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Recording, Reporting, and Utilizing School Attendance Data in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway: A Nordic Comparison

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Abstract: The compulsory educational context and school systems within the Nordic countries Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway share fundamental similarities, facilitating comparison across these countries. In this study, we describe and compare existing practices of recording, reporting, and utilizing school attendance data in four countries. In Sweden, Finland, and Norway there is a lack of national guidelines and agreements of how to record, report, and use school attendance data. Municipal autonomy has led to a variety of recording and reporting practices, which then lead to lack of comparable data and wider use of the data gathered. Denmark has a national registry of attendance data, and schools are required to report the data to municipal level. There are more specific guidelines regarding recording and reporting in Denmark compared to Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Problems with school non-attendance are well recognized in the North, but ways of recording and responding to absenteeism are still versatile. This leads to inconsistencies both within and between the countries. Due to variations of the way attendance is recorded, the quality of the national registry of data in Denmark can be questioned. A unified approach to inform research and practice to include formalized definitions of school absence in the Nordic Education Acts are suggested. It requires schools to record and report attendance data within a national register and finding a reliable way to differentiate problematic from non-problematic absenteeism.

Keywords: school attendance data, recording, reporting, utilizing, Nordic countries

The Nordic countries share more similarities than differences in their education systems. Sweden has a comprehensive education system (i.e., by creating homogeneous classes of students with similar abilities or by offering flexible courses) whereas Finland, Denmark and Norway have individualized education systems (Kerpens & Spruyt, 2018). In individualized education systems all students are offered a common curriculum and students are not grouped, for example, by skill level,

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2 but student heterogeneity is addressed by individual or small group tutoring. The countries also share many similarities regarding the organization of the schools: most education providers are municipalities, and most of the schools are public. In addition, student welfare is provided for everyone, for example via school psychologists, counsellors, and social worker services (Sandhaug et al., 2021). The Nordic countries have established an education model comprising a compulsory school system and emphasizing ‘A School for All’ with equal opportunities for all students (Blossing et al., 2014).

School attendance problems (SAPs; Heyne et al., 2019) are multifactored and pose a challenge for students and school professionals, families, and communities in general. There is an increasing awareness of the challenges SAPs bring forth in all the Nordic countries, and each country has had versatile ways of trying to handle the problems at a local and national level.

1 Educational Context

Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway are all divided into regions or counties, each of which consists of several municipalities. In all four countries, the municipalities are responsible for providing public education. Education is compulsory and free of charge for all children and adolescents. Still, not all of them are obligated to go to school if they are seeking asylum or live abroad, for example. Compulsory education is ten years and children typically start school at the age of six and continue until they are 16 years of age. There are exceptions though. Students in special schools in Sweden for instance study for 11 years. In Finland, new legislation was ratified in 2020, expanding the compulsory education age up until the student either turns 18 or completes secondary level education (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). All countries also have a national core curriculum for compulsory education (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

The municipalities in all countries receive funding from the state/government and through taxes. They have considerable autonomy and decide how to organize education and how much of the budget is to be allocated to education. This results in differences among municipalities within each country and between the countries. Despite the autonomy, municipalities must organize and provide the education in compliance with national policies and regulations (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

The Nordic countries all have systematic ways of providing educational support for students, and have in common the Education Act, the three-tiered support system in line with Response to Intervention (RTI; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and student welfare or educational psychological services. Various means of support (e.g., differentiated instruction, targeted support to specific skills, individualized syllabi) are utilized to promote student progress, and for example grade retention is seldom used in supporting students with SAPs. For example, Finland and Norway utilize

grade-independent studies to help students keep up with their grade level, even when the objectives of some subjects are not met (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020). In other words, instead of grade retention students get to proceed with their classmates, as accomplishing the learning objectives is not tied to certain grade levels. Norway and Sweden have national agencies for special needs education in schools and kindergartens (i.e., Statped, Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools). In Finland, under the National Agency for Education, The Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting aims to support inclusion and each students' possibility to attend their neighborhood nationwide. In Denmark, services supporting learning environments and special needs education are carried out by the municipalities.

In terms of legislation and statutes regarding absenteeism the countries differ. In Sweden, school-aged children are legally required to attend school. In Finland, Denmark, and Norway, children are required to complete compulsory education, but not to attend school physically. However, the schools are required to keep a record of student absenteeism and to have a plan within the student welfare plan about how to intervene in cases of unexcused absenteeism (Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen, 2020; Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020; Swedish Education Act, 2010).

