

## School Absence Seen from a School Perspective and a Parent Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Inspired by social practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen, 2016), this article adopts a contextual perspective to address school absence, specifically focusing on the relationship between parents and schools in addressing excessive school absence. The central questions of the article are: How do parents of children with excessive school absence perceive the support they receive from the school? Secondly, why do schools struggle to support parents dealing with children with excessive school absence? By exploring the experiences of parents and school staff in their interactions regarding excessive school absence, the article highlights how the organization of everyday practices influences the dynamics between schools and parents. The study is based on 41 interviews, including 24 interviews with parents, four with school leaders, four with pedagogical leaders, and 11 with teachers. The article reveals that parents of children with excessive absence describe feeling left in a communicative vacuum due to schools not taking sufficient action regarding their children's absences. On the other hand, school staff reported challenges related to internal coordination, negotiation of responsibilities, and limited resources in implementing long-term systematic interventions for parents dealing with children with excessive school absence. The article argues that in order to understand and address school absence effectively, it is essential to consider its contextual and relational nature.

**Keywords:** *school absence, communication, parents, school practices, cooperation*

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- J: If school and home work together, then we can go a long way with the children. But if school and home do not cooperate, we get nowhere with the children. (Teacher)

## Introduction

In the past few years, student absences have become a growing problem, and have therefore received increased attention. According to past studies, students' school absence seems to predict academic performance (Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried et al., 2010; Rogers et al., 2018), high school graduation (Byrnes et al., 2012; Schoeneberger et al., 2012), drug and alcohol use (Henry et al., 2010), criminality (Baker et al., 2001; Jacob et al., 2003), and the risk of adverse outcomes later in life (Kristensen et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2018; Rohrman et al., 1993). Studies have shown that parental involvement is crucial for remedying school absenteeism (Broussard, 2003; Fröjd et al., 2007; Kearney, 2008). Parental involvement refers to actively developing a child's academic progress, monitoring attendance and homework, and enhancing school quality via participation in parent–teacher relations and other activities (Kearney, 2008). In general, parental involvement in children's school life (Boonk et al., 2003; Broussard, 2003) promotes children's school performance (Studsrød et al., 2009), as well as their self-confidence and motivation in school (Kearney, 2008).

Despite a growing awareness regarding the complexity of school absence, studies on school absence have tended to focus on specific discrete factors (Frydenlund, 2021b). Regarding school–parent relations, most researchers have focused on factors such as: language barriers between parents and teachers; relations between class and culture; lax family attitudes towards academic progress; conflicts and mistrust; family resistance to school practice; teacher absenteeism; and school-based racism and discrimination, all of which negatively influence school–parent relationships (Brand et al., 2004; Broussard, 2000, 2003; Grolnick et al., 1997; Kearney, 2008; Martinez et al., 2004; Teasley 2004). Although these studies are important, scant attention has been paid to how the organization of different contexts influences remedying school absence. A contextual perspective on school absence focuses on the informal organizational dimensions of everyday life in institutional practice (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Rumberger & Rodrigues, 2002). In this article, when analyzing school absence, we wish to pursue a contextual perspective on parent–school relations inspired by social practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen, 2016). A social practice perspective has its roots in Marxist thinking, arguing that human existence needs to be understood as part of historical, contradictory, and dilemma-ridden social relations (Gould, 1978; Ollman, 2003). When addressing school absence from a social practice perspective, we need to approach it as a relational phenomenon, that is as it is experienced by both parents and school staff, and the contexts in which they are a part. We argue for the importance of understanding parent–teacher relations as part of a social practice involving not only how teachers and parents interact, but also how schools are

organized, and how school staff (educational and school leaders, pedagogues), educational psychologists working in PPR<sup>1</sup> (Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning), and social service representatives cooperate in everyday life with parents of children with excessive absence (Dannow et al., 2018; Frydenlund, 2021a; Ingul et al., 2013; Reid, 2005). Several scholars in the field have called for further research on the complex interaction between the various levels and factors related to excessive absence (Frydenlund, 2021c; Jonasson, 2011; Loftis, 2014). More concretely, the article will focus on two questions. Firstly, how do parents of children with excessive school absence experience the support they receive from the school? Secondly, why do the schools have difficulties supporting the parents of children with excessive school absence? The two questions obviously are related and, as outlined below, the second question presumes the first. Excessive school absence is defined as the child missing more than 10% of school days during the last 3 months, and the parents and school staff experience the child's lack of school attendance as a significant problem (see Kearney et al., 2019, for a discussion defining school absence).

