, the entire project should be student focused (Helle et al., 2006).

The first cornerstone of PBL is centered around a high quality question that includes thoughts about the world outside of the student's school (Helle et al., 2006). For

example, second grade students may ask, “How can I become an informed voter?”, “How can I create a useful map of my school’s neighborhood?”, “What is the human impact on the life cycle of butterflies?” Students should continue to ask this central question and the question should be a focus of discussion and reflection throughout.

The second cornerstone of PBL is the creation of a project. This will show how the student chooses to study the question. These second grade students may read about the United States voting process, identify important issues in their community to vote about, write their own opinion of the voting issues, give speeches, create an election in their classroom and grade level, elect voting officials, make voter registration boxes and signs, attend an election in their cafeteria, write a summary of the winning vote, and reflect on the process. Notice that this project includes reading, writing, oral presentations, peer collaboration, independent thought, creativity, and a focus on neighborhood issues all while teaching a social studies standard. Guiding a project through a transdisciplinary lens requires students to use their previous knowledge which solidifies their past learning (Helle et al., 2006). Like Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development, PBL provides students with a true, meaningful experience through which to learn.

The third cornerstone to PBL is student centered learning, meaning that the teacher will model and guide, but that the student has choice and is encouraged to use their voice to bring personal interest into their work. For example, these students may choose the neighborhood issues on which to vote, choose their opinion on the issues, cast their own voice, choose to speak freely by presenting their choice, choose to take a larger role by becoming an elected official, and be creative with their voting signs. Returning to



Vygotsky's (1978) theory, this project offers students to enhance their learning with many opportunities for oral and social interaction.

### ***Social and Emotional Elements of Project Based Learning***

Krajcik et al. (2021) highlight three integral aspects of social and emotional focus for PBL. These aspects are ownership, collaboration, and reflection. Though these three aspects are natural consequences of planning a high quality project, they are worth mentioning. Quality projects will encourage students to take ownership of their ideas and work. Students will be intrinsically motivated to make the project their own and celebrate their work publically. Collaboration between individual students and entire classes will emerge if the environment has previously been built with a focus on classroom community. Finally, as the teacher offers opportunity for discussion and provides feedback throughout the project, students will reflect on their work and edit for improvement.

### **Effects of Project Based Learning**

Project Based Learning has mostly been studied at the high school and middle school levels. Unfortunately, many of these studies have drawn unclear conclusions for a variety of research related reasons. Though PBL is more widely used practice in private schools, Project Based Learning is not yet a widely used practice in the United States public school systems. The public education system in the United States continues to face challenges such as widening achievement gaps, widening income gaps, and the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic name a few. Therefore, our public education system needs to innovate. Researchers seem to agree because, little by little, more attention is

being paid to studying the effects of Project Based Learning in public schools. (De Vivo, 2022).

Though few elementary level studies have been conducted, I was able to find a handful of literature showing positive results of Project Based Learning. The studies I will highlight include urban schools with high levels of free and reduced lunch, indicating high economic need, and students of various races, especially those of color. Researchers have found that students of high economic need and students of color are perceived to benefit from rote learning as they are inheritantly considered remedial students (Isik-Ercan, 2020). Therefore, to combat this stereotype, the study of Project Based Learning in high needs schools emerges.

### ***Study One: Teacher Perception of Project Based Learning***

The first study I will highlight discusses teacher perception of high needs students. Isik-Ercan (2020) studied how second grade teacher Lauren perceived the abilities of her urban students before and after teaching literacy and science by way of PBL. The author notes that Lauren's student body was not only made up of new English language learners, students with special needs and overall, struggling students but Lauren had few available teaching resources or teaching tools as is common for low income, urban teachers. Isik-Ercan (2020) continues, saying that before the study, Lauren taught in a traditional way using worksheets, text and video while focusing on the narrowest standards she could. Lauren thought that the more basic and direct her teaching was, the less extra things her students would have to take in; therefore, the more her struggling students would learn. Lauren's idea was to teach the most basic required standards for the best outcome on standardized tests (Isik-Ercan, 2020). The article continues to show

through PBL, Lauren's teaching methods changed greatly as she gave her students the opportunity to be inquirers and to think at a higher level. It states that Lauren's students became active participants in their learning while Lauren realized that her perception of her students was far too low. The greatest improvement Lauren saw was in the non-academic integral aspects highlighted earlier by Krajcik et al. (2021) surrounding social and emotional learning (Isik-Ercan, 2020). Lauren saw an increase in student engagement, improved accountability and better student self-regulation. She found that she had to give fewer reminders of the task, engaged less in overall classroom management and saw independent workers learn to work as a team. Lauren's PBL allowed her students to develop critical life skills by taking ownership and interest in their learning (Isik-Ercan, 2020).

