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WHAT IF SCHOOL AS WE KNOW IT TOOK ON A DIFFERENT STRUCTURE?

Disrupted Educational Structures as Catalysts for Rethinking Opportunities for Preventing School Attendance Problems within a Pedagogical Framework

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DISRUPTED EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES AS CATALYSTS FOR RETHINKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PREVENTING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS WITHIN A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Unexplained and involuntary school attendance problems have become an increasing concern in educational systems over the past decade. The issues often lead to professional interventions based on a clinical oriented within-child-deficit model that overlooks the pedagogical surroundings in which the student is situated, potentially alienating students through existing educational structures. Drawing on qualitative interviews with students and staff from two Danish public schools, this article explores how the pandemic- as an unprecedented disruption of school practices- has provided insights into the connection between school attendance issues and pedagogical practices within learning environments. We hypothesize that these insights can inform future strategies for preventing attendance problems. Based on empirical reflections on changed educational structures, the analysis highlights how the concepts of Pedagogical Tact and Collective Transformative Agency could play a key role in preventing school attendance issues within more resonant learning environments.

Keywords: School Attendance Problems; Prevention; Disrupted Educational Structures; Resonant Learning Environments

1. Introduction

> I think public school is generally crap, and it's just not for me. I've never understood the point of spending so much time in school. I don't get the point of the whole eight-to-three thing. You can't concentrate, have seven different subjects, and can't remember half of them by the time you get home. Plus, you've got a ton of homework waiting for you. I can't handle sitting on a chair for eight hours in school (...) So I just stopped going to school (...) and also because of bullying and stuff like that. I just didn't want to go anymore. (Eskild, 14 years old)

The opening quote is drawn from a qualitative interview with Eskild (pseudonym), who reflected on his experiences in the Danish public school system and the reasons behind his increasing school absences. This article draws on findings from a Ph.D. research project investigating the prevention of school attendance problems (SAPs) within learning environments (Walther-Hansen, 2025), with a particular focus on students' perspectives on absenteeism. Eskild's account of his experiences with teaching resonates with other student narratives from the empirical material, supporting this article, about the challenges of attending school - often attributed to a perception of alienating learning environments and group dynamics within the classroom community (Lund et al., 2024; Walther-Hansen, 2023, 2025). The following quotes illustrate variations of these narratives, frequently emphasizing the nonverbal, embodied, and intangible experiences related to the development of school absenteeism:

> I was hit by a lot of anxiety. It's really hard to explain, but it was kind of like living in a constant anxiety attack. It was really bad, and it came on very suddenly. I wasn't really prepared for it, but it was as if my body just said 'stop'. That was when I was in eighth grade. (Anna, 15 years)

Yeah, well, when you move into the upper grades, and, like, you go from having a break every half hour or so to only getting one every hour and a half, and… the breaks are shorter, there's more homework, more pressure, and then there are tests all the time and… yeah… and people are starting to figure out who they are and what they want, and then… you know, all that teenage stuff, and yeah, it was just a lot. And I had really been trying to keep up with the others for so many years, even though I didn't really manage to… so that's when it just got too much, and I slowly stopped going to school (…) I felt empty inside. (Eliza, 14 years).

There was always something. Yeah. There was just something that felt wrong. It was like… a lot of things. The teachers, the classes, stuff like that. (Signe, 15 years)

Drawing on these statements and the broader set of qualitative interviews with students, this article underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how didactic and pedagogical practices shape both barriers to and enablers of school attendance.

A substantial portion of the dissertation's empirical data was collected immediately following the COVID-19 lockdowns. As such, the material is shaped by experiences from that period, which also prompted notable shifts in established didactic and pedagogical structures. The article centers on empirical insights from educational professionals concerning shifts in attendance patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further examines how these changes impacted teachers' everyday practices and discusses their implications for a broader understanding of the complex social and institutional dynamics underlying school attendance problems. We are thus led to ask: *what if school as we know it took on a different structure?*

Drawing on qualitative interviews with school personnel from two public schools in Denmark, the article examines how the global pandemic affected patterns of attendance, specifically focusing on two middle-school classes. The aim is to explore how these shifts inform our understanding of SAPs and their prevention within a pedagogical and didactic context. Accordingly, we undertake an explorative analysis of two selected school settings to investigate how broader insights into school attendance may contribute to the development of future pedagogical approaches.

Contrary to solely adverse outcomes, the pandemic prompted hopes that schools would "build back better" post-lockdowns, with proposals like more outdoor education, smaller group teaching, fewer changes in teachers and subjects, and shorter school days receiving positive feedback (Carboni, 2022). Qvortrup et al. (2023) suggest that these temporary changes positively affected student well-being, noting a correlation between well-being and the learning environment. However, they also emphasize that "we are less good at determining the impact of malleable factors of schooling such as teaching activities" (Qvortrup et al., 2023, p. 737). Although existing research has highlighted the problems and tensions in schooling during the pandemic (See, i.e., Werner & Woessmann, 2023; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) our aim is to identify openings for structural transformation within education, following Zhao and Watterston (2021) who advocate for educational changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Contextualizing school attendance problems

Unexplained and involuntary school absenteeism represents one of the most significant global educational challenges. While the causes vary across cultural and demographic contexts, the issue persists: an increasing number of students struggle to attend school regularly. In Denmark, 21,6% of students recorded an absence rate exceeding ten percent of the total number of school days in the 2023/2024 academic year[1]. Even though the number of absent students is decreasing since the year 2021/2022, it remains a thought-provoking fact that relatively high proportion of students are unable to attend school consistently.