The paper does not explore the direct interaction between parents and school staff, but focuses on how parents and school staff experience cooperating in relation to excessive school absence. In the paper, we assume that excessive school absence is remedied through the school staff and parents ideally working together, and understanding each other. This means understanding the context of the other party, the parents' and school staff's context respectively. Thus sound communicative relations are a prerequisite for beneficial coordination between parents and school.

First, we will outline how parents of children with excessive absence experience the school's actions in response to this. Second, we will outline how the institutional practices of which the school staff are a part shape their perspectives on children's excessive absence. This analysis aims to clarify the conditions for interaction between parents and school staff relating to children's absence in Danish elementary schools.

## Method

The study was conducted in the municipality of Aarhus, which is the second biggest city in Denmark, with approximately 330,000 inhabitants and 46 primary schools. We conducted 41 interviews: 24 with parents, four with school leaders, four with pedagogical leaders, and 11 with teachers from various schools in the municipality. In two of the interviews, two teachers participated. The Danish Folkeskole is a comprehensive school including both primary (grades 1 to 6) and lower secondary education (grades 7–9/10).

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1 In Denmark, educational psychologists work in Educational Psychological Counseling Centers called PPR (Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning). PPR is a part of the primary school system and offers primarily psychological counseling to the primary schools in cases where the pupils have various problems.

The 24 parents interviewed all had children with excessive absence. We conducted 22 (92%) of the interviews with the child's mother. Of the students with excessive absence, 16 (66%) were boys, and the majority, 17 (71%), attended sixth to ninth grades. The children attended 20 schools in the municipality of Aarhus. Both authors were connected with the Back2School research project, in which a group of children with the most common problems of school absence were treated with a manualized modular program in a randomized control group experiment. The relationship to the Back2School project gave access to the Back2School database, from which it was possible to recruit parents with children who had excessive school absence (Thastum et al., 2019). The parents and children involved in this study were recruited from the treatment as usual (TAU) group in the randomized controlled trial (RCT). We asked 32 parents from the TAU group to participate: 24 accepted and eight declined. All participants gave their consent to participate. The interviews lasted from 25 minutes to 1.5 hours. We conducted all interviews over the phone. The inclusion criteria for the RCT were that: (a) the parents had a child with excessive absence, defined as missing more than 10% of school days during the last 3 months, as the parents reported; (b) the child attended an elementary school in Aarhus; and (c) the parents experienced the child's lack of school attendance as a significant problem. We centered the interview questions on the following themes: cooperation; support and assistance between school staff and parents; the reasons for the child's absences; the biggest challenges experienced regarding the absences; and who has the responsibility for an intervention. The school leaders interviewed were from four schools in Aarhus, all women with between 4 and 20 years of experience as school leaders. We contacted the school leaders by phone and received their consent to participate in the interviews. Student assistants conducted the interviews, which lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 25 minutes. We focused on the following themes: definition, registration, understanding of excessive absence; official policy in the field; concrete interventions and responsibilities; opportunities to enact them; communication and cooperation with parents and other authorities in the municipality of Aarhus. Of the four pedagogical leaders interviewed, two were women, and they all had between two and three years of experience as pedagogical leaders. We interviewed them using the same themes as those we used with the school leaders. We recruited the school and educational leaders through the group of school leaders who were part of the steering group connected with the Back2School project. The ten teachers and one pedagogue we interviewed came from six schools in the municipality of Aarhus. We conducted two of the interviews as double interviews. We recruited the teachers via school leaders and pedagogical leaders in the schools in Aarhus. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. We interviewed the teachers using the same themes as those we used with the school leaders. We recorded all the interviews using Crystal Gear, transcribed them in Extensio, and analyzed them in Nvivo 9 using thematic analysis (Kvale et al., 2009). When analyzing the interviews, a number of prevalent themes gradually emerged: lacking support from the school; a sense of isolation and powerlessness (parents); problems of coordination and responsibility;

underfunding; lack of time; and problems with division of labor when addressing school absence (school staff).