### ***Study Two: Growth in High Poverty Schools***

Additional research in urban elementary schools shows significant academic growth through the use of Project Based Learning. Duke (2015) discusses a study in the state of Michigan where social studies and literacy were taught using PBL throughout two full units. Materials included books, magazines, videos, writing and oral presentation. By the end of two units, high poverty, urban students made enough growth to match the success of the standards learned by two wealthy school districts.

### ***Study Three: Project Based Learning vs Rote Learning***

Krajcik et al. (2021) used PBL while studying science and literacy in third grade classrooms throughout the United States. This study compared the results of a PBL environment with a traditional rote learning classroom. The PBL group performed eight percentage points better on the science test. Even students with low reading ability were able to interpret the science questions and showed improvement in their science scores. The non-academic aspects of collaboration and reflection also improved across the PBL students.

### ***Additional Studies***

In Duke's 2021 article, "Putting PBL to the test..." she looks at several more studies, this time in a combination of the United States, Turkey and Greece. All elementary schools, specifically grades one through five, are of low socioeconomic status and all schools continue to include a transdisciplinary approach. Some projects are for science and literacy, where students learn about animals while others learn about electricity. Some projects are to teach social studies and literacy with topics such as economics or building businesses. These six studies showed statistically significant gains in both content and student motivation.

### **Teacher Perception of Project Based Learning**

As positive results of PBL continue to flow in and as the United States public school system continues to see more gaps in learning, teachers must innovate and evolve (De Vivo, 2022). In the following section I will provide research showing that teachers have found success using PBL. Then, I will discuss the work necessary to accomplish high quality PBL. Next, I will explain how time and classroom management are

challenges teachers face when implementing PBL. Finally, I will provide suggested strategies for teachers to accomplish high quality PBL.

Teachers like aforementioned Lauren, in Isik-Ercan's 2020 article, participated in a study that changed Lauren's perception of her students, urging her to change her teaching practices to provide deeper, collaborative, authentic learning experiences. In Revelle's 2019 article teachers participated in a PBL study. They found student success in collaboration, discussion and peer teaching. These elements were especially important for the English language learners, as it gave them extensive opportunities to use English. Teachers found success also, and they liked giving some choice and control to their students. Teachers also found that PBL provided better opportunities for differentiation. The projects allowed students to more easily work at their own level and more naturally use their individual abilities (Revelle, 2019)

### ***Elements of a High Quality Experience***

Despite the variety of success including increased student motivation and even the reinvigoration of teachers, educators are still hesitant to start Project Based Learning. DeVito (2022) identifies four requirements for high quality PBL experiences. First, teachers must create purposeful projects with relevant questions pertaining to the world outside of the classroom. Next, teachers must look through a transdisciplinary lens while still aligning to state standards and the grade level expectations of social and emotional growth. Third, because of the robust nature of this work, the school and grade level team must be immersed in a solid culture of collaboration and innovation. Finally, the school must offer continued, high quality professional development (PD). The PD should continue for two to three years, consecutively. As with everything, the longer the craft of

PBL is studied and implemented, the more effective it becomes in the classroom (De Vito, 2022). Sormunen et al. (2019) agrees that, “Teachers need examples of beneficial approaches, detailed illustrations, and models of good practice” (Sormunen et al., 2019, p.710) to provide high quality Project Based Learning.

Sormunen et al. (2019) studied the importance of group composition to ensure full participation of all students as a critical element of high quality Project Based Learning. In the discussion of the study, the author confirms that a focus on student grouping helps teachers learn the academic and social needs of the students, helping to identify needs for differentiation. In the study they specifically mention students with learning difficulties (LD) and use teacher-led discussion to encourage interaction and cooperation between students with LD and mainstream students. The study explains that students with LD are less accepted by their peers to begin with, which causes low self confidence, leading to low participation and feeding this negative cycle.

