

# International Comparative Perspectives on School Attendance Problems

Analysis of statistics, risk groups and prevention in four countries

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## Abstract

This research project is funded by the Swedish Research Council. It has started on January 1st, 2020 and will be carried out under four years, until, December 31st, 2023. The purpose of this study is to investigate national, organisational and individual dimensions of school attendance problems (SAP) among 15 to 17-year-olds in Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan. The project uses a mixed method approach combining quantitative analysis of large-scale data on the national level with qualitative case studies on the organisational and individual level.

1. What can national and international comparative statistics contribute to our understanding of SAPs of adolescents in Sweden, compared to other chosen countries?
2. What can we understand about SAPs and its prevention from the perspective of professionals working with students (non-attending or risking non-attendance) and student health in the chosen countries?
3. How can we understand the situation of youth who belong to certain risk groups for SAPs, their perspectives on schooling and (possible lack of) support related to SAPs in these countries?

This project will combine inclusion as a normative perspective, reflecting socio-political ambitions and aims to reform school practices, with intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical lens. It will open up the internationally well-developed research field on school non-attendance to the Swedish audience and provide knowledge that can guide school leaders or student health teams in their preventive work. The project will contribute to the understanding of SAP by diversifying what is often generalized as international perspectives on SAP.

## Keywords

School attendance problems, international comparison, support systems, students' perspective

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# Purpose and aims

The purpose of this study is to contribute understanding of the phenomenon of school attendance problems (SAP) of 15 to 17-year-old adolescents in Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan in an international comparative perspective. Compulsory education and a right to education is a general feature of modern welfare states, but a constant shadow is non-attendance. SAP has become a frequent topic in the media since a recent national investigation (SOU 2016:94) shed light on this field, which for decades has been neglected in Sweden. The report shows that there is a lack of knowledge about what can promote school presence. Internationally, this problem has been in focus for a long time (Reid, 2008; Ricking, 2003). In Japan, for example, school refusal has been problematized since the 1980s and various discourses on this problem have been analysed 20 years ago as today (Yoneyama, 2000; Horiguchi, 2018). At that time the topic was very exotic for international readers. Today, however, media and public agencies frequently write about what is described as a serious problem. Based on the results from Strand's dissertation (2013) there is a need to critically discuss how school and related systems can in a salutogenic way address truancy in order to break pattern of exclusion. Yet there is still very little research available in Sweden (Ekstrand, 2015) that can help us comprehend the situation and guide school leaders and student health teams in their preventive work.

Our project will, from an international comparative research perspective, investigate societal, organizational and individual perspectives on SAPs in different national contexts. The countries chosen for comparison are in accordance with the focus of this project in order to reflect different school systems and also different models of welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Esping-Andersen's ideas have dominated comparative welfare state discussions for decades; these ideas distinguish between universal, liberal, conservative, and other types of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1999). In the literature Sweden is often regarded as a typical example of Scandinavian 'universal welfare states' which organize many sub-systems like pensions or health care universally. As contrasting examples, we have chosen the UK as a 'liberal welfare state', Germany as a typical example of a 'conservative welfare state' and Japan, which has been described as an 'East-Asian Confucian welfare state' (Goodman, 1998). Investigating the role of schools in the context of welfare state theory is most appropriate because our project on SAPs investigates schooling not only as the provision of intellectual and social competence but also as the most central social institution in children's and adolescents' life. With Japan and the UK two countries with long tradition of gathering national data on school attendance and with Germany and Sweden two countries without such traditions are chosen.

The following research questions will be studied:

1. What can national and international comparative statistics contribute to our understanding of SAPs of adolescents in Sweden, compared to other chosen countries?
2. What can we understand about SAPs and its prevention from the perspective of professionals working with students (non-attending or risking non-attendance) and student health in the chosen countries? This part of the project will include case studies that, from the organizational level of working with SAPs, may provide possible strategies for prevention in specific risk groups. How can the support systems be structured, how is support being practised and what are the perspectives of key professionals involved? In an international

comparative perspective, it will be interesting to understand which professionals are active in this work and how they reflect on their work.

3. How can we understand the situation of youth who belong to certain risk groups for SAPs, their perspectives on schooling and (possible lack of) support related to SAPs in these countries? This part of the project gathers data on an individual level.