We made every effort to ensure that the project was ethically sound. Prior to conducting the interviews, each participant was provided with comprehensive information about the purpose and procedures of the study, and all gave informed written consent. Furthermore, all data collected for the study were treated with strict confidentiality. The data were anonymized, thereby safeguarding the identities and privacy of the participants throughout the research project.

## Results

We begin this section by outlining how the parents experienced the interaction between themselves and the school regarding interventions for their children's excessive absence. In the interviews, nearly all the parents problematized the communicative relations between themselves and the school. Only two of the parents were happy with the cooperation and communication between themselves and the school.

### The Parents' Perspective: Being Left in a Vacuum

When we analyzed how the parents with children with excessive school absence experienced their interaction with the school, the general experience was one of lack of support. Three characteristics stood out in the interviews. First, the parents in general lacked clearly articulated communication from the school regarding plans, time schedules, and division of responsibility. Second, the parents asked for more specific interventions in response to their children's problems. Third, the parents felt that their goals for the intervention were in many cases different from the school's.

In the interviews, the parents outlined a number of problems in their interaction with the school, and they said they did not receive much help from the school, because the school was passive when communicating with them. One parent stated:

And now we're just sitting here, and 15 months have passed and not a god-damn thing has happened. Roughly speaking, nothing. That is, if we measure in this way what the result has been. I know there were some meetings along the way and stuff like that, and so on and so forth. (Father of a girl in eighth grade)

In most of the interviews, the parents complained about the school lacking initiative, and being slow in responding to the parents' problems with the children who do not wish to attend school. The parents considered this lack of verbal and written interaction a sign of disrespect, producing a set of negative communicative relations between the parents and the school staff. According to these parents, the schools have taken little initiative in addressing their children's absences. In many cases, the parents claimed that they have had to take the initiative to make anything happen at all regarding their children's absence. Two parents at two different schools, independently of each other,

emphasized that they must take the initiative if anything is going to happen regarding their child's excessive absences:

Well, it has been ... the initiatives have to come from us [the parents – KN]. Every time there has been something, the ideas have come from us. (Mother of a girl in eighth grade)

I probably would have liked to have known from the beginning that it was me who was to be in charge of it all. (Mother of a boy in sixth grade)

The parents stated that the school underinformed them regarding treatment plans and potential interventions for their children. They stated that they lack a clear division of labor in terms of who does what. Furthermore, the parents are unsure of who at the school was responsible for taking action in response to the child's attendance problem, and they wondered if the school had an intervention plan at all. Consequently, the parents felt that they were left in a communicative vacuum, in which they did not know who was in charge of their child's case, or what the school's next step or initiative would be. Several parents compared their situation to playing a game, in which they do not know the rules or what options they as parents have when they seek help.

I simply have not been able to find out who I have to contact, and who takes care of what, who sets what in motion, what is PPR – and should they be part of the process, and when, and who will take care of it? And reports, and BUC<sup>2</sup>, so all these technical terms and names of different institutions just fly around. It's very difficult to navigate when you are "just a parent". (Mother of a boy in sixth grade)

In this communication vacuum, the parents felt powerless. In some of the interviews, they appeared to have given up, and felt discouraged by the situation. When we asked one parent what the greatest challenge was in addressing their child's absence from school, she stated that it was her feeling of powerlessness:

Well ... it has clearly been the case that I remain here with a child on my hands who is feeling super bad, and I do not know what to do with her. You could say it is the frustration of not being able to help [XXX]. So, the frustration over, well, what do I as a parent have to put up with? It has clearly been frustration that is at the top of the list .... Yes, so this has clearly been the biggest challenge. It is that you as a parent feel powerless. (Mother of a girl in fifth grade)

Terms such as "frustration" and "powerlessness" are some that recurred in the interviews when the parents described their situations, and they hinted that it is shameful

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2 BUC is an abbreviation for the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Denmark (Børne og Ungdomspsykiatriske Center).

to have a child who is absent from school. It is partly in this area that the recurring theme of not receiving help quickly enough arose. Some parents even stated that their child's problems worsened during the waiting time, because they missed schoolwork and were very concerned about being excluded from their classes' social interactions (see also Muusmann, 2008, p. 12).