Research on school absenteeism has expanded significantly, particularly since the early 2000s, when psychologist Christopher Kearney conceptualized the issue as a psychological phenomenon termed *school refusal* (see Kearney, 2002, 2003, 2008). Since then, diverse approaches, interpretations, and terminologies have emerged, complicating the field. Researchers employ various terms such as truancy (Ramberg et al., 2019), *school exclusion* (Havik et al., 2014; Havik et al., 2015a; 2015b), *school avoidance* (Wilkins, 2008), *school non-attendance* (Baker & Bishop, 2015), and *school attendance problems* (Heyne et al., 2019; Gren-Landell, 2021; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020) to describe student absenteeism.

In a literature review on school absenteeism, Knage and Kousholt (2023) use the term *prolonged problematic absences* as an umbrella concept to capture the multi-dimensional issues affecting students, such as family dynamics, friendships, socioeconomic status, classroom inclusion, academic performance, and mental health. They emphasize that both the definition of problematic absenteeism, as well as its causes, remain ambiguous. Regardless of the terminology, scholars agree that school non-attendance negatively impacts future academic performance, individual well-being, and personal development (Allison et al., 2019; Finning et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2022; Gren-Landell, 2023; Keppens, 2023). In this article, the term *school attendance problems* (SAPs) is adopted to conceptualize these issues as pedagogical and school-related phenomena.

Students with SAPs are often offered reduced timetables, individual education plans, and various forms of emotional support. However, practitioners frequently feel powerless, struggling to understand the underlying problems (Finning et al., 2018). There is a risk that support from educational psychology and social services is limited and slow to materialize, with interventions typically based on the assumption that SAPs are linked to anxiety or depression (Kearney, 2008; Thastum et al., 2019; Biswas & Sahoo, 2023). While anxiety-based treatments benefit some students, this approach risks pathologizing the issue reframing it as a clinical condition requiring treatment (Knage, 2021; Walther-Hansen, 2025).

More recent research indicates that educational psychology practices are increasingly focusing on contextual factors (Jensen & Szulevicz, 2025). Nevertheless, the dominant individualized lens can stigmatize students, leading to a negative identity centered on being abnormal or maladjusted (Knage, 2023).

[1] Statistik om Elevfravær | Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, visited 05/26/2025

Several scholars (Andersen et al., 2019; Lund, 2020; 2021; Knage, 2021; 2023; Frydenlund, 2022; Walther-Hansen, 2023; 2025; Lund et al., 2024; Enderle et al., 2024) challenge this individualized perspective, arguing that absenteeism often stems from the broader culture of the educational institution, of which the student is an integral part.

Viewing SAPs solely as a matter of physical absence can risk overlooking the complex and underlying reasons why some students face challenges in attending school (Frydenlund, 2022). As a result, responses to SAPs may become non-pedagogical, offering a limited understanding of cause and effect. Furthermore, some teachers feel sidelined when absenteeism escalates and is transferred to school counselors (Walther-Hansen, 2023).

1.2 Advocating pedagogical sensibility toward SAPs

Research on SAPs is marked by tensions between individualized, clinical, and pedagogical-existential perspectives (Walther-Hansen, 2025), reflecting the challenges of understanding and intervening in the phenomenon (Knage, 2021; Frydenlund, 2022). This article explores the potential for preventing SAPs by examining school professionals' experiences of school attendance factors within classroom communities. While this represents only one perspective on SAPs, a central argument is that pedagogical understandings of non-attendance should be more prominent in research on SAPs.

For example, a recent study by Lund et al. (2024) links SAPs to feelings of insecurity within the classroom, frequent teacher changes, high rates of substitute teachers, bullying, and ineffective classroom management. SAPs emerged as a research term relatively recently (Heyne et al., 2019; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Gren-Landell, 2021), encompassing a range of definitions and understandings of school absenteeism. While changing terminology cannot halt the rise in SAPs, the semantic shift – from "absence" to "attendance" – signals a potential for change. This reorientation emphasizes facilitating students' re-engagement with education rather than merely addressing their absence (Walther-Hansen et al., 2024).

The development-oriented, multifaceted perspective supports a situated framework for understanding SAPs, treating these issues as solvable rather than fixed. The goal is not necessarily to reintegrate students into the same problematic educational settings, but to create new opportunities for re-engagement by forging effective pathways between stakeholders (Matthiesen, 2019). This perspective shifts the focus from viewing students as pathologically unable to manage school to understanding them as excluded from alienating school cultures or classroom environments (Knage, 2021; 2023; Lund, 2021; Frydenlund, 2022; Walther-Hansen, 2025).

Critiques of the "within-child" deficit approach have been raised by several scholars (Lund, 2021; Knage, 2021, 2023; Frydenlund, 2022; Walther-Hansen, 2023, 2025), who argue that school absences are tied to exclusion processes within the classroom community. The shift in terminology also acknowledges the unique, complex, and multi-causal nature of each case of SAPs, involving patterns of intertwined events, explanations, and subjective experiences.

This complexity presents a challenge for both practitioners and researchers, as every intervention brings new issues. Addressing SAPs thus requires a situated understanding rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. Nonetheless, recurring themes of exclusion, hopelessness, and loneliness are often present in students' narratives (Walther-Hansen et al., 2024; Knage, 2023; Lund & Winslade, 2018).

A key aspect of SAPs is that school professionals are often the first to recognize early signs of non-attendance within classroom communities and to communicate with families. Viewing attendance problems as linked to learning environments and classroom dynamics implicitly frames SAPs as situated phenomena, where understanding the problem and actions must be contextually grounded (Lave & Wenger, 2012; Matthiesen et al., 2024).