According to Sormunen et al. (2019), a teacher needs to think about their LD and mainstream students, understanding how each fits into the grouping framework. This framework includes considering how students interact with other students, the social status of the students, the academic capability of each student, and the readiness of the students to accomplish a task. The study notes that below average students progress best when participating with high achieving students. While high achievers perform best when working independently and when they move between varying groups.

The second portion of the Sormunen et al. (2019) study states that teacher-led discussions that foster group work and social skills will create a high quality learning environment for Project Based Learning. The author gives examples of direct, reflective

questions that will help the students learn the process of Project Based Learning. These examples include: “How challenging was the task?”, “Did you have the enough skills to do it?”, “How interesting was the task?”, “How much did you cooperate with your pair or other team members”? Were you all equally interested in the task?” Sormunen et al. (2019). Sormunen et al. (2019) then recommends that teachers will give guidance, offer suggestions and provide examples of ways to be successful while academically and socially working in groups. Additionally, Sormunen suggests that teachers ask students to list three peers they can work with and list three peers they cannot work with.

### ***Time***

Teachers found that time is their hardest obstacle to overcome (Revelle, 2019). It takes a lot of time to prepare transdisciplinary lessons, especially with the added pressures from the district to adhere to the state standards. Teachers find that scaffolding the learning, (or making the order of the lessons properly built upon each other), is difficult as a project flows over several weeks with student inquiry guiding the process. Additionally, teachers report that it takes a lot of time to implement PBL with the students (Revelle, 2019). The inquiry, observation, predicting, creativity and collaboration are lengthy processes. However, teachers find that it is class discussion and teacher feedback that takes the bulk of the time (Revelle, 2019). It is clear from the Sormunen et al. (2019) that it takes extensive time to identify the most effective groups of students for Project Based Learning. As teachers in the Revelle (2019) article would agree, the teacher-led discussions that Sormunen et al. (2019) recommend takes dedicated time as well.

### ***Classroom Management***

Another intimidating factor for teachers is classroom management. Creating an environment of community, acceptance of others, and willingness to try new things is a task in itself. If teachers are truly going to give up some control and allow students to guide their own work so they can participate in their experiences, they must first create an environment that can manage collaboration and the social and emotional demands of PBL. Especially in the primary grades, (kindergarten, first grade and second grade), teachers may spend a substantial amount of time teaching children how to work in groups. Also aligned with teachers giving up some control, they need to look through a new lens and recognize the complex relationship that exists between teaching standards directly and allowing the learning of standards to evolve through PBL. Teachers should decrease their direct fidelity to the standard based curriculums and trust in the process of PBL (Isik-Ercan, 2020; Revelle, 2019).

### ***Strategies for Teachers***

In order for teachers and teaching teams to accomplish this labor intensive work, there are a few strategies that Duke (2015) offers. First, teachers should reuse projects over the years and teachers should collaborate among themselves to share projects. Next, teachers should consider using the same format when creating new projects. Duke (2015) suggests a project launch, then students read and research, followed by writing and research, then revising and editing and finally, presenting and celebrating. This repeated process helps provide a familiar outline for all teachers to recognize and work with efficiently (Duke, 2015). Next, districts, schools and teachers must invest in highly



quality, continued PD, as mentioned earlier. This will clarify and expedite teacher mastery of PBL (De Vivo, 2022; Duke, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Poor attendance, whether excused or unexcused, especially for struggling students and family, can cause long term consequences. Chronically absent students are more likely to have poor academic performance, grapple with social and emotional issues, and are more likely to drop out of school. These problems widen the academic gaps in the United States and repeat the cycle of poverty for future generations.

Project Based Learning, though rigorous work for teachers, is showing promise of success for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status. Building learning experiences through a transdisciplinary lens and incorporating opportunities for social and emotional growth through collaboration and discussion, generates authentic learning.

In Chapter Three, I will describe a Project Based Learning experience offering entry points into the projects for chronically absent students. I will dovetail absenteeism and Project Based Learning as I further explore my Capstone Project question, “*How can students with chronic absenteeism learn through Project Based Learning?*”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Overview

#### Introduction and Positionality

In the United States, about 15% of students face chronic absenteeism. Gottfried (2019) defines chronically absent students as those with dramatic absenteeism, missing at least 10% of the school year. Gottfried (2019) states that chronic absenteeism not only affects the absent student but also affects the absent student's classmates. Drake (2017) confirms that chronic absenteeism affects student achievement on formal and informal tests, standardized tests, class grades, and grade point averages.