Well, the fact that time passes and no action is taken ... And meanwhile, he's just at home, and I just think he's getting more and more indelukket [withdrawn] .... You just feel like time goes by, and you just feel like he's getting worse. (Mother of a boy in seventh grade)

Another central characteristic of the parents' descriptions of their communicative relations with the school is that when they finally had a meeting with the school, it was of little help. The meetings only consisted of what the parents called "talk", which meant that the school invited the parents to a number of meetings, in which the parents felt the school did not offer any tangible action to help them solve their children's problems:

Well, both my husband and I, when we left (the meeting) there with such a feeling: "Yes, so it was even more talk and not so much action." As I said before, the thing about making a plan ... this is not the experience I have when I leave [the meeting]. I think things become very little concrete. (Mother of a girl in fifth grade)

Finally, several parents felt they and the school staff had different goals. They stated that the school staff were primarily concerned with getting the children back in school, while the parents were concerned with solving the children's problems, which in many cases reached beyond getting the children back into school:

Well, I think the [help] was lacking. Yes, I think so .... Well, I just do not think they were particularly flexible in terms of being able to help. It was so much that ... yes, he did not come to school, and that was the only thing they related to. Not so much what the background for it was .... They did not understand that we could not get him to leave home. (Mother of a boy in seventh grade)

Several parents said that they felt the schools were essentially pursuing their own agenda by focusing on the child returning to class, rather than trying solve the problems that had kept the child from attending school.

We have outlined how the majority of the parents experienced the interaction with the schools. In general, they felt the communicative relations were problematic. The parents felt as if they were in a communicative vacuum, in which they lacked clear communication involving plans about what will happen next and who will take the initiative. Furthermore, when the schools took action, the parents found it of little help to them. Only a few of the parents interviewed described the interaction with the school



as helpful and beneficial. In general, the parents felt that making the school respond to their children's excessive absences required inordinate resourcefulness on their part. In the next paragraph, we will focus on how the school staff experienced the interaction with the parents.

## How Schools See the Interaction With Parents

When interviewing the school staff (school leaders, pedagogical leaders, and teachers) involved with students with excessive absence, another picture of interactions with parents emerged. Whereas the parents were strongly focused on their particular children's problems, thus experiencing a communicative vacuum in relation to the school, the school staff generally perceived excessive absence relationally, as a part of a number of other activities in ongoing institutional practices. As will be explored below, the negotiation of responsibility and agency is a conspicuous feature in the interaction among the school staff when being confronted with excessive school absence.

However, before outlining how the school staff experienced the communicative relations with students' parents, it is important to emphasize that in the interviews with school staff, there was a consensus that it is only through close cooperation with parents that school absence can be remedied. One teacher stated the following:

- I: ... In relation to the concrete intervention, what role do parents play in it?
- S: Everything ... well, a school day does not just start at 8. It starts much earlier, it may start already the night before ... (Teacher from The Sea Side School)

Accordingly, in most interviews, the school staff emphasized that parents are central to interventions related to school absence.

## The Single-Case Approach to School Absence

The interviews with school staff revealed that identifying children with excessive absence played a significant role in how schools addressed school absence issues. This is a significant part of how school organizations address state-sanctioned school absences. The school addresses excessive absence by meticulously observing, registering, and addressing children's school absences. As will be elaborated below, the comparison between the amount of time used to discuss how to identify children with excessive absence, and the amount of energy put into school absence related interventions presents an idiosyncrasy. In the interviews, the school staff outlined several different strategies for identifying children with excessive absence. The schools identify these children both through an electronic absence system that automatically registers when a child's school absence exceeds 10%, and through teachers' sensitivity to children's changing behavior in everyday life. In interviews, the latter strategy – identifying children with excessive absence through teachers' knowledge of the children and their family backgrounds – played a significant role. Consequently, one of



the recurrent themes in the interviews with school staff was the situational dimension of approaching excessive absence from a *single-case approach* (every child has his/her own history), which dominated when it was taken for granted that every case of excessive absence has its own causes and history. One teacher stated the following:

I: ... When do you start reacting?