School-related factors play a key role in SAPs. Research highlights issues such as strained teacher-student relationships, lack of school belonging, inadequate support, and difficulties faced by neurodivergent, immigrant, or minority students (e.g., Hansen & Højmose, 2019; Lund et al., 2024; Melin et al., 2022). Bullying and emotional well-being are also frequently involved (Havik et al., 2015b; Klan et al., 2024). These perspectives shift the focus toward school practices and call for a more critical approach to pedagogy and classroom dynamics. Recent studies further suggest that SAPs may reflect a form of quiet resistance to school structures, raising questions about the goal of reintegrating students into the same environments that contributed to their disengagement (Knage, 2023; Walther-Hansen et al., 2024; Walther-Hansen, 2025).

Labeling absences as SAPs reflects an inherent belief that students can re-engage with alternative school structures, avoiding reliance on a single narrative about a student. From this perspective, relatively small structural adjustments hold the potential to significantly improve school attendance, aligning with Van Manen's (2016, p.75) notion of the "tact of teaching," which emphasizes care as a fundamental element of pedagogical practice. Care, as Van Manen (2016) argues, can manifest in two dominant perspectives regarding school absences: 1) concern that students are developing well-being issues, leading to individualized clinical responses, or 2) concern that classroom practices are excluding students from participation. Rather than choosing between these perspectives, we advocate for a more nuanced approach that questions the starting point of analysis to better understand the goals of intervention and prevention.

From a situated perspective, SAPs can be viewed as a triangulation of subjective, objective, and intersubjective factors, where no single perspective should dominate at the expense of others (Allesøe, 2024). Although qualitative studies on SAPs that incorporate student perspectives remain relatively rare, some do engage with student narratives (Wilkins, 2008; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Knage, 2021, 2023; Lund, 2021; Wright, 2023; Walther-Hansen, 2023; Frydenlund, 2022, 2023; Enderle et al., 2024). These studies consistently point to the school and classroom environment as the primary factors contributing to student absences, framing the prevention and management of SAPs primarily as pedagogical and didactic challenges.

A key issue in addressing SAPs, as discussed by Brochmann and Madsen (2022) in *Skolevegringsmysteriet* (The Mystery of School Refusal), is the tension between viewing SAPs as an individual or community-based phenomenon. They argue that the issue is complex and often not fully explainable, noting how some students respond negatively to current educational structures.

In this article, we posit that a learning environment is shaped by the selection of didactic structures (Lijnse, 2007) and pedagogical approaches within the classroom community, supported by scholars as Szulevicz and Arnfred (2022, 2023) and Tange (2023). Consequently, we use the term structures to discuss the pedagogical and didactic decisions and adaptations linked to ruptures in educational practices, exemplified in this case by the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that these ruptures may catalyze advancements in the study of SAPs.

1.3 The COVID-19 pandemic: An example of a disrupting force challenging ruling educational structures

During the pandemic and the gradual reopening of schools, students engaged in alternative educational structures compared to pre-pandemic routines. These shifts – some of which were experimental – provided valuable insights into didactics and pedagogy, particularly in relation to SAPs. For students already struggling with SAPs, the lockdowns and resulting changes exacerbated attendance issues (McDonald et al., 2023). However, we argue that the pandemic also highlighted educational alternatives worth exploring for the early prevention of SAPs.

Although the educational consequences of the pandemic should not be overinterpreted, the lockdowns and the gradual reopening of schools were nevertheless significant from the perspective of prolonged school absence. The COVID-19 pandemic, despite being a global crisis, introduced a sudden disruption to educational practices and revealed the potential for alternative school structures. Both students and school professionals encountered radically different educational environments, which exposed pre-existing exclusion processes and unveiled new patterns of school exclusion (Daniels et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2024). Given the rarity of such large-scale disruptions, we argue that the pandemic offered a valuable case for exploration.

During the phased reopening of schools, participation dynamics shifted, with smaller student groups and fewer teacher transitions throughout the day (Szulevicz, 2021). Allen et al. (2022) argue that forced pauses - such as those caused by crises - present opportunities for restructuring educational practices, revealing both barriers and facilitators to improved schooling. While many challenges from pandemic-era restructuring have been studied, the factors facilitating improved attendance in the post-COVID context remain largely underexplored. In a sense, the entire world experienced school absenteeism during the pandemic, providing a collective experience of being unable to attend school, although the reasons behind this absenteeism were clearly different from typical SAPs. Despite the differing circumstances, school attendance patterns related to educational structures in the empirical material merit further investigation to better understand how to prevent school absences within learning environments and in a pedagogical framework.

Peters et al. (2022) noted that COVID-19 acted as a much-needed disruption to university pedagogy, creating an opportunity to reassess educational norms. This article builds on the idea that the pandemic prompted a broader re-evaluation of school practices (Szulevicz, 2023). While the structural changes were temporary, we assert that they revealed how altered school structures could foster new patterns of belonging and participation for some students, with both positive and negative implications. Therefore, this article is not about the pandemic itself, but rather the rupture it caused in school practices and how these disruptions shaped patterns of inclusion and exclusion – critical factors for understanding the relationship between SAPs and didactic structures.

We posit that SAPs are not inherent to the individual student, but rather emerge as triangulated phenomena shaped by sociocultural conditions that exclude some students while including others within existing educational structures. These situated structures relate both to students' unequal opportunities for participation and to the professional conditions under which teachers exercise pedagogical judgment (Mardahl-Hansen & Højholt, 2025).

2. Methodology

The empirical material for this article consists of four semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) conducted in the spring of 2022. These interviews were conducted with school professionals (N=6) - (teachers (N=4) and school leaders (N=2)) - at two public schools in a larger city in Denmark. The interviews are part of a bigger set of empirical material, which also includes participating observations (Szulevicz, 2020) and student interviews on barriers and facilitators for school attendance (N=39). School A is a small rural institution with classes up to sixth grade and approximately 80 students, while School B is a larger urban school with classes up to ninth grade and around 700 students.