Project Based Learning (PBL) is a process in which students and teachers engage in creation, discussion, and reflection. Teachers guide while students inquire independently and with peers. Learning is acquired through questioning, choice and action. Project Based Learning takes place over a sustained period of time.

School attendance is a true indicator of success in the United States. Project Based Learning is an educational process where students build long term understanding. This capstone project will integrate chronic absenteeism and Project Based Learning by answering the question, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*"

Throughout this project, I have considered my own biases, as I am not of the same upbringing or socioeconomic status of my current students. I am a white female who attended public suburban school for elementary and high school. Further, I attended a private school for grades six, seven and eight. I did not grow up facing hunger, violence or homelessness. My family valued education and were active advocates for my learning.

Currently, I am an elementary school teacher in an urban setting, at a highly diverse school, with 81% free and reduced lunch. I admit that I get frustrated when students with chronic absence come to school confused, and show little or no interest in academic growth. I want to better understand the academic, social and emotional needs of the chronically absent student so I can successfully weave them into high quality, engaging academic projects. I am excited that I have created a curriculum unit that offers entry and exit points for students with chronic absenteeism and allows them to grow without interrupting the progress of regularly attending students.

In this chapter, first I will provide an overview of the Project Based Learning unit that I created. Second, I will describe the research that supports PBL and the need for chronically absent students to have quality academic and social and emotional school experiences. Next, I will discuss the setting and intended audience for my project. Then, I will then provide a description of the PBL unit that I designed, including a timeline. Following, I will state how students can be assessed throughout the unit. Finally, I will provide a preview of Chapter Four.

### **Overview**

This capstone project is intended for second grade teachers working in urban schools with chronically absent students. I have designed one Project Based Learning unit with special attention to daily entry and exit points for students with chronic absenteeism. The unit addresses the Minnesota social studies benchmark standard, 2.1.1.1.1 Citizenship and Government: Civic Skills: Demonstrate voting skills, identify rules that keep a voting process fair, and explain why voting is important (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). The unit has been developed through a transdisciplinary

lens and includes reading, writing, speaking, creativity and student choice. Ultimately, students produce a large poster project to show their understanding.

### **Research Framework**

Research shows that designing unit lessons that include the proper PBL elements and designing unit lessons using an effective framework will produce effective learning Wiggins (2011). Research also shows that academic success is dependent on student attendance Drake (2017). In this capstone project I used this research to design an effective unit, while focusing on entry points for chronically absent students.

This curriculum design includes Duke's (2015) eight gold standard elements of Project Based Learning. These eight gold standard elements will be defined in the project description below. The curriculum design also highlights three integral aspects of social and emotional focus for PBL. These aspects are ownership, collaboration, and reflection (Krajcik et al., 2021).

This curriculum design follows Wiggins's (2011) design framework. According to Wiggins (2011), high quality curriculum design can produce long term understanding that can be transferred as a full skill set to a variety of circumstances. Unit development should be built by working backwards from first identifying the desired results, next determining appropriate assessment, then planning the learning and instruction. The lessons should continually revisit the main objective and the learning along the way. The unit should have a variety of engaging activities but these activities have to continually generate learning that connects to the desired results.

Regarding students with chronic absenteeism, Drake (2017) confirms that chronic absenteeism affects student achievement on formal and informal tests, standardized tests,

class grades, and grade point averages. Gottfried (2019) states that chronic absenteeism not only affects the absent student but also affects the absent student's classmates. Additionally, absent students miss social and emotional opportunities provided by a trusting, healthy adult and are likely to be in emotional distress and lack social confidence (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Following the academic elements of PBL outlined by Duke (2015) and the social and emotional elements of PBL outlined by Krajcik et al. (2021), combined with the robust curriculum design framework outlined by Wiggins (2011), students will gain true understanding of the material and gain collaborative and reflective skills. Project Based Learning may also aid in solving academic and social and emotional challenges that chronically absent students face. I sought to answer this question by studying, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*"