C: It's situational, and it all depends on who it is. (Teacher from The Old School)

The single-case approach is based on the idea that each excessive absence case is unique. It is primarily the teachers who have the best contact with specific family members, who become central individuals in these cases. One of the school leaders explained the single-case approach by emphasizing that the schools use the path of dialogue: "We use the path of dialogue a lot, both with the parents and with the children" (School leader). Relations to and knowledge of the family played a decisive role in the timing of staff's responses to excessive absence. In most interviews, there was no fixed point at which to respond, even if a student had more than 10% absence. In general, there was no collectively defined procedure for who would contact the parents when children were found to have excessive absence.

I: Who informs, and how?

H: ... It's different. Sometimes, it is the teacher who contacts the parents, and at other times it is the management who is in charge and contacts the parents. And again, it depends on the case.

I: So it will be very individual?

H: Yes, it will. (School leader of West Hill School)

Consequently, the division of responsibility among the involved persons was situated in each case's individual nature and circumstances. The decision regarding who would manage each intervention was based on the case's circumstances, and the relations between teachers and children and their parents. Precisely because many of these cases of excessive absence were apparently unique (*særegne*), it appeared from the interviews difficult for the school to construct and utilize prestructured solutions and collective, defined action plans. Hence, there was no accumulation of shared experiences and knowhow in relation to handling future cases of excessive absences. It was up to individual teachers/teaching teams, together with the educational leader, and possibly the school leader, to prepare plans and solution strategies in relation to each case.

Whenever a case of excessive absence was identified, the next step was to find a person responsible for instigating the appropriate intervention process. However, the process for finding this person was open to negotiation. According to the school staff interviews, the division of responsibility typically depended on cooperation among several parties, and was something that needed to be negotiated when each excessive absence case arose. However, in the interviews with the teachers, there was

a sense of uncertainty related to who had the responsibility for managing interventions in these cases. Most of the interviews showed that it was the school leader who had the formal responsibility. Yet the intervention's practical management was in the teachers' hands. Moreover, this division between formal and practical responsibilities did not inherently clarify who had the primary responsibility for proceeding with the intervention. According to some teachers, the school leaders had the primary responsibility. However, according to others, the class team held the primary responsibility. This case-sensitive approach was precisely described in the following quote:

P: No, it is those who see it who react. But the contact teachers are the ones who then have to contact the family .... This does not mean that the other teachers are not responsible or can also see some patterns, and then just take it up at a team meeting with their colleagues .... (Educational leader from The New School)

As indicated in the quote, it was the teacher who had the closest contact with the child who had the primary responsibility. However, as also reflected in the quote, other teachers also were responsible. In other words, as will be explored below, the division of responsibility for acting on cases of excessive absence was not clearly formulated, and was constantly open to negotiation.

## **A Lack of Internal Coordination**

As outlined above, children with excessive absence were constantly discussed among school staff depending on the specific case's nature and circumstances. In many cases, the responsibility for these cases fell on those with the closest relations to the child and his/her parents. The positive aspect of this approach was that the teachers' knowledge about the child and his/her parents could be used constructively in understanding and helping the child. However, the single-case approach's negative side, as we will explore below, lies in this social arrangement's fragility, in relation to internal coordination processes. Confronted with work overload, illness, and leave situations among school staff, interventions related to excessive absence easily came to a standstill. In other words, when schools must address children with excessive absence, considerable coordination and negotiation were required, and these processes could easily go wrong.