2 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism

There is a lack of shared definitions and guidelines on national (and transnational) levels in the Nordic countries. Specifically, the ways of recording and responding to absenteeism are diverse impeding both the possibility and quality of using data on school attendance or absenteeism (Sandhaug et al., 2021).

2.1 Definitional and Recording Issues

In recording absenteeism in Sweden, Finland and Norway, the schools use two categories: excused and unexcused absence. There are some nuances as many schools record tardiness and absence due to other school activities as well. The schools in Denmark use three categories: absence due to illness/disability, extraordinarily permitted absence, and unexcused absence. The first two are both regarded as excused absences. Only Denmark and Sweden have some national or municipality level registry data and rates for school absenteeism (Bekendtgørelse om elevs fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a) and recently Finland has had one national report evaluating absence rates (Määttä et al., 2020). An overview of recording of absence data is provided in Table 1. Following the table, we discuss the matter country by country.

4 Table 1 Recording of Absence Data in the Nordic Countries

Absence	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
Is absence registration required by law?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
What is recorded, attendance or absence?	Absence	Absence	Absence	Absence
Which categories of absence are recorded?	No national guidelines, but commonly categorized as 1. Excused 2. Unexcused	No national guidelines but commonly categorized as 1. Excused (entails health-related absence and granted leaves) 2. Unexcused	1. Absence due to illness/disability 2. Extraordinarily permitted absence 3. Unexcused absence	1. Excused a) Health-related absence b) Granted leave 2. Unexcused
How and when are the attendance data recorded by schools?	No national guidelines. Most schools use electronic registration systems. Unexcused absence is recorded at least daily.	Recording in electronic databases, in primary schools on daily basis, in grades 7–9 each lesson.	Recording in electronic databases, the minimum requirement is 1 time a day (grades 0–6) or 2 times a day (grades 7–9). Some schools choose to record absence more often.	No national guidelines for how the teachers and the schools must record school absence. The schools are free to develop their own guidelines and procedures. Absence is recorded as lessons and schooldays missed.
Who is responsible for recording student attendance/absence?	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals	On student level: the teachers On school level: the principals
Are there any automated attendance tracking systems in use?	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory	Yes	Varies by the schools and is not obligatory
How has the recording of attendance/absence changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?	No changes yet	No changes yet	No changes yet	No changes yet

Sweden

In Sweden there are no guidelines or national regulations on how attendance and absence should be recorded. However, in case of unexcused absence, the parent must be informed the same day. Further, data on unexcused absence should be included in the end of semester report (only grade 6–9). Given this, schools are obliged to record unexcused absence at least on a daily basis. Some schools record absence for every single lesson.

Most schools in Sweden, 84% of compulsory school according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2021a), use electronic registration systems to record absence. However, the recording systems of each school differ considerably. For example, the municipalities use different electronic registration systems for their schools, systems that in turn provide various possibilities to store and analyze attendance data. The private schools may also use different systems than the schools organized by the municipalities.

What is classified as excused and unexcused absence is not defined in the Swedish Education Act (2010). Instead, most principals provide their own guidelines of what kind of data that should be recorded and how unexcused absence should be defined (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a). Otherwise, it is the individual school or teacher who classifies the absence as excused or unexcused. Tardiness, or attending class but not being active, could also be classified as either attendance or absence. A student could also be granted leave for shorter periods for individual concerns, though schools nowadays are quite restrictive in giving these grants.

Currently, no national registry of attendance data exists in Sweden. The data that exists stems from national investigations by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2008, 2010, 2021a), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2016), and one independent study by Öhman (2016). The possibility of recording attendance data on a national level, along with recording reason for school absence, has recently been investigated (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021b). If it is decided to start this register during year 2022, then national data on school attendance could be reported from year 2024 on.

Finland

Even though it is not compulsory for students to attend school, attendance is still registered since the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), states that the education provider (i.e., municipality) needs to have an action plan targeting student absenteeism and that they are responsible for recording absenteeism (categories not defined) and reporting to students' guardians (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998). However, in practice this often only happens on teacher- and school level (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022), as the recorded absenteeism is not reported further, for example on municipal level. How absenteeism is monitored at the level of the class, school, or education provider level varies greatly (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022; Määttä et al., 2020).

- 6 The definitions of excused and unexcused absenteeism vary between the schools and municipalities, and Finland is yet to establish national definitions.