### **Setting and Audience**

This curriculum unit has been created for second grade classrooms in an urban pre-kindergarten through fifth grade public elementary school. According to the Minneapolis Public School website (2022) 81% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 42% receive English language services and 12% receive special education services. This school is an International Baccalaureate school and therefore supports Project Based Learning. More specifically, the second grade expected class size is 22 students with 59% of students missing at least 10% of the school year, categorizing them as chronically absent. This setting and audience, like with most urban schools, is ideal to study my capstone question, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*"

## **Project Description and Timeline**

This social studies unit contains 11 lessons lasting 35 - 40 minutes each. The focus of the unit addresses the social studies Minnesota benchmark standard, 2.1.1.1.1 Citizenship and Government: Civic Skills: Demonstrate voting skills, identify rules that keep a voting process fair, and explain why voting is important (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

Following Duke's (2015) eight gold standard elements of Project Based Learning:

- The project is aligned to the Minnesota benchmark standard 2.1.1.1.1.
- The project is sustained over a two to three week period of time.
- Krajcik et al. social and emotional aspects of ownership, collaboration, and reflection are weaved throughout the unit (2021).
- The project addresses the responsibility of voting.
- The project offers choice and an opportunity for student's to use their own voice during voter registration, while electing officials, while electing candidates and during the election process.
- The project provides an opportunity for students to complete the voting process themselves.
- Students reflect on their learning, cooperation and ability to share their work with their community by completing a rubric.
- Poster projects including all elements of the unit will be shared with an audience.

Other resources used throughout this unit include Google Documents lesson plans, a rubric, technology, videos, fiction text, writing paper, writing prompts, graphic organizers, and art supplies.

## **Assessment**

Teaching a transdisciplinary unit across an extended period of time allows for frequent, varied assessment. A rubric reflects both academic and social and emotional assessments that take place as the project progresses.

Graphic organizers are used as an informal assessment of making connections and showing understanding. Writing is assessed throughout in partnership with the graphic organizers. Social and emotional skills are displayed through group work, independent thinking, oral presentation, and while voting. The artistic creation of project posters will show collaboration and age appropriate fine motor skills. A rubric addresses these criteria.

## **Conclusion**

In Chapter Three I stated my research question, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*” and recognized my own biases that could hinder me from truly understanding the challenges students face in their lives that influence their learning. Then, I provided a brief overview of the Project Based Learning social studies unit that I created. I also provided research that shows the essential elements of PBL, the necessary framework for the PBL unit and the need for PBL, especially for students with chronic absenteeism. Next, I outlined the setting and intended audience for my project. Finally, I provided a description and timeline for the unit. Chapter Four will provide my reflection of the capstone project, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project was to answer the question, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*” I have always worked in urban elementary schools with high need students and families. The challenges that families face often result in chronic absenteeism. As a new teacher, I was easily judgemental and frustrated. As the years passed, though I became less judgemental and frustrated, I still had not found solutions for chronically absent students. Through my research for this capstone project, I have come to better understand the challenges families truly face and I have become highly empathetic towards my chronically absent young students. Through my research I have also learned the importance of putting forth the effort to teach in new, better ways that reach more students. My research included Project Based Learning as a strong solution for chronic absenteeism.

In Chapter Four I will highlight the major learnings that developed as a result of my research, writing and project development. Next, I will revisit my literature review. Then, I will discuss the limitations of my project. Following that, I will talk about future projects and policy implications. I will also discuss how my project benefits the profession.

#### Major Learnings

This research project has helped me to look through a new lens. I have recognized as a rich, white woman who grew up in a household that valued education, that my expectations of all of society are not fair. I have a new level of empathy and



understanding of those who grow up in households riddled with poverty, adverse childhood experiences and chronic illness. This research taught me about the efforts put forth by families, schools and different levels of government to aid students who miss 10% or more of their schooling. I see chronic absenteeism as a deep, generational problem that takes energy and resources to battle. These realizations have made me a better teacher. I am now constantly looking for ways to connect with families, document needs, communicate with my social workers and urge my school to go the extra step in helping kids get to school. In the classroom, I am thinking about who is absent and what they will need when they return to school. I am working with my grade level teachers to create learning opportunities that not only fit the children who come to school but will welcome absent students back to the learning. My teaching team has embraced Project Based Learning as a more robust, effective way of teaching. We are coordinating our reading, writing and social studies units. We are looking at each individual learner and including the just right steps to provide the right level of learning. Absent students who may have missed fundamental learning are students we are now focusing on.