## Background and earlier research

All schools need to provide every single child with education, and SAPs needs to be counteracted and prevented (Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013). Swedish schools have been famous for their inclusive character. During recent decades, however, students have not performed as well as earlier in international tests like PISA (OECD, 2013). While Swedish schools were earlier known for their small differences between students from high or low socioeconomic strata (SES), social differences are now rising (Karlsson & Oskarsson, 2018). The inclusive character of schools has diminished since the 1990s (Vislie, 2003). While some people are critical of increasing neo-liberal tendencies, privatization and communalization in the school system, others blame Swedish school pedagogy with its strong focus on constructivism for this decline.

With our international comparative study, we want to shed light on Swedish education today by analysing it through the lens of SAPs. In Sweden data on SAPs is very scarce compared to some other countries, for example Japan, where statistics are followed up every year by the school authorities (MEXT). For Sweden, owing to quite limited statistical evidence, we need to lean on a recent study initiated by the Swedish government (SOU 2016:94); 1700 pupils in Grades 1-9 missed more than 30 days of schooling. This is approximately 0.17% or 0.07% of Grade 1-6 and 0.39% of Grade 7-9 students (The Swedish School Inspectorate / Skolinspektionen, 2016). These figures are similar to those from the 2009 survey of The Swedish National Agency for Education. Other studies, however, report higher figures (Gren-Landell et al., 2015) than these official statistics, which only focus on continuous and invalid non-attendance of all students included in compulsory education. With the information at hand, it is difficult to judge whether school non-attendance, and its risk of no longer being included into the classroom environment is a new or an increasing phenomenon in Sweden.

According to the international literature, “[s]chool refusal behaviour is a heterogeneous, dimensional construct consisting of extended absences from school, periodic absences from school or missed classes, chronic tardiness, and intense dread about school that precipitates pleas for future non-attendance” (Kearney, 2008, p. 452). International literature distinguishes between Individual risk factors such as injury, drug use, psychiatric disorders, violence and economic deprivation, and Contextual risk factors such as homelessness and poverty, teenage pregnancy, school violence and victimization, school climate and connectedness, parental involvement, and family and community variables (Kearney, 2008). In the literature of the early 2000s, SAPs is often connected with medical conditions ranging from epilepsy to lice, influenza, sleeping disorder, diabetics and chronic pain (over 30 articles from 2000-2006, in Kearney, 2008). Other studies connect absenteeism with psychiatric conditions, sometimes building on extended community studies (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2005) and a large clinical sample (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Many more recent findings from international studies mirror those historical studies, for example, a great heterogeneity with respect to

symptomatology, connection with psychiatric diagnoses evident in children with school attendance difficulties, which largely include anxiety, depressive, and disruptive behaviour disorders. Poverty and chronic illness are quite clearly associated with absenteeism. And finally, emphasis is placed on specialized intervention conducted in close conjunction with family members, school officials and other relevant agencies (Holzer & Halfon, 2006; Lehmkuhl & Lehmkuhl, 2004, in Kearny, 2008) and a call for specific assessment tools.

According to recent Scandinavian research, *school refusal* is a phenomenon that is related to emotional distress and (psycho)somatic symptoms, while *truancy* is associated with rejecting school and with conduct disorders (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015b; Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2018). While parents have no knowledge or try to counteract their children's conduct in these cases, it is different when we talk about *school withdrawal*, where parents have knowledge or play an active role in keeping their children at home. Providing care to a relative who needs support and assistance because of a physical or mental illness, disability, drug-abuse problem or some other reason also influences students' possibilities to attend school and follow up their own education (Becker, 2007, in Nordenfors & Melander, 2017, p. 2; Hagborg, Berglund, & Fahlke, 2018); ten per cent of the group of young carers express school problems, 2/3 of whom are girls and 1/3 boys (Järkestig-Berggren, Bergman, Eriksson, & Priebe, 2018). Research is needed to understand these different forms of SAPs and to strengthen the welfare state and the children's rights against all kind of child labour or other forms of distress.

Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg (2015a) have assessed different reasons for school non-attendance among Norwegian students (6th and 10th grade) and describe a lack of knowledge of possible reasons like somatic symptoms and subjective health complaints in relation to truancy and school refusal. On the basis of self-reported data, they argue that truancy and school refusal are different phenomena although the reasons given for both types of non-attendance are closely related. In earlier research, gender has been identified as a predictor of truancy, but it seems that girls nowadays appear as often as boys in the statistics of unauthorized absence (cf. Reid 2012, Attwood and Croll 2006, in Ekstrand 2015, p. 464). Many results from earlier research on different types of SAPs are in line with what is stressed in recent Swedish investigations (SOU 2016:94): a need to follow up all kinds of non-attendance as a serious risk for children's schooling and well-being.

There is a growing body of literature on SAPs (cf. for example references in Gren Landel, 2021) and our literature reviews, which we have conducted during the first year of the project focused among others on practical work with SAPs and specifically on a students' perspectives of support. The analysis of the material is still under work and will be revised in other contexts.

## Terminology and concepts

In our project we follow the definitions of school attendance problems (SAPs) used in much of the (inter-)national literature. Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin and Gentle-Genitty (2018), in line with other international literature, differentiate between four major forms of SAPs: *school refusal*, *school truancy*, *school withdrawal* and *school expulsion*. These phenomena are also described in the research literature of the countries included in this project.

Relevant terminology in the field of problematic school absenteeism can vary within and between different countries. While the term school refusal (skolvägran, Schulverweigerung, tōkō kyōhi 登校拒否) was used earlier, school non-attendance (futōkō 不登校, frånvaro i skolan, Schulversäumnis/

Schulabsentismus) has been the most common term since the 1990s. Truancy is translated as “skolk” in Swedish and “Schulschwänzen” in German, but in Japan 登校拒否 (tôkô kyohi) seems to be used, the same term as for school refusal. School withdrawal is referred to as ”föräldrastöd frånvaro” in Swedish (Forsell, 2020). In German, “Zurückhalten” was used earlier (Bools et al. 1990 in Ricking, 2003), but although this phenomenon is being intensively studied in recent German research (Hillenbrand & Ricking, 2011; Ricking, 2017) no specific single term is in use.

From Gren Landell’s publications we understand that Swedish school statistics, in accordance with the basic law for education, distinguish between valid and invalid non-attendance (Skolverket, 2008, 2010; Skolinspektionen, 2016a in Gren Landell, 2018:20) and between periodical and extended non-attendance. However, we will follow her argument that these ways of distinguishing non-attendance are neither easy nor necessarily helpful (Gren Landell, 2018; SOU 2016:94); we choose as our starting point the idea that all kinds of absenteeism *can* be problematic (Heyne et al., 2018).

There is not a single risk factor for SAPs (Gren Landell, 2021). Absence has been described as a risk factor of its own, as it tends to lead to more absence (Ingul, Havik & Heyne, 2019; Ingul & Havik, 2021; Keppens & Spryt, 2017). That is why we decided early during the project not to focus on specifically defined risk factors or “risk groups”. We start our investigation close to the phenomena in question: children who have experience of school non-attendance.

## **The value of international comparative studies on SAP**

The examples above show that absenteeism is perceived as problematic in many countries, but we know very little about it from a comparative perspective. There are studies from many international contexts. However, the specific phenomena are seldom explicitly discussed with rich contextual information from the respective education and social systems. Obviously, we need to take into account both differences in the education systems, specifics in the terminology and national discourses around the phenomenon when analysing SAPs. There are few international comparative studies on SAP (e.g. Grewe, 2005). We argue that case studies from different countries and international comparative analysis may contribute innovative perspectives related to SAPs.

In our project we will build on comparative statistics and then investigate organisational strategies and experiences from those in particular concerned, youth with SAPs. By this we want to provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. We also want to add that research on SAP is often pursued from the perspective of medical sciences or psychology but only a very few studies have so far been carried out in social work and the education sciences, specifically in Sweden. With this said the project fits well into the field of international and comparative education. Studying SAP from such a comparative perspective will enable us to illustrate the background and consequences of not attending school.

# Theoretical perspectives

This project combines inclusion as a normative perspective, which reflects socio-political ambitions and aims to reform school practices, with intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical lens. Sebba and Ainscow defined inclusion as “the process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering its curricula organisation and provision. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces the need to exclude pupils” (as cited in Skidmore, 2004, p. 23). Inclusion means that all pupils should have access to a well-functioning school situation. Diversity of students should be seen as an asset and equal access to knowledge, social development and democracy education can make school environments inclusive (Nilholm & Göransson, 2013). By not attending school, these goals are being missed.