This study does not claim to provide universally applicable principles but instead seeks to generate educational insights through an inductive and exploratory analytical process based on exemplary cases (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The analysis is used to nuance the research field on SAPs, and to explore the role of educational structures in preventing school exclusion processes.

The thematic analysis is rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2007a, 2007b, 2014, 2016, 2022) and aims to describe the phenomenon of SAPs as openly as possible before identifying specific thematic aspects. In this context, we align with Van Manen's (2014, pp. 87-88) view of themes as the "experience of focus," involving a process of "making sense, simplifying complex lived experiences, and shaping what is otherwise formless." The analysis follows hermeneutic principles of interpretation, involving a continuous movement between parts and the whole, acknowledging pre-understandings, and seeking deeper insights into the research theme (Gadamer, 2007). In conjunction with Van Manen's (2014) thematic analysis, this interpretive approach allows for an open, attentive engagement with the interview material.

Phenomenological themes, as Van Manen (2014, p. 90) explains, "are not objects or generalizations... Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes, we can navigate and explore such universes." While we recognize that themes may not fully capture the richness of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014, p. 92), we nonetheless agree that "any lived-experience description is an appropriate source for uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon it describes" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 92).

Given that the article primarily aims to reflect on structural dynamics in learning environments, the analysis focuses on interviews with school professionals. Teachers and pedagogues play a vital role in shaping pedagogy and didactics within the classroom community, while school leaders have the authority to implement structural changes. Thus, the perspectives shared in these interviews are crucial for understanding SAPs prevention. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for flexibility, with questions evolving to explore didactic issues related to SAPs. In the interviews, school staff were asked about their key lessons and pedagogical reflections following the return to normalized school structures after the pandemic, with a particular focus on facilitators for school attendance.

2.1 Ethical considerations

All informants have been pseudonymized and provided written consent to participate in the project. All interviews with school professionals were validated with the participants by showing them the interview transcriptions, allowing them to rephrase or delete content. The validations were conducted to ensure that the informants acknowledged the empirical material and to fulfill the ethical demands of qualitative research. The first author translated all empirical material from Danish to English.

In exploring first-person perspectives on lived experiences with pedagogical issues, ethical dilemmas arise at multiple levels of the process. These dilemmas exist both within the practice field itself and are inherent to the concept of SAPs as an ontological part of a *socially sensitive phenomenon* (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). Socially sensitive areas often carry direct societal interest, which is particularly important when investigating SAPs. This requires ethical competencies on the part of the researcher (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), enabling navigation through 'fields of uncertainty' while continuously refining the project through an open, questioning, and reflective ethical practice.

Research findings in the field of SAPs have the potential to bring about both positive and harmful changes in practice. Therefore, presenting the empirical material as transparently and comprehensively as possible is essential. Communicating this ethical transparency can be challenging within the constraints of an article format. However, we emphasize that the research process adhered to the principles outlined in *The Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity²*, including its core principles of honesty, transparency, and accountability.

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[2] https://ufm.dk/en/publications/2014/the-danish-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity, visited 11th June 2025

Additionally, we align with the ethical guidelines for empirical exploration of practice, as articulated by Banyard and Flanagan (2013, p. 35): "The purpose of conducting any research is to establish knowledge that may be used to improve the society in which we live or to understand ourselves and our behavior better." Accordingly, we emphasize the importance of viewing our analytical discussions and conclusions as pedagogical reflections that open possibilities for future educational changes. Although these reflections remain as budding experiments in this article, they warrant further investigation and critical discussion.

3. Empirical findings

In analyzing the empirical material, we adopted Max Van Manen's concept of *lived existential* – spatiality, corporality, temporality, and relationality (Van Manen, 2014) – as our framework. These existentials encompass lived experiences which, in a pedagogical context, are connected to the notions of gestures, atmospheres, non-verbal communication, speech, and the look in the eyes (Van Manen, 2007a).

Our findings reveal that the gradual reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic led to new participation dynamics shaped by these existential dimensions. These dynamics touched upon phenomenological themes such as atmospheres, feelings, senses, and existential experiences. School professionals reported the following observations:

- A more relaxed approach to teaching, enabling adjustments to daily learning activities based on students' specific needs
- Greater emphasis on fostering student interaction and coherence within the classroom community
- Observations that students had more energy to engage in play and be children
- Increased flexibility, contributing to more positive atmospheres within learning environments
- Teaching in smaller groups was experienced as more flexible, present, and attentive

In the following section, we explore these themes in greater depth, focusing on their potential for preventing SAPs. We analyze teachers' experiences with altered educational structures during the pandemic to extract lessons regarding didactics and pedagogy and their relationship to school attendance.

The ways in which school professionals experience and respond to spatiality, temporality, corporality, and relationality within the learning environment significantly influence inclusion and exclusion processes within the classroom community. The hypothesis presented in this article is that structural changes related to one or more of the existential dimensions can alter group dynamics and subjective experiences, thereby impacting participation possibilities. In other words, we hypothesize that educational structures play a critical role in preventing and intervening SAPs.