The development of my 11-lesson unit covering Minnesota benchmark standard, 2.1.1.1.1 Citizenship and Government: Civic Skills: Demonstrate voting skills, identify rules that keep a voting process fair, and explain why voting is important (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011) showed me that specific thought must be given to absent students. For absent students to learn through PBL, they must see the progress of others, but also participate in the project. When developing this project I noticed that I had to plan for absent students to learn the main points of the previous lesson and add to their project to solidify the learning, even if their additions are only partial compared to

students who attended the entire lesson. Again, since completing the unit, I have become a better teacher. I see how I have to intentionally plan for students to return to class and learn the foundational information.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

For me to have effectively researched this project and answer my capstone question, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*” I needed to first thoroughly research why students are chronically absent. Following that, I needed to research the elements of PBL and how effective they have proven to be. When I dovetailed this learning, I was able to see that PBL is a viable solution to teaching students, despite their inability to attend school.

Gottfried (2019) defines chronically absent students as those with dramatic absenteeism, missing at least 10% of the school year. In the urban elementary schools I have taught in, it is not uncommon for one third of my students to miss 40% - 60% of their school year. The reasons students are chronically absent often have to do with the struggles that people living in poverty face. According to Jackson (2011), poor oral health is a leading health factor relating to absenteeism because of the distracting pain it causes students. Students who experience dental pain and infection are three times more likely to be absent than a student who attends regular dental visits. Morrissey (2014) explains that low income families also often work odd hours, forcing children to be more self-reliant than is desirable for their age. Those students who face homelessness are over twice as likely to miss school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). Housing mobility, eviction, foster care, and school changes contribute to these student’s absences. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) predict absenteeism. According to Stempel et al. (2017),

the screening of ACEs includes nine questions and scores the excessive hardships of the child. Having one ACE shows correlation with absenteeism, while having two or more ACEs increases trauma and absenteeism accordingly.

Students who are frequently absent perform more poorly in school. Drake (2017) confirms that chronic absenteeism affects student achievement on formal and informal tests, standardized tests, class grades, and grade point averages. Research shows that children living in poverty often show lower performance in school because families lack the resources to help the child learn or to help the child to catch up after lagging behind (Morrissey et al., 2014). Poor families also lack the time for a parent and teacher relationship. Family involvement in school is a large factor in school attendance and school success (Drake, 2017).

These severe hardships have changed me as a teacher, and have changed my teaching practices. Through my extensive research, I have developed empathy for those facing the extreme effects caused by absenteeism. I have also changed my professional practice to be more deliberately in contact with families of chronically absent students. In the unit curriculum I have highlighted where and how teachers can purposefully include absent students. The “Key element” section reminds the teacher what the student missed in the previous lesson. The “Previous lesson’s review” section provides the teacher with direct instructions on how to generate discussion as a whole group that is directly intended for absent students to learn from. My research and my capstone project have emphasized the importance of teaching in a way that offers an opportunity for absent students to see other’s work, notice the logical progression of the work, hear a concise

re-teaching through classmate voices, and be academically and socially included in the ongoing learning.

Project Based Learning is shown to be an effective way of teaching and learning and may be the best way to teach chronically absent students. PBL is a process in which students and teachers engage in creation, discussion, and reflection. Teachers guide while students inquire independently and with peers. Learning is acquired through questioning, choice and action (Helle et al., 2006). First, PBL is centered around a question, next, the project is created and third, the entire project should be student focused (Helle et al., 2006). Additionally, the project should be aligned to the core curriculum; the project should address a meaningful problem; the project should be sustained over a period of time; projects should address issues of the student's outside of school world; the project should offer choice and an opportunity for student's to use their own voice; the project should be reflected upon; students should receive feedback and make revisions to their project; and the project should be shared with an appropriate, public audience (Duke, 2015).

I included each of these Project Based Learning elements in my unit curriculum. The "Teacher lesson" sections have been created through a transdisciplinary lens. Depending on the lesson, the students will read, watch videos, write, use graphic organizers, orally present, generate discussion, be an active member of the voting community, and add creatively to their personal posters. I know that these elements make my project engaging and logical to follow for both the teacher and the students. These elements also offer the students many opportunities to grow socially and emotionally throughout.