As there are various student groups who miss parts of their (mainly secondary) school education for various reasons, this study will use an intersectional perspective, whereby we will distinguish between the specific situations of girls and boys with different backgrounds and orientations. Intersectionality is a helpful concept when it comes to broadening the perspectives and finding adequate solutions, which is why it has become popular as an analytical framework in international education and social science research (Davis et al. 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality makes it possible to take into account different dimensions of difference and categorizations like gender, class or ethnicity (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2018: 39). Intersectionality, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), concerns advancing a larger goal of promoting social justice and social change, so it is very relevant to the proposed project on SAPs and different risk groups. The theoretical contribution of the project will be to investigate a possible interrelationship of concepts of inclusion and intersectionality in different national and organisational contexts. The intersectional analysis of different national cases will help us to figure out international convergent and divergent trends in the research and practice concerning SAPs.

## Methodology

The proposed research project on SAP builds on a mixed-method design (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Mixed methods play an important role in cross-cultural research (Schrauf, 2016) and have been discussed in combination with intersectional approaches (Hankivsky & Grace, 2015). Truly comparative studies demand not only good comprehension of methods but also flexibility in applying methods that are in accordance with the research focus. The proposed study uses statistics to build a quantitative framework for the national comparison (Study 1). Case studies, which build on qualitative data derived mainly from focus group and interview studies but also from background data, will illustrate the organisational level and perspectives of professionals working with school non-attenders (Study 2). Finally, the researchers will conduct qualitative interviews in the tradition of Kvale and Brinkman (2014) with students with experience of SAPs (Study 3). This part is at the heart of the project, since the student perspective is precisely what is missing in the debate on SAPs. The interview data will be analysed with thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis

is not tied to any specific epistemological or theoretical positions. Although thematic analysis is primarily descriptive, it still allows for analytical aspects. Thematic analysis can include an interpretative approach, whereby the researcher reasons about backgrounds, understandings and consequences of the presentation of a topic by target groups. In connection with rich contextual descriptions the cases will provide a basis (obviously not statistical) for what is called “analytical generalisation” (my translation, Kvale & Brinkman, 2014: 314-15). By means of this methodological approach we will gather rich material for understanding the SAP in Sweden, both in line with and in contrast to cross-culturally selected cases from countries that exemplify different school systems and welfare states.

## Preliminary time schedule and project planning

The project will build on three consecutive and complementary sub-studies, including a series of case studies and cross-country analyses. It combines quantitative analysis of large-scale data and qualitative case studies (Table 1).

**Table 1. Time schedule for the project: Data collection, analysis and presentation of results**

	<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
<b>Study 1 National level</b>	Statistical analysis of Pisa data and national statistics.	Contextual analysis and publication of results of Study 1		Interpretation of project results in relation to national school systems.
<b>Study 2 Organisational level</b>	Design, ethics examination, contact gate-keepers for case studies in four countries; pre-studies.	Field visits: Two municipalities/ country. 2-3 schools/ municipality. Interviews and focus groups. Transcription.	Thematic analysis. Continued: Field visits, interviews and focus groups.	Problematizing of analysis and publication in open-access journals.
<b>Study 3 Individual level</b>	Design, ethical approval in Sweden and other countries.	Defining specific risk groups in the four school systems according to statistics, literature review and Study 2. Meetings with students who have experience of SAP; interviews.	Continued interviews in all countries (at least 10 in each country). Transcription and thematic analysis of interviews. In-depth analysis.	Continued analysis of the data and publication on student perspective on SAP in open-access journals.
<b>Survey of literature and overall analysis</b>	Literature reviews on SAP, focus on countries under study.	Literature reviews continued, focus on risk groups.	Analysis of literature from methodological perspectives.	Analysis of all three studies in relation to international and national literature.

<b>Workshop / conference</b>	Workshop for researchers and international and national collaborators and gatekeepers. (March 2021)	Continued communication with collaborators in the context of international research conferences.	Conference with presentations of finalised and ongoing studies and contributions of international collaborators.	Publication of conference results in open-access journals or peer-reviewed book.
<b>Publications</b>	Publish results from Study 1.	Open-access publication of literature reviews.	Open-access publication of Studies 2 and 3.	Open-access publication of collected results.