3.1 Alternative educational structures during the pandemic

The pandemic forced educators and school leaders to restructure the school day to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. This analysis focuses on the experienced positive effects of these altered school structures and highlights how such changes created new patterns of student participation - particularly for those who had previously struggled with a sense of belonging. As one school leader explained:

> *Many children thrived in this structure [the gradual reopening of schools during the pandemic], with more calmness, cleanliness, and regularity. The increased adult presence among the students significantly reduced conflicts. Of the 900 students, those who typically exhibited problematic behaviors or required parental interventions were almost entirely absent from these issues. It was pretty remarkable and thought-provoking.*

Naturally, there were also significant negative effects. Many students were challenged by the pandemic, and in some cases SAPs even escalated. However, interviews reveal that fewer changes in classroom routines, increased co-teaching resources, and enhanced collegial collaboration were key characteristics of the altered school structures. These changes facilitated greater student participation for some, supported by lowered curricular demands and increased adult engagement. A teacher from School A added: "I believe the children had more energy to be themselves during Corona because they didn't have to adjust to the adults and rigid structures constantly." In focusing on the structural facilitators for school attendance during the pandemic, we emphasize the analytical nature of this approach, to avoid romanticizing a worldwide crisis. While school professionals reported increased well-being and improved access to education during lockdowns, these outcomes can also be interpreted as paradoxical effects – where what appears as a positive development simultaneously reveals underlying exclusion processes embedded in everyday school life. In this sense, the very conditions that enabled some students to thrive better during the gradual re-opening may underscore the ambivalence of institutional inclusion, pointing to a school culture from which disengagement became a form of relief rather than resistance.

Nevertheless, we reflect on these empirical findings to develop pedagogical understandings of SAPs, which is why we highlight the reported positive effects. A school leader from the same school, overseeing two institutions, reflected on how these altered structures also provided insights into school attendance:

> *One benefit was that professional expectations were lowered—the range of subjects narrowed. The focus shifted entirely to ensuring the students were present, learning in smaller groups, with a consistent, structured schedule throughout the day.*

We argue that three empirical categories emerged on the altered educational structures during the pandemic:

1. Deceleration
2. Flexibility
3. A strengthened focus on classroom communities.

These categories will be elaborated in the following sections and relate to both students' individual experiences of a more resonant school day (Rosa, 2019; Rosa & Endres, 2017) and to new possibilities for school professionals to remain present and attentive toward the group of students in their care. We find this closely aligned with Van Manen's (2022) notion of *pedagogical tact*.

3.2.1 Deceleration – empirical finding #1

The interviewed teachers valued the additional time available for fostering student interaction and collegial cooperation, which, in turn, enhanced their ability to provide more tailored teaching. The interviews suggest that teachers experienced increased freedom during the pandemic, allowing deeper connections with students. A teacher from School B emphasized: "It was easier to give the children what they needed on any given day." She elaborated on how this flexibility enabled her to adjust plans based on the students' needs: "If German didn't feel right that day, I could push it to tomorrow and focus on something else, giving me a chance to go deeper into the material – it was amazing."

Another teacher from School A reflected on how frequent teacher turnovers during the day typically affect student attendance and engagement:

> *Children expend much energy adapting to different teachers, even though we aim for consistency. My expectations may differ from those of my colleagues, and what is acceptable in one class may not be in another.*

Experiences of time and pace within social contexts affect how students perceive the possibilities for stability, peace, and tranquility during a school day. At schools that succeeded in creating a safe space for transformation during the pandemic, students and teachers may have experienced better circumstances for developing moments of resonance (Rosa, 2019).

3.2.2 Flexibility – empirical finding #2

The school leader from School B highlighted the unexpected benefits of remote teaching, which led the school to experiment with more adaptable structures, particularly for students with special attendance needs:

> *We have a student dealing with severe anxiety, and we are testing remote learning for her. Initially, her anxiety was too overwhelming even to allow her to participate virtually, as she was too conscious of the other students knowing she was there. So, we tried having the teacher record lessons, and she could watch them immediately after. This method allowed her to receive instruction while maintaining a connection with her teacher, eventually allowing her to return to the classroom.*

Structural flexibility was mentioned across several arenas within pedagogical practices, including fewer transitions throughout the school day, lowered curricular demands, increased opportunities for improvisation in the pedagogical moment, and a greater sense of professional freedom. The call for more flexible educational structures is echoed in an interview with a teacher at school B:

> *I think the public school system is too rigid; we're far too bound by rules, and there is a lack of flexibility in how we run the best school. I'd like us to have a much more open school where a rigid schedule of subjects doesn't dictate classes, but instead are much more flexible (...) I think there's a lack of creativity.*

It is noteworthy how this teacher linked flexibility to creativity, suggesting that having time to create more adaptable and imaginative schedules enabled more individualized pedagogical solutions. The example of remote teaching during the pandemic illustrates how educational structures can affect SAPs. However, the flexibility and creativity inherent in critically reflecting on prevailing didactics require professional judgment in each case. Moreover, the ability to apply such judgment depends on both didactic and political structural conditions.

Assuming that schools aim to maintain a post-pandemic 'new normal', sustaining structural changes has proven challenging due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders and the political dynamics shaping curricular decisions. Furthermore, the changes implemented during the pandemic were not necessarily optimal, and one might question whether an overly optimistic narratives obscure the frustrations and difficulties experienced. Nevertheless, teachers reported that many reverted to previous practices once schools returned to normal operations. Some informants expressed frustration at the difficulty of maintaining the flexibility and professional autonomy they had experienced during the pandemic, although others welcomed the return to familiar structures.