The electronic registration systems used allow the teachers to record excused and unexcused absences and it can be programmed to collect more detailed information on absenteeism if desired (i.e., individual definitions on school/municipal level). It is recommended that no data regarding physical health (for example, absence due to illness) would be saved in the databases. The principal can grant a leave of up to two weeks for example for family holiday. In general, when a student is absent, the guardian must explain the absence: in addition to the teachers, also the students and the guardians have access to the database. The guidelines for recording and reporting absence are established on the local municipal and school level (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2022). For students in grades 7–9, subject teachers record absence during each lesson, while for the younger students the recording is mostly done on day level by the classroom teachers.

Denmark

In Denmark, mandatory schooling and recording of absence have a long history. The first nationwide school law from 1814 institutes mandatory schooling for all children between age 7 and 14. In the towns, children had to go to school on daily basis. On the countryside half of the time, so that the children could help at home. If a child did not go to school, the local authority should be informed. Parents who kept the child away from school without a valid reason, was sentenced to a fine. Valid reasons for absence were illness, bad weather or impassable roads (Appel & Coninck-Smith, 2015).

Nowadays in Denmark, student absence is divided into three categories: 1) absence due to illness/disability, which includes mental and physical health issues that prevent the student from attending school, medical appointments etcetera (excused absence); 2) extraordinarily permitted absence where the principal grants absence in case of exceptional events in the student's life (excused absence); 3) unexcused absence, which are absences that are not justified by the aforementioned categories (Bekendtgørelse om elevs fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019).

The schools are legally required to record student absence daily. Absence must be recorded in an electronic registration system in accordance with the three official absence categories. For the students in grades 0–6, the minimum requirement is that any student's absence is recorded daily and at the start of the school day. Among the students in grades 7–10, who are allowed to leave the school area at recess, any student's absence must also be recorded at the end of the school day. Absence must be recorded as unexcused if the student's parents fail to notify the school about the cause of the absence within reasonable time (i.e., often the same day or within a week at the latest) or fail to comply with the school's potential request of a doctor's note (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2019).

Further specifications regarding the practice of absence recordings are up to the individual school. As such, each school is permitted to set out recording rules for tardiness or early leave as well as policies regarding absence due to illness/disability and extraordinarily permitted absence (e.g., vacation outside of school holidays) (Bekendtgørelse om elevs fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019). There may therefore be significant differences across schools and municipalities in the types of absences that are recorded as excused and unexcused. In addition, the above-mentioned legislation only applies to the public schools. Private schools are regulated under a different legal framework, that allows greater independence at school level.

Norway

In Norway, absence is categorized by law as excused and unexcused (Norges offentlige utredninger, 2020). Excused absence is defined as absence due to health-related reasons or a granted leave of absence. The school (i.e., the principal or municipality) can grant a leave of up to two weeks (e.g., family holiday). It is up to the school principal to grant or decline excused leave of absence. Unexcused absence is undocumented nonattendance that is not excused.

There are no national guidelines for how the teachers and the schools must record school absence and therefore no national registry data. The municipalities use different electronic registration systems and have the autonomy to develop their own guidelines and routines to maintain these guidelines. From 2023, by law, the Norwegian municipalities will be responsible to respond on students with absence more than 10% over a school year (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2020). This counts for, approximately, 19 school days a year including both excused and unexcused absences.

2.2 Reporting Issues and Utilization of the Absence Data

In the Nordic countries, absence data are mostly used for recording absence rates at school level and rarely reported further than school level, except in Denmark. In Denmark, schools are required to transfer absence data to the municipal board every week. Absence data are then transferred annually to a national data bank under the Ministry of Children and Education (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2019). The national data bank provides publicly available absence rates at the school, municipal, and national level. Absence rates are calculated as whole days missed and made up in percentages. Absence data at the individual level can be accessed (e.g., by researchers) by a data processing agreement. In this way, it is possible to follow the development of student absence in the country year by year. It is possible to see which geographical areas that are most troubled by absenteeism, which types of absence that are most prominent (in terms of the three absence categories) and compare absence in different age groups and school types (e.g., regular, and special schools). According to the Danish National Agency for IT and Learning (2021), all

8 national education statistics, including absence data, are used in political decision making such as supporting reforms. It should be noted that all official absence data are from the public schools only.

In the other Nordic countries, national absence data are not systematically selected or reported and can therefore not be used in decision making. In Sweden, several of the municipalities track the absence rates in all the schools in the municipality, but these rates are not assembled on a national level. In Finland and Norway, there are no national guidelines for the use of absence data. Absenteeism is recorded by individual schools, but data are not systematically collected or reported further from this level (Määttä et al., 2020; Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2020).