According to the teachers, a number of the problems related to internal coordination processes were closely related to the organization of teachers' everyday work as teamwork. Several teachers mentioned how the latest educational reforms<sup>3</sup> within

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3 In 2014, an extensive reform of the Danish primary school system was carried out supported by a majority of parties in the Danish parliament. The reform was aimed at, among other things, supporting students' knowledge and well-being. The reform strengthened teachers' teamwork and abolished the classical class teacher function.

the Danish primary school system have moved responsibility from a predefined class teacher to the class team, which has the primary responsibility for children's social problems. According to the teachers, each excessive absence case must be negotiated from scratch, in terms of who has the responsibility for initiating and maintaining intervention. In other words, there is a risk that responsibility for the intervention falls between two stools, metaphorically speaking. Thus the new educational reform of the Danish primary school, where everything is organized into teams, has the consequence that responsibility for intervention in excessive absence cases needs to be constantly negotiated. Several teachers described the problem by emphasizing that being in several different teams related to a large number of children made it difficult to find someone who would consistently manage interventions. It was complicated and time-consuming to determine who had the responsibility for addressing a particular problem with a particular child with excessive absence:

M: ... It's simply one of our big problems right now, because there are so many things going on—and not just the absence issues but all those different issues that take place around the kids, right? It is super difficult—because before (the reform), there was a class teacher function. In fact, this is no longer the case in relation to the new reform. Then, you were the leader for a group of children, the class of children you had. But right now, I am in a lot of teams, and I have the same function in all these teams ... so it's an impossible task. And then, you try to structure yourself out of it. It just means a lot of collaboration time. It means that an incredible number of hours go into making structure and talking, and things break down with such a structure .... And you simply cannot remember everything because you are involved with so many children ... (Teacher from Water Hill School)

As indicated in both quotes, from two different teachers, in the previous school reform there existed a predefined class teacher function. However, with the new reform, it is up to the teachers themselves to develop a structure for handling school absences. Another teacher added that the negotiation approach means that everything takes substantially more time:

... So everything will take a long time. Then, all of a sudden, it can take .... Something you could do in a week can take three weeks, because there are so many balls flying around. And I think sometimes that's the vulnerability of it. (Teacher from The New School)

Another teacher mentioned that the time aspect was critical, and consequently that time spent on interventions with parents of children with excessive absence was taken away from other activities. If teachers must spend more time on addressing particular problems with specific pupils with excessive absence, they must take that time away from teaching preparation:

If I'm going to use it [time] to sit and talk to a student every single day for four hours, then that must be what I do with my preparation time. But then there will also be some teaching that just as quietly begins to fail and have some shortcomings. So, it is up to the individual teacher what they will give of their own time. (Teacher from The New School)

In many respects, time was of the essence when new cases of excessive absence arose. The balance between investing time in these cases and investing it in other activities was important to most of the staff. This need for balance gave the staff many challenges in coordinating their activities. One educational leader explained the following:

To get two psychologists and a social worker and a club employee and me to be able to have a gap in their calendars at the same time – plus the teacher does not have to teach, because then the students have to have a substitute teacher – it's like finding a needle in a haystack, right? It's a big job, but it's not reluctance, it's just reality. (Educational leader from East Hill School).

As can be seen from the above quotes, it was time-consuming to negotiate who should initiate and maintain the responsibility for an intervention. The teachers were members of different teams, so in that respect there might be several discussions unfolding simultaneously about who should take responsibility for a particular case. Furthermore, the teachers had a fixed amount of time at their disposal, which meant that time spent engaging in conversation about school absence with particular children or parents took time away from teaching preparation. The Danish elementary school reform, with the aim of providing better teaching for children by organizing school life through teaching teams, turned out to be problematic in relation to excessive absence situations.

In some of the more complicated cases of excessive absence, the school needed to include external experts, such as educational psychologists (PPR) and social services experts. Involving external experts in the intervention process adds to the coordination problem. The school organization, the PPR organization, and social services are three separate organizations with different organizational practices. Hence, adding this dimension to work with excessive absence cases requires even more coordination. In many cases, this dimension slows the intervention's pace even further, because these external experts would call for a new set of communicative relations to be established and negotiated. One of the teachers stated the following:

J: ... It can take *months* to get kids through if we find there are children who are unhappy in school. It can take an *insanely* long time before we can get the PPR system up and running .... (Teacher from The Old School)