Though there is not a lot of research for PBL in elementary schools, the little that there is, shows positive results. We should continue to teach by way of Project Based Learning given the strength of these few studies. Isik-Ercan, (2020) states students became active participants in their learning...the greatest improvement was in the non-academic integral aspects highlighted by Krajcik et al. (2021) surrounding social and emotional learning. The teacher saw an increase in student engagement, improved accountability and better student self-regulation. She found that she had to give fewer reminders of the task, engaged less in overall classroom management and saw independent workers learn to work as a team. PBL allowed students to develop critical life skills by taking ownership and interest in their learning (Isik-Ercan, 2020). Additional research in urban elementary schools shows significant academic growth through the use of Project Based Learning. Duke (2015) discusses a study in the state of Michigan where social studies and literacy were taught using PBL throughout two full units. By the end of two units, high poverty, urban students made enough growth to match the success of the standards learned by two wealthy school districts.

After researching school absenteeism and Project Based Learning in depth, I was able to see that PBL is a viable solution to my capstone question, “*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*” Creating the capstone project furthered my belief that we must think closely about our absent students, and find better ways to teach such students. We must be willing to put forth the effort that PBL takes to achieve more profitable results for our students.

### **Limitations of My Project**

This particular project contains 11 lessons clearly laid out for one unit covering a second grade social studies standard. This standard is the Minnesota benchmark standard, 2.1.1.1.1 Citizenship and Government: Civic Skills: Demonstrate voting skills, identify rules that keep a voting process fair, and explain why voting is important (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Most materials are standard classroom materials, such as crayons, markers, scissors, glue and the schoolwide printing services. Teachers can also find videos and audio texts online, or choose to locate the texts in hard copy. One material that teachers must procure on their own and possibly at their own expense is a poster board for each student. A teacher may decide to create a booklet as a work around for the poster board. The biggest limitation to this project is planning the pacing. The lessons take varying amounts of time so planning each session into your days may shift your literacy or math blocks. A strategy is to join lessons in this unit together or take more than one class to finish a lesson. Planning the pacing of this unit is key.

### **Future Projects and Policy Implications**

Project Based Learning is more commonly used at the high school level. As previously stated, there is little research supporting PBL in elementary schools. However, there is some solid evidence that PBL can and does work in elementary schools. Through my research and teaching career, I have found that social and emotional teaching is very important in elementary school and PBL offers this element of learning. Project based learning requires a lot of whole group discussion, where all students can be involved and supported. PBL also allows students to interact in small groups or with a partner, building a stronger classroom community. Finally, PBL requires an artifact to be created and to be

individually proud of. This artifact allows students to show their thinking in a safe way, rather than being required to speak outward to classmates that a chronically absent child may not really know. Social and emotional learning is reason enough to continue to explore and create PBL lessons throughout all levels of elementary school.

As my research showed, teachers, families, school districts, communities, counties and the federal government are all battling the academic and social effects of chronic absenteeism. If more research is put towards the effects of PBL, maybe school districts can shift their curriculum choices to PBL models. Imagine if teachers, families, school districts, communities, counties and the federal government also put resources towards this new, underdeveloped way of teaching by way of Project Based Learning.

### **Benefits to the Profession**

This unit project is just one example of Project Based Learning. The goal of this project was to create an ongoing, visual representation of past learning so absent students can get a glance at what they missed and naturally join the project. It is my hope that using this project will encourage teachers to build more projects for their grade levels and share them throughout our industry. The creation of PBL units is time consuming, but once they are created, they help teachers to teach in new, invigorating, engaging ways. As projects become more mainstream and access to projects across the country increase, our way of both teaching and learning can shift.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Four reflected on the capstone project, “Project Based Learning for Chronically Absent Students”. The chapter highlighted the major learnings that developed as a result of my research, writing and project development. Then, I revisited

my literature review by pointing out key research that informed my opinion of how absenteeism and PBL dovetail. Next, I mentioned the few, but real limitations of my project. Following that, I discussed how attention to future projects and government policy could shift our ways of teaching, which could be a benefit to the profession.

Through my research and reflection of the capstone project, "*How can students with chronic absence learn through Project Based Learning (PBL)?*" I know about the extreme hardships that school aged families face, causing education to take a back seat. I know through research the power of Project Based Learning for both the teacher and the students. The key to teaching chronically absent kids is in the creation of a project that an absent student can look at, and make sense of, the previous day's lesson. In doing this, an entire class can more flawlessly move forward with learning, while not leaving others so far behind.



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