Across the four countries, schools' obligations to undertake actions in relation to absenteeism are primarily decided at the school or municipal level. However, in Denmark and Norway there can be economic sanctions for the parents (or guardians) if a student reaches a certain amount of unexcused absence. In Denmark, the principal is obliged to notify social authorities if a student reaches 15% or more of unexcused absence within three months, and the child benefit (i.e., a universal public benefit per child under the age of 18) may then be ceased for the following quarter (Bekendtgørelse om elevens fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen, 2019). In Norway, the municipalities are allowed to react with economic sanctions for the parents, if the unexcused absence is 10% or more during a school term (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2021). In both countries, schools are obliged to warn the parents before these thresholds are reached. In Sweden, the parent must be informed the same day in case of unexcused absence (Swedish Education Act, 2010).

Besides this, the Nordic countries do not have clear benchmarks as to when and how the schools are to intervene upon absenteeism. In all the countries, schools are to investigate and follow up on unexcused, repeated, or prolonged absences. However, the respective education acts do not state how thorough the investigation must be and do not provide clear guidelines for the exact actions to be taken. Instead, it is decided on municipal or school level, when absence is deemed to be serious enough to warrant intervention as well as the type of intervention needed, leading to a great variety of models and strategies.

Some municipalities use 10% of absence over a certain period (e.g., three months) as a criterion of when the school is to react. This is the case in some municipalities in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, but consensus around the time frame is lacking. Some Finnish municipalities use a certain number of absence hours within a certain time-period to indicate what actions should be taken (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2002; Sandhaug et al., 2021). However, the time-period and amount of absenteeism leading to actions varies greatly. The time-period of follow-up on emerging school attendance problems may range from monthly to a whole school year or missed lessons from 1–150 hours.

3 Discussion

The Nordic countries Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway share a common ground with fundamental similarities in how the education systems are structured. This allows for comparisons between the countries so they can learn from each other while developing their systems and tools for handling SAPs. Yet, in most Nordic countries legislation and regulations leave great autonomy to municipalities and other education providers in how absenteeism is recorded and there are no strict reporting requirements. As a result, a lot of variances exist regarding how and when recording and reporting absenteeism data is done, and how and when the data is utilized. In the future, it would be important to map in detail, what information is needed on national, municipal, and school level to target support better. For instance, how the data collection should be done (for example in terms of General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR]), what changes (legislative or other guidelines) need to be made to gather the data, and how the data is stored and utilized on different levels.

3.1 Recording Absence

The Nordic countries all have a focus on recording absence, as opposed to attendance, but there are great variabilities both within and between the countries concerning the procedures for and the quality of the recorded absence data. The schools in all countries are required by law to record absence in categories, and almost all schools use electronic registration systems, but the systems differ among schools. All countries record excused versus unexcused absence, with Denmark being the only country dividing excused absence into two subcategories. There are no clear definitions of excused and unexcused absence in Sweden and Finland, which leaves it up to the teachers and schools to make their own interpretations. In Denmark and Norway, the absence categories used are more clearly defined, but further specifications are still up to the individual municipality or school. It differs between countries and grade levels, whether absence is recorded for every lesson, half days, or whole days.

For many schools, the accuracy of the recording is questionable, and the recordings are not compiled and used at the municipal or the national levels. The exceptions are Denmark that compiles the information on a national level, and Sweden on a municipality level. Even when the absence recording is compiled and mandatorily reported to the municipality, as is the case in Denmark, two Danish studies (Johnsen et al., 2022; Lomholt et al., 2020) have shown major flaws in absence recording of the schools, resulting in a misleading picture of some student absenteeism. For example, if a student was chronically absent, the school sometimes stopped recording the absence, so the student would erroneously be recorded as attending regularly. In addition, significant differences between the absence rates reported by the municipality and by the parents were found as the parents rated higher absence than was recorded by the school which raises issues regarding the reliability and validity of absence records in general.

One explanation for these discrepancies may be that parents over-report youths' school absence, and another may be that the absence records underestimate or falsely report absence. Another explanation could be related to how the schools record the students' absence. In all the Nordic countries, the schools are obliged to record students' absence and not their attendance. If the teacher does not actively record a missing student as absent, they will automatically be recorded as having attended school. This may often be missed or forgotten, possibly leading to an underestimation of the absence rates. It would probably produce more valid registrations to record attendance instead of absence, so that the "missing data" are not interpreted as "not absent". Another problem with the registration systems may be that in Denmark absence is often recorded as whole days, without recording tardiness or early departure. If school absence is recorded more frequently, for example by the hour, this might provide a more accurate picture of the overall prevalence, as well as the individual student's situation (as for example in Sweden, Finland, and Norway).