A teacher from School B recounted a situation where she felt constrained by institutional expectations, despite her professional judgment suggesting otherwise: "I wish I had just said, 'let's go outside instead,' when I saw the students weren't up for a lesson. They would have benefited from the fresh air and conversation, but I pushed the lesson through instead." This anecdote highlights the paradox teachers face between meeting institutional expectations and responding to students' immediate needs. The pandemic illuminated the potential for teachers to exercise greater professional judgment when working within more flexible structures and with fewer curricular constraints. However, as regular schedules resumed, many of these opportunities disappeared. One teacher reflected on the difficulties of sustaining these innovations:

> *We talked a lot about how we should keep some flexibility – like forgetting the books now and then and doing something different. Still, those ideas faded when next year's schedule was made and everything returned to the usual rush.*

The pandemic emphasized the importance of empowering teachers to act on their professional judgment in response to students' needs. However, sustaining this level of flexibility in regular school settings remains a challenge. A stronger focus on flexibility and pedagogical tact would likely require that school professionals are given the opportunity to rely and act more on their professional judgement – what Van Manen (2016, pp. 184, 190) describes as " to know what to do when they do not know what to do".

Van Manen further defines the classroom atmosphere as "composed of modulating waves of attention and distraction, washing over the complex life and dynamics of interiorities and exteriorities within which teaching and learning occur" (2016, p. 25).

Pedagogical tact should not be understood solely as the individual responsibility of the teacher within the confines of the classroom; rather, it is also a structural and societal concern shaped by the conditions under which schools operate – such as political mandates and the time allocated for professional development. These contextual factors render the transformation of didactic and pedagogical practices both complex and, at times, paradoxical.

3.2.3 Coherence within classroom communities – empirical finding #3

The pandemic disrupted classroom communities, prompting teachers to rethink how to maintain a sense of belonging despite social distancing and remote learning. As this article focuses on facilitators for school attendance, we have examined statements from the empirical material thar highlight positive impacts. We acknowledge that negative and adverse experiences may compromise the analysis. Nevertheless, the purpose of this article is to explore an under-researched argument: that the pandemic revealed structural issues indicating the need for a change in the school day, particularly for students who struggle with school belonging.

A teacher from School B elaborated on why she found the educational structures during the pandemic conducive to better teaching and expressed concern about the increasing focus on individual learning outcomes at the expense of the classroom community:

> *Social aspects have always been a priority for me. Students who do not thrive socially or feel part of the classroom community cannot learn effectively. There is more focus now on communal activities, but the external pressures for better academic outcomes often overshadow this. We should focus on both simultaneously.*

For this teacher, the pandemic underscored the tension between individual academic performance and fostering a communal classroom environment. She noted the increased effort to maintain the community during lockdowns, recognizing that many students would feel isolated without a specific focus on well-being. She described her strategy of ensuring that no student worked alone during remote learning, organizing small group activities in breakout rooms and emphasizing the social aspects of schooling. In another dialogue in the interview, she elaborated on her approach to teaching:

> *I can accept kids lying on the floor, sitting on the windowsill, or not staying in their seats during group instructions. Honestly, I couldn't care less if they're even hanging from the curtains as long as they're engaged in learning. I don't care where they are because that's not what matters to me. My job isn't to teach them to sit nicely on a chair or anything like that.*

Another critical issue that emerged during the pandemic was the challenge of meeting individual students' needs in larger classrooms. A teacher from School A reflected on how working with smaller groups allowed for more personalized attention:

> *As part of special needs support, when only three students attended, we could provide them with close academic assistance. It was almost a luxury. The smaller groups allowed for lowered academic demands and more time for outdoor activities, which the students appreciated.*

Experiencing the benefits of teaching in smaller groups reinforced his belief in the value of working with fewer students during a school day.

An overall finding in the interviews suggests that the ruptured educational structures demanded school professionals to be more attentive to students' well-being within the classroom communities.

This shift prompted reflection on how a stronger focus on the classroom community could foster a more positive atmosphere in the learning environment. The empirical material reveals that teachers associated a slower-paced school day, attention to classroom dynamics, smaller group instruction, time for teachers' critical reflection, and reliance on professional judgment with improved school attendance.

Paradoxically, our findings illustrate how the social restrictions ultimately revealed something fundamental about the significance of community. The pandemic, while disruptive, exposed the essential role of classroom coherence in supporting student engagement and attendance.

3.3 Bridging the Gap Between Individual and Community Perspectives

Deceleration, flexibility, and coherence are situated factors within the tension field of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity. Structural changes will inevitably include some students while excluding others. While these parameters cannot resolve all exclusion processes, we argue that focusing on them may create new participation opportunities for a broader range of students.

As noted in the introduction, a binary understanding of SAPs – framing them as either individual or community-based phenomena—continues to dominate both research and practice. However, the empirical material suggests that certain didactic approaches, or even rethinking school as an institution, may soften this binary. The following quote is part of a response from a school leader when asked how schools might prevent SAPs in the future:

> *What if we created a school where some students didn't have to start until nine? It's just a small adjustment. Or where the schedule looked different, or there was no fixed schedule at all. We currently employ many people, including DSA staff, co-teachers, counselors, etc. Essentially, we could experiment with alternative approaches – and I believe this is worth exploring, considering there is something about the communities we've built and the way we run schools that makes some students feel, 'I don't want to be there.' In response, we try to encourage, coax, stabilize, scaffold, and adapt them to fit into a structure they initially sought to escape. To me, that approach lacks integrity.*

This reflection points to the potential for creating educational structures that are more responsive to the needs of individual students while simultaneously supporting classroom communities. In the same interview, the school leader elaborated on his critique of normative structures:

> *Back when I was in school, we had a set school schedule. And when my dad went to school, they had a school schedule. And when my grandparents went to school, they probably had one, too (...) We need to look at the data we have, the artistic intuition, you know, the judgment to determine what will work, and then figure out what actions and practices will make that happen and which structures will support it. It's the reverse of the municipal logic (...) There's one way to go to school – you have German here, math there, from ten till noon, then recess, and so on. That's fine for the 600 kids who benefit from it, but we also have 100 who clearly don't.*

No matter how much we coach, meet with parents, hold network meetings, reduce school hours, and so on, if the main issue is that the structure doesn't work for them, it's our responsibility to figure out what these middle forms could look like (...) I believe many kids who don't feel like they fit in with their classmates struggle because the structures shape communities that, by design, aren't accommodating (...) Right now, we have a group of twelve kids who've been close to school refusal or have had excessive absences; they're starting to come back, but they're coming back to what they initially wanted to escape.