## First study: National level

In this part of the project we will answer the first research question: What can national and international comparative statistics contribute to our understanding of SAP of adolescents in Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan? Absenteeism and SAP are very difficult to quantify because the behaviour includes complete and partial absences, tardiness and anxiety-based difficulties in attending school (Kearney, 2008). Different quantifying studies are based on a variety of instruments. In order to find a standardized instrument which is available for all the countries included in the project, we will build on data in the PISA study as well as other data and national statistics.

PISA contains data from representative samples of 15-year olds from Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan, collected on seven occasions, from 2000 to 2018. A question about truancy has been included in these studies and it will be possible to see the development over a period of time. It is also possible to relate truancy to students' result in the PISA tests and to describe the composition of the groups who have had unauthorized absence from school in respect of gender, socio-economic status and migration background for all the four countries included in the study (see Project report on PISA data).

Research questions to be answered with PISA data:

1. How many students are absent from school? Are there any differences between the countries? Are there any trends?
2. How do students who report that they have skipped classes perform in reading comprehension, mathematics and science in the PISA tests compared to other students?
3. Who are the absent students? Gender? Socio-economic background? Migration background? From private or public schools? Rural or urban? Are there differences or similarities in patterns between the countries? Are there any trends?
4. How big is the problem with truancy according to the principals? Are there differences between the countries? Are there trends?

Self-reported data and officially assembled data differ substantially (Keppens, Spruyt & Dockx, 2019). Student self-reported data will be combined and contrasted with national statistics from the four countries (UK Department of Education; MEXT, School Basic Survey Ofsted; Skolverket, Skolinspektionen; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, Kultusministerkonferenz or equivalent). National statistics will be presented, compared and discussed in relation to the results

from the PISA study and in relation to data from research studies. The analysis of this quantitative material will contribute to our understanding of SAP, including risk groups and other relevant aspect. Different terminology and categorization in different research communities will be considered. Data can also be analysed in relation to immanent representations of SAP (WPR). The results will partly guide Studies 2 and 3.

## **Second Study: Organisational level**

The question to be answered in the second part of the project is what we can understand about SAP and prevention from the perspective of professionals working in school and with student health by systematically gathering data and material on the situation in the four countries. Study 2 focuses on organizational dimensions: how the support systems can be structured (from national to regional and local policy level), how it is practised (both internally at schools and externally via contacts with social services, etc) and what are the perspectives of key professionals involved (on remedial and preventive strategies regarding SAP, especially as this certainly differs between countries).

Documentation of non-attendance in different schools can be part of the analysis of what kind of absenteeism is being registered and followed up.

Study 2 in the project will build on focus-group and individual interviews with actors from different support systems in and around school such as school leaders, teachers and student health systems, including school social workers, school psychologists and special needs educators; and depending on the context also with actors in independent schools and NGOs. Interviews aim at gaining practical knowledge about actual conduct and describing the organization and support context in each school effectively.

The interview data will be analysed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Following Bacchi (2012) on the need to problematize policies, her approach regarding "what's the problem represented to be" (WPR) can also be used to analyse how proposed and practiced strategies reveal what is seen as problematic. Analysing representation of problems allows us to problematize how actors make meaning and how this meaning-making may interact with policies and practices.

## **Third study: Individual level**

The third study will put the individual in focus, asking how we can understand the situation of youths who belong to certain risk groups for SAP, their perspectives on schooling and (possible lack of) support related to SAP in the four countries. Although it is important to understand different organizational contexts and support systems and to analyse the perspectives of professionals who work with these students, it is perhaps most important to get to know the students' own experiences and how they reflect on their experience of SAP. In accordance with the results from Studies 1 and 2, we will interview adolescents who have experience of school non-attendance. The age group selected for the study consists of 15 to 17-year olds. 15- year olds are part of compulsory education in all of these countries while the older pupils are strictly speaking not legally bound to go to school in Sweden or Japan. However, there is a very high consensus of opinion on the importance of schooling for young persons after the age of 15, which can make this group especially vulnerable.