The Nordic countries are to different degrees intending to address absenteeism by using systems to record absence. The school systems and the education providers have established at least local guidelines for how and when to intervene in response to SAPs. The schools and the education providers need to use shared definitions and systems for recording non-attendance at least on national, if not on Nordic level.

3.2 Reporting Absence

Since Denmark is the only country where absence data are systematically reported to the municipality and to a national data bank, absence prevalence rates from the other Nordic countries are inconsistent or not available – making comparisons difficult. It is impossible for example to compare absence rates between the countries, to measure the development of absence over time within the countries, to compare absence between schools or to measure the effectiveness of school absenteeism interventions compared to "treatment as usual".

More systematic work could be done to prevent, monitor, detect, manage, and treat SAPs. The guidelines, initiatives and actions are carried out in different ways and followed up on, to limited or varying degrees, both nationally and across the Nordic countries. Reporting varies due to two reasons: lack of common definitions and different reporting requirements in the law. How to react to SAPs should be covered by law, so that national guidelines and registries could be defined. This would make it possible to address SAPs more clearly on all levels of support (e.g., Kearney & Graczyk, 2014), especially at Tier 1, with recommendations regarding promoting student engagement, school climate, and overall student well-being etcetera.

3.3 Using Data

Inconsistencies among all four countries in defining, recording, and reporting absence as well as having only Denmark with a national data bank, make across-country comparisons difficult. While absence data from Danish public schools are used in policymaking (Danish National Agency for IT and Learning, 2021), access to absence data to target SAPs in support for reforms and evidence-based research are limited in the other countries. Still, there is a debate going on about school absenteeism, especially in the media. School attendance problems of children and youth have raised a discussion during the past few years as an increasing problem. It has become a universal phenomenon leading to versatile short- and long-term consequences for students, their families, schools, and societies. In a recent investigation (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021a) eight out of ten principals reported using attendance data to promote attendance and respond to school attendance problems.

4 Conclusions

Across the Nordic countries there is a need for clearly defined, national, municipal, and school level data not only to support decision- and policy- making, but also to benefit intervention research targeting SAPs in country-specific, Nordic, and multicenter studies. To reduce problematic absenteeism, there is a need to ensure consistent and valid recordings of absenteeism data at the local and the national levels. A standard way of recording data on attendance and absence will enable comparisons and analyses to be made at the local, the national and the transnational levels. To accomplish this, the first steps to be taken could be:

- 1) Finding a reliable way of differentiating problematic and non-problematic absenteeism. In terms of definitions and in everyday school life, mostly three types of absenteeism are recognized: (a) absence due to illness, (b) unexcused, and (c) excused absence. Shared definitions would benefit both practice (i.e., teachers recording the attendance) and researchers by making data collection more reliable and generalizable (for example, comparison across countries). That in turn could provide evidence-based knowledge on SAPs that may improve implementation of guidelines with coherent directives to political and legislative bodies. Instead of an “each for their own” perspective, collaboration between the countries in terms of definitions and possible cut-off rates would be reasonable. There are already some guidelines in how to differentiate between problematic and non-problematic absenteeism (Kearney, 2016) that could be utilized in the process.

- 2) Reporting responsibility for the schools and data monitoring responsibilities at the municipal/education provider level and the national level are needed to make the data more reliable and accessible. For instance, the schools need to analyze the data and provide statistics of absence prevalence rates in their own reports which include the interpretation of SAPs.

3) Improve actions of the education provider (i.e., schools and municipalities) by emphasizing systematic recording and reporting of attendance and absence, promoting attendance and early intervention for absenteeism. This can be done through competence building and acquisition of knowledge concerning school absenteeism in educational networks and across collaborating disciplines within the education and the health sectors. This could be achieved, for instance, by establishing multidimensional and multi-tiered system of support models (Gren-Landell, 2021; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

4) Definitions of school absenteeism should be formalized in the Nordic education acts, with clear notifications for school personnel about how to interpret and apply the definitions across the Nordic countries. This will ensure that students with absenteeism are protected by law. Also, it would help bridge the gaps between what is specified in legislation, and what occurs in practice with respect to exemptions from education. For instance, the Norwegian Education Act, paragraph 9a, is about the school environment, and could easily be extended to include school absenteeism.

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