The quote touches on several educational debates, but most notably it underscores the need for a critical examination of how schools might be reinvented. Both the quote and our analysis suggest that the educational structures themselves may offer a pathway for addressing SAPs – not by forcing students to adapt to rigid systems, but by reimagining those systems to better accommodate diverse needs and foster inclusive communities.

4. Discussion

The slower-paced school day, attention to classroom dynamics, smaller group instruction, and time for teachers' critical reflection, documented in our empirical findings as positive factors during the pandemic, facilitated what could be described as more resonant learning environments (Rosa & Endres, 2017). These environments were characterized by a decelerated, flexibility, room for improvisation and creativity, a stronger focus on well-being within the classroom community, and increased sensitivity to both individual and group needs. However, focusing solely on positive outcomes might obscure the fact that a more sensitive approach to these dynamics can also introduce new challenges within classroom communities. Nevertheless, we find it relevant to consider whether shifts in perspectives on structural conditions could foster a stronger sense of school belonging for some students.

According to Rosa (2014, 2017, 2019), the counterbalance to acceleration – which leads to alienation - is the creation of resonance. Rosa (Rosa & Endres, 2017, p.9) describe resonance in education as "relations between individuals and their relations to the world", linking it to the triangulation between subjective, intersubjective, and objective factors within a learning environment. Alienation occurs when people no longer experience the world as meaningful and cohesive but rather as fragmented and fleeting, leading to a sense of lost control and disconnection (Rosa, 2014). Similarly, Rahel Jaeggi (Jaeggi et al., 2014) argues that alienation occurs when individuals feel disconnected or unable to identify with their activities, relationships, and social structures. Importantly, Jaeggi argues that alienation contains a transformative potential - if one's relationship to the environment is reconfigured.

We argue that the conditions and frameworks within educational structures during the gradual reopening of schools created a stronger foundation for resonant learning environments. These were exemplified by increased opportunities for deceleration, flexibility, and coherence within classroom communities. As one teacher noted, students had more energy to be themselves and thus "approach learning situations that crackle," as Rosa (Rosa & Endres, 2017, p. 8) describes.

Rosa further explains optimal learning environments as: "..being open to encountering something new or different, something that can touch, captivate, or move you, and allowing yourself to be changed by it. This also involves a certain vulnerability. Therefore, the school can and should create a safe space for this transformation." (Rosa & Endres, 2017, p. 29).

While our intention is not to romanticize the pandemic period, we argue that the altered structures served as a reminder that alternative ways of organizing learning environments may contain certain pedagogical qualities that tend to be underprioritized in current educational practices.

The empirical categories in the interviews revolve around the tension between individual needs and community interests. In addressing this binary, we follow Mørck et al. (2023) in defining collective transformative agency as participation created within social practices. Similarly, Mardahl-Hansen & Højholt (2025), emphasize the crucial role of teachers in creating conditions for transformative agency and participation. The classroom community is understood as a socio-material learning environment where participation opportunities are developed. Meaning and agency are inherent human capacities that enable students to contribute to transformative actions within the classroom (Stetsenko, 2016). Embedded in socio-material practices, the community simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by students' participation.

Social practices shape the opportunities and positions individuals perceive as available to them, and "who belongs and who does not" is often reproduced within these same practices, despite efforts to counteract exclusion (Mørck et al., 2023, p. 20). This insight highlights a potential limitation in normative approaches to SAPs. From the perspective of *collective transformative agency*, preventing and intervening in SAPs requires school professionals to foster conditions that enable students to act as co-creators of collective social practices. From a situated perspective (Lave & Wenger, 2012), group dynamics within learning environments shape both the community and the individual student's experience of belonging, agency, and potential for transitioning from legitimate peripheral participation to more active engagement.

Within a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework, our discussion of collective transformative agency and resonance may be expressed through Van Manen's (2016) words:

> *At the end of the day, what matters to pedagogically sensitive teachers is that they provided students with academically significant and psychologically relevant learning experiences, that there was a good atmosphere in their classes, that students felt safe and successful in their learning, that personal difficulties could be worked out, and that the day was satisfying, meaningful, or good for them and their students (p. 89).*

Van Manen emphasizes the importance of pedagogical tact, classroom atmosphere, agency, and belonging. He argues that the tension between dependence and independence in education is a false dichotomy from binary thinking. He advocates for a balance rooted in concepts like pedagogical atmosphere, contact, and reflectivity (Van Manen, 2022).

Building on these ideas, we argue there is an analytical connection between *deceleration*, *flexibility*, and *coherence* and the concept of *pedagogical tact* and *collective transformative agency* within learning environments – an approach that could advance research on SAPs. We acknowledge that the structural changes proposed require sustainable societal shifts in education. This issue can be presented through the relationship between *I-framing* (individual understandings and solutions) and S-framing (systemic understandings and solutions) in the development of societal problems (Chater & Lowenstein, 2023; Andreas & Jabakhanji, 2023). This relationship illustrates the contingent link between social structures at individual and societal levels, showing how change depends on the perspective from which action is taken.