In each of the countries at least 10 adolescents will be interviewed. These adolescents will probably be from the same municipalities (or equivalent) in which Study 2 was conducted. Studying SAP on an

individual level will fill an important research gap in the overlapping field of school studies and social welfare studies with the focus on children and youth.

To sum up, Studies 1 and 2 can be understood as preparatory for Study 3. The results will be presented for every single study, but the final aim will be to combine the results from all three studies in order to provide understanding of the phenomenon of SAP among 15 to 17-year-old adolescents in Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan in an international comparative perspective.

## **Ethical considerations**

The Swedish Regional Ethics Board has approved data collection in Sweden (Dnr. 2020-05441; Decision 2020-11-24).

In all research, ethical considerations are of central importance, not least when the research involves adolescents and concerns matters that can be considered sensitive (see CODEX – Rules and Guidelines for Research). In this project we will apply for ethical examination because we expect that the project will need to be approved by the Regional Ethics Board. Applications for ethical examination of research are scrutinized by the new Swedish Ethical Review Authority from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.

The project builds on three studies. The first study analyses data from PISA and national statistics. This data is already published and fully anonymised. Using already existing data can be more ethical than gathering new large-scale data. However, as we will analyse the data through an intersectional lens, we will need to be especially careful not to stigmatise certain populations or describe them in negative terms.

According to the Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (SFS 2003:460 and SFS 2008:192), research has to undergo formal ethical review if sensitive personal data is to be part of the research. In our project, Studies 2 and 3 in particular may be sensitive as we plan to interview professionals working with adolescents (in Study 2) and 15- to 17-year old adolescents themselves (in Study 3) about school nonattendance. We have chosen this design because it is precisely the student perspective that is missing in research on understanding school attendance problems. Professionals are important informants for understanding and comparing the organizational level in the countries included in the project.

To implement the study, we need the informed consent of the school management, the professionals and the students. Participants will be informed of their right to decline or to quit the study without giving specific reasons. All data will be anonymised in transcript and handled according to the recent law for data protection. A data protection plan will be written as soon as the project is accepted. The data will be described, documented, stored and used in a secure manner and we will take responsibility for all ethical aspects involved. We cannot exclude the possibility that we will be given sensitive information during the interviews and that involves responsibility on the researchers' side. Ways of tackling this risk will be developed further when applying for formal ethical consent because all research involving handling of sensitive personal data must be examined regardless of whether research subjects give their informed consent or not.

This study will be carried out in Sweden and in three other countries. For Sweden we have applied for ethical clearance which has as mentioned above been approved during 2020. We will need to

understand the laws in the UK, Germany and Japan in order to carry out similar ethical examination in these countries, too.

## **How to conduct study 2 and 3 in Sweden**

Both study 2 and 3 are based on a qualitative research method. The following paragraphs describe the slightly developed research plan which has been approved by The Swedish Regional Ethics Board and which is the basis for our ongoing discussions with a number of municipalities in Sweden.

For study 2, two or three municipalities will be chosen in Sweden. We will initially conduct shorter (telephone/online-) interviews with school leaders at (all) lower secondary schools (schools that include school years 8-9) in the selected municipalities and with responsible professionals for student health teams in the municipalities. These interviews aim to obtain an overview of the overall support structure around the work with SAP, including information about the formal policy and organization (e.g. responsibilities of different involved actors, routines for registering school attendance and the practical work towards pupils who for various reasons miss part of their schooling) including policy on promotion and preventive measures. The interviewed persons are also important as gate-keepers to teachers and other professionals who are working with related matters in the respective municipality and in the schools.

Based on the gathered information, focus groups will be created consisting of teachers and other professionals (mainly student health staff). We target actors who have experience of working with students (with absenteeism) or work with systematic attendance promotion work in the municipalities. The focus group interviews will address issues of support systems for students with attendance problems and preventive and attendance-promoting work. At least two focus groups will be conducted in each municipality; one with teachers and one with student health staff. All together about 30 persons will share their experiences and views in these focus groups. In addition to the focus groups, policy documents and guidelines for the work with school attendance will also be collected. Such material from local, regional and national level will be relevant for understanding the work in the individual municipalities with school attendance. It will be helpful during the analysis and provide a context for what we can learn in the focus groups.