According to the teachers, another problem that made successful cooperation difficult was that the staff were constantly changing within PPR and social services. The interventions often ran over long periods and called for continuity. However, the teachers

felt that the persons in PPR and social services, who assisted at the beginning of a case, were often changed during the case management process, increasing the process's vulnerability. One of the teachers explained the following:

J: ... The system is not very efficient and [is] vulnerable. It is underfunded, and many of the people we deal with, they are lowest in the food chain compared to those who work there. So, there are a lot of redeployments and replacements of staff, and illness and stuff like that, and leave periods, which means that the people you are dealing with are always changing.  
(Teacher from The Old School)

The involvement of experts from PPR and social services added to the complexity of coordinating interventions with parents of children with excessive absence. As indicated by the teachers, PPR and social services experts work in different organizations, and are influenced by the problems that govern these organizations. In this respect, the school's ability to cooperate with parents of children with excessive absence is closely linked to other institutional practices beyond the school. In many respects, the school staff's description of communicative relations with parents validated the parents' descriptions of these relationships. The school staff's account of the communicative relations with parents confirmed that adequately responding to children with excessive absence took an inordinately long time, because of the way schools' institutional practices were organized. In the following sections, we will outline briefly how school staff directly experienced the interaction between the school and students' parents.

## Cooperation Between School and Parents

As outlined above, the problematic interaction between the school staff and the parents of children with excessive absences is mediated by the schools' institutional practices. This is actually something that some of the teachers themselves recognize:

A: The parents have, as it were, banged their heads against the wall, in relation to collaboration with the class team, where it can be said that it is not because the class team does not want [to help – KN], but the framework may just be that they have a hard time offering what the child needs.  
(Teacher from The Sea Side School)

As indicated above, the result of the schools' unclear division of responsibility, and the single-case approach to parents and children with excessive absence, meant that school practice lacked predeterminate and collective procedures for how to handle these children. Furthermore, schools did not accumulate a collective knowhow of how to deal with this problem. Consequently, the school staff working with interventions often took a "learning by doing" approach, in which they separately tried out different intervention strategies on their own, to find out what might and might not work. When asked how the teachers learn how to handle children with excessive absence, one of them answered with the following:

M: Well that ... it's "learning by doing," I think .... You get experience from finding out what works. Because we are all just so different. So it is ... and it is not something that happens in a month. (Teacher from East Hill School)

As a consequence of this "learning by doing" approach, the teachers displayed a great sense of insecurity about doing interventions in relation to children with excessive absence. Consequently, in the interviews, the teachers asked for more "tools" when working with interventions in relation to these children. In this context, some of the teachers expressed a need for a more collective approach on how to intervene:

- I: Do you think it will be possible to make such general solution plans/solution proposals for worrying school absenteeism? Do you think that you will be able to generalize in this way?"
- E: Yes, I really think so. So, within categories, no. Well, I think you can .... Well, even though we ... and the kids think they are unique and not very special. Then we are basically very similar. You are rarely alone in having the problem you run around with .... So I think you could. (Teacher from Water Hill School)

Another consequence of the schools' approaches to excessive absence was that teachers interviewed in general showed significant insecurity about knowing what to do in relation to these cases, and they asserted that they lacked special knowledge when working with this issue. Several teachers asked in the interviews for techniques and real options in relation to school absenteeism problems. This insecurity also showed itself in the relationship the teachers had with parents. Several of the teachers described the difficulty they had in finding the limit of the family's private sphere. A number of teachers addressed the discomfort they felt stepping into a family's private sphere, not really knowing what was at stake. Essentially, they did not have any knowhow to back them up. As one of the teachers described it:

- C: Just imagine people [who] might sit and say, "Well, my child is sad and does not want to go to school". And then I might sit there and know that the child's parents are getting divorced or something.... That's not what we're talking about. (Teacher from West Hill School)

As indicated in this quote, it is difficult for the teacher to find a way to address the crux of the problem when communicating with parents about children with excessive absence. Furthermore, as outlined by several teachers, some of these children come from families with heavy problems and few resources. In these situations, it takes a lot of knowhow and cooperation to make the intervention work for the benefit of the child.