In hermeneutic-phenomenological research, this can also be described as the relationship between figure and ground. Knowledge development and approaches regarding SAPs are thus not a question of choosing between systemic or individual solutions but rather understanding their dialectical relationship. The structural ruptures during the pandemic serve as an exemplary example of how this dialectic process is interdependent. In the following section, we focus on the dynamics within the classroom community to further elaborate on the role of school professionals in preventing SAPs.

4.1 Pedagogical tact in preventing SAPs within resonant learning environments

The empirical categories and subsequent discussion revealed that the pandemic highlighted how changes in educational structures can reshape 'the grammar of participation' in education. This insight led us to question whether broader structural changes might reduce SAPs - or at least reconfigure the framework for participation. By posing the question of *what if schools were different from today?* we hypothesize that preventing SAPs requires structural, didactic and pedagogical transformation.

Exploring *pedagogical tact* within *resonant* learning environments offers a way to move beyond the binary approach of focusing solely on individual students or the entire classroom community. The theoretical concepts presented support our argument that preventing SAPs is not merely about increasing attendance but about rethinking how educational systems are structured to support meaningful participation for as many students as possible.

To foster *collective transformative agency*, school professionals must remain continuously reflective of the didactic and pedagogical landscape while actively engaging with the specific school culture. We argue that this approach requires educational de*celeration, structural flexibility,* and *sound pedagogical judgment* – qualities that became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given current governance structures, we question whether school professionals are sufficiently authorized to enact these pedagogical values.

Enforcing rigid structures, rather than adapting pedagogical strategies to the needs of students and the context, overlooks the situated nature of SAPs as a dynamic phenomenon. A strict adherence to 'one-size-fits-all' models risks prioritizing conformity over agency, relationships, and coherence.

The pandemic underscored that school structures should not be assumed to be fixed. The strongest argument for increased structural flexibility lies in the hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis of our empirical data. This analysis highlighted a decelerated school day enabled more professional reflection and a stronger emphasis on pedagogical judgment – factors that some teachers found deeply fulfilling. These elements, tied to the existential dimensions of time, space, relationships, and embodiment, shape our hypothesis that structural attentiveness is essential in addressing SAPs.

We argue that shifting didactics toward a more situated and relational understanding empowers school professionals to better address SAPs. Education must be understood as contingent upon the pedagogical moment, and the role of educators in navigating these moments is vital. Flexibility in structuring the classroom community – particularly in terms of group size – also significantly impacts school attendance. This calls for moving beyond a rigid dichotomy toward a more organic understanding of the relationship between the individual and the collective needs.

New paradoxes emerge when examining *collective transformative agency* and *pedagogical tact* as didactic categories relevant to SAPs. First, school professionals must understand each student's unique lifeworld while recognizing the student are embedded in communities that shapes emotions, behavior, and cognition. Second, they are expected to create the right didactic conditions for *resonant learning environments*, which requires both professional expertise and careful planning. This also demands an open, curious, reflective, and self-critical stance that allows for in-the-moment improvisation - relying on pedagogical tact to determine the best course of action.

This dynamic interplay between structure and flexibility may be the essence of resonant learning environments, where intentionality and movement are integral to reflective practice. We argue that maintaining awareness of the connection between *resonance* and *alienation* is essential for preventing SAPs in the classroom. *Collective transformative agency* as a didactic category can support this professional awareness and help mitigate SAPs through pedagogical tact.

However, this claim potentially places a significant responsibility on teachers - a balance that must be further investigated methodologically and addressed politically, to avoid placing an unsustainable burden on school professionals.

5. Conclusion

A key insight from our analysis is that the choice of didactic and pedagogical approaches can play a significant role in preventing school attendance problems (SAPs). This is particularly relevant given the normative nature of educational systems, where the traditional model – students following a fixed schedule, seated in rows facing a blackboard – remains dominant. A more flexible approach requires school professionals to engage in critical reflection and collegial dialogue to identify when and where alternative educational structures might be beneficial. Sensitivity and adaptability are crucial when addressing SAPs.

This article has examined how the disruption of everyday school life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a necessary discussion about current educational structures and their impact on SAPs. Our aim is not to glorify the pandemic or suggest that ongoing disruptions are desirable. Rather, the pandemic created an opportunity to explore the pedagogical and didactic consequences of structural change. It also opened space for a more pedagogically oriented understanding of SAPs, which has traditionally been dominated by individualized and clinical approaches.

Our empirical findings indicate that educational structures significantly influence participation factors related to processes of *resonance* and *alienation*. Increased professional and societal awareness of these structures may help prevent SAPs. We argue that the focus should not be on choosing one specific structure, but on fostering sensitivity and flexibility to create alternative structures that enhance participation for a broader range of students. SAPs prevention should be balanced between community-based and individualized approaches. Each case of SAPs requires a tailored response grounded in curiosity and understanding of the student's situated context.

We emphasize the importance of continually questioning dominant educational structures. Structural choices and participation opportunities are situated, context-dependent, and interactional phenomena. A one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. What fosters belonging and resonance for some students may alienate others, underscoring the need for *pedagogical tact* and attentiveness to individual cases.

We also explore the concept of *collective transformative agency* as a didactic category emerging from the empirical tension between individual and community approaches. Drawing on Van Manen's work, we suggest that this category requires knowing how to act in uncertain situations, demanding sensitivity to the classroom atmosphere and a tactful understanding of each student's lived experience within the classroom community.

In addressing and preventing SAPs, it is essential to investigate multiple explanations and interventions while continuously reflecting on the didactic approaches used within the learning environment. Time, professional dialogue, pedagogical awareness, and openness to doubt and curiosity may pave the way for a more inclusive school that accommodates a wider range of students. We argue that adopting *pedagogical tact* as a guiding principle in the pursuit of *resonant learning environments* offers a promising approach to preventing SAPs in the future.

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