For study 3, (at least) 10 individual interviews will be conducted with adolescents who have experiences of non-attendance. The selection of adolescents will be made from the same municipalities as in study 2 and based on the contacts with the school leaders and other professionals that participated in study 2. The criteria for participating in the study will (primarily) be that the student has reached the age of 15 and has, or has had, experiences of SAPs. The amount of non-attendance among the adolescents will be specified based on information about local policy and statistics. The main focus in the interviews will be on the adolescent's experiences of and perspectives on received or lacked support/reactions from school regarding attendance, and not on how the adolescent view the causes to their non-attendance. Adolescents who meet the selection criteria will be invited to participate in the study via letters from the researchers that are either sent out by the school and / or distributed via school staff.

## Significance of the study

A growing number of international studies document the importance of regular school attendance (e.g. Thornton Darmody, McCoy, 2013). Not attending school regularly has negative implications for the students' scholastic achievement, their social development and their possibilities to participate in society and the labour market. This international research field has only recently been reflected in Swedish studies. Although there are no simple solutions to the complex problem of absenteeism, we argue, in line with international research, that more knowledge of factors concerning SAP will provide a better understanding of the problem; it will also facilitate policies and strategies that can provide answers to this increasing challenge in many post-modern societies. The primary goal of the study, however, is to contribute understanding of the phenomenon of SAP among 15 to 17-year-old adolescents in Sweden, the UK, Germany and Japan in an international comparative perspective. The study will also make a long-term contribution to the field of international and comparative education

## Project organization: participants' roles and competences

Susanne **Kreitz-Sandberg** (Stockholm University, Department of Education, International and Comparative Education) coordinates the project and contributes to all the studies. Kreitz-Sandberg has worked for more than two decades on international comparative studies on Japan, Germany, Sweden and other countries (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2008, 2015; Kreitz-Sandberg & Lesch, 2019). She speaks all the four languages relevant to this study and has interviewed teachers and other professions in these countries. She is experienced both in research and in science management. Among other tasks she will also investigate literature studies, gathering and analysing data in collaboration with the project team and international collaborators.

Malin **Gren Landell** has headed the national investigation SOU (2016:94) on school non-attendance and has published widely both in scientific journals and in popular science on SAP (e.g. Gren Landell, 2018; 2021). She has a PhD in psychology and is at present working in a Swedish municipality as a project leader for central student health. Her local, national and international networks will help us get in contact with informants and reach out with results from the project.

Ulf **Fredriksson**, Associate Professor, Stockholm University, Department of Education, has experience of large-scale studies. He has worked with PISA (Fredriksson, Karlsson & Pettersson, 2018) and is experienced in methodological questions related to PISA (Oskarsson et al., 2016). He has also investigated for the government a reading, writing and mathematics guarantee related to students with weak school results (Fredriksson, Rasmusson & Sundgren, 2012). He will contribute to Studies 1 and 2.

Maria **Rasmusson** (Uppsala University) has experience from work with data in large-scale studies such as PISA and PIAAC. She will support more complex statistical analysis for Study 1. See for example Rasmusson (2016) or Rasmusson and Fredriksson (2018).

Åsa **Backlund** (Stockholm University, Department for Social Work) will support Studies 2 and 3 with the design and analysis of the data. In her research Backlund has examined the support system in Swedish schools called "elevhälsa" (student health) in which different professions provide support for teachers and school leaders to help students achieve school targets (Backlund, 2007), a research field that is still scarcely investigated, particularly regarding social problems and support. Relevant publications: Backlund (2013, 2018); Backlund et al. (2012, 2017); Backlund & Gren Landell, 2017; Backlund & Högdin, 2017; Trygged, Backlund, & Elofsson (2017)

Joakim **Isaksson** (Stockholm University, Department for Social Work) has conducted several studies regarding the organization of psychosocial resources for pupils in need of special support in Swedish schools (Ek, Isaksson & Eriksson, 2017; Isaksson, 2017). These studies cover several levels in the education system from the policy level (Isaksson, 2011; Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015) to the organizational / school level (Isaksson et al. 2007, 2010a) and further to an individual level with pupils' experiences of special support (Isaksson et al. 2010b). Isaksson will contribute design, analysis and publication in peer-reviewed journals.

Obviously, all the project members will be involved in the publication of the results of the various studies in the project and will contribute to national and international collaboration.

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