## Discussion

In this article, we have focused on how parents of children with excessive school absence experience the support they receive from the school, and why schools have

difficulties supporting the parents. We addressed these questions from a social practice perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen, 2016), focusing on contextual and relational dimensions when trying to understand school absence. In this respect, the results and theoretical approach of this article expand the possibilities for bridging what Kearney (2021) has identified as a general bifurcation in the field of research on school absence, consisting of detached systemic and analytical approaches. Systemic approaches focus on: global perceptions of events; interactions among elements; their unification; modification of multiple variables simultaneously; time duration; and broadly defined models (Kearney, 2021). Analytical approaches, on the other hand, focus on: local perceptions of events; isolation of key elements; dissection into manageable components; modification of one variable in an iterative fashion; immediacy; and the development of more precisely defined models (Kearney, 2021). Systemic approaches to school absence emerge from disciplines such as education, policy, social work, and sociology, while analytical approaches emerge from disciplines such as medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. The results and theoretical assumptions presented in this article address specifically the contextual dimensions of school absence. However, this does not exclude an analytical approach where interventions are aimed at helping the individual child and their parents. In fact, it makes it possible to enable an analytical approach to school absence.

The results outlined in this article show that school absence needs to be understood as a contextual phenomenon right from the beginning, where the organization of schools, the parents' lifestyle, and peer relations play significant roles in how the child develops school absence. The findings of this study indicate that parents feel that their child's mental state, in relation to school absence, worsens due to the lack of help from schools. Furthermore, the relationship between parents and the school gradually becomes more negative and problematic as parents do not receive any help. If schools were able to address the children's problems immediately with the required help, issues of school absence might be prevented or dealt with before they develop into more serious or chronic absenteeism (Aaltonen et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2014).

As shown in the results, understanding the contextual dimensions of a child's school absence should include the school's resources, the teachers' involvement in various assignments, and the lack of coordination among school staff. All these dimensions have consequences for parents' and children's experience of the school absence situation. In other words, if we want to understand and intervene in relation to children with school absence, we need to contextualize school absence right from the beginning. This would make it possible to address the problems more precisely, as suggested in an analytical approach, for example by developing a model for transparent and efficient communication between parents and teachers, for the benefit of the child.

If we pursue a contextual perspective on school absence, it becomes possible to explore ways of utilizing the potentials inherent in contextual practices. The results presented in this article have highlighted the resources embedded in both the school context and the relationship between parents and school staff (see also Rumberger,



2011). In the study outlined above, our focus was on how teachers themselves dealt with school absence in their everyday lives. Our study revealed a significant problem for teachers related to the organization of school practices in handling school absence. These organizational challenges meant that teachers collectively lacked the necessary knowhow to effectively address future school absence issues. Additionally, as shown in the study, the prevalent belief among teachers that each child with school absence is unique also hindered the development of collective knowhow among teachers when working with future children and their parents. In other words, it is crucial to recognize the potential resources embedded in organizational practices and, as previously argued, to enhance the teachers' knowhow and eliminate barriers to teacher cooperation. Furthermore, teachers find themselves in a situation where they need more knowledge on how to handle and work with pupils experiencing excessive school absence. It is worth mentioning that a contextual perspective allows exploration of the often dilemma-filled and contradictory everyday relationships that teachers and parents navigate while trying to address school absence. The aforementioned results also illustrate the dilemmas and contradictions that school staff face when they must help children with excessive school absence, while simultaneously managing a school where other children also demand their attention. Finally, it is important to emphasize the urgent need for future research to delve into the contextual dimension of school absence.

This study also has several weaknesses that need to be addressed. One of the weaknesses is that the article examines the contextual dimensions of school absence only from the perspectives of schools and parents. It would strengthen the article if we had also interviewed the children. Furthermore, although we employed interviews to understand everyday practices, it would strengthen the empirical part of the article if we had conducted participant observations in schools as well. This would allow us to explore how school staff act in their everyday interactions with parents and children experiencing school absence. Lastly, in the interviews with parents, we focused primarily on their experiences of their relationship with the school. However, we did not explore how everyday life is organized in the children's homes, and how the parents cope with their children's excessive school absence.

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