Nordic Journal of Educational History
Vol. 12, no. 2 (2025), pp. 37–61
ISSN (online): 2001–9076
ISSN (print): 2001–7766

Truancy, School Phobia, or School Fatigue? Understandings of Students' Absenteeism, 1945–1975

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Abstract • Although school absenteeism is often described as a growing problem, it has long posed challenges for educators. This article explores how unwanted school absenteeism was problematised in Sweden between 1945 and 1975. Drawing on archived student records from the school health service concerning students with perceived problematic absenteeism, and published texts by experts such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and teachers, the study examines how the issue was defined, what explanations were offered, what interventions were proposed, and which experts were involved. The analysis uses the concept of *psychoculture*, referring to ways of thinking shaped by psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. The article shows how interpretations of absenteeism were historically contingent, influenced by institutional structures, professional agendas, and available methods of interventions.

Keywords • Unwanted school absenteeism; school health services; Sweden, psychoculture

In Sweden today, school absenteeism is reported as a growing concern, both in media reports and in investigations conducted by public authorities.[1] Children who do not attend school are sometimes referred to as "home-sitters" (*hemmasittare*), but the term "problematic school absenteeism" is often proposed as an umbrella concept encompassing all forms of absenteeism. Research has shown that the reasons for students' non-attendance vary widely: a child may struggle to keep up with the curriculum, experience conflicts with teachers, be subjected to bullying, or feel different and excluded.[2] Ongoing discussions seek to uncover the underlying causes of problematic school absenteeism, with some questioning what has changed in schools when a significant proportion of students are unable to attend.[3]

However, the issue of unwanted school absenteeism is not new. Throughout the history of education, there have always been students who, for various reasons, have been unable or unwilling to participate in the compulsory education offered by schools.

1 Skolinspektionen, *Omfattande ogiltig frånvaro i Sveriges grundskolor* (Stockholm: Skolinspektionen, 2016); Skolverket, *Nationell kartläggning av elevfrånvaro: De obligatoriska skolformerna samt gymnasie- och gymnasiesärskolan* (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2021).

2 Tobias Forsell, "*Man är ju typ elev, fast på avstånd:" Problematisk skolfrånvaro ur elevers, föräldrars och skolpersonals perspektiv* (Umeå: Umeå University, 2020); Hans Ek, *Psykiatriseringen av skolkaren: BUP och det institutionella omhändertagandet av ungdomar som inte går till skolan* (Umeå: Umeå University, 2018).

3 See e.g. Moa Haltorp, "Vad är egentligen problematisk skolfrånvaro?" *Dagens Nyheter,* August 13, 2024.

This has traditionally been a matter for teachers and school authorities to address. As early as 1846, Oscar Elis Leonard Dahm described in his work *Skolmästarkonst* (The Art of the Schoolmaster), the problem of school neglect – "truancy and the like" – as a matter of concern. Dahm emphasised that the fault "often actually lies with the parents," who did not always ensure their children attended school.[4] Reasons such as necessary household chores, a relative's illness, or lack of proper clothing were considered legitimate grounds for absence. However, unwarranted absences were to be counteracted. Measures available to teachers included detention, remarks in conduct grades, demotion, or corporal punishment (preferably administered by parents to avoid increasing the child's reluctance to attend school).[5] Parental failure to send children to school was also viewed as a major issue by authorities during the early decades of compulsory education, even though at that time, compulsory schooling referred to the municipality's obligation to provide education, rather than the child's obligation to attend.[6] Even in grammar schools and similar institutions for children from higher social classes, dating back to the seventeenth century, absenteeism was seen as problematic, particularly when students roamed the streets in groups, causing disturbances instead of being in school.[7] Although the issue of unwanted school absenteeism has long existed, perspectives on its nature, causes, and appropriate responses have changed over time.

The aim of this article is to show how students' unwanted school absenteeism was understood and interpreted during the period 1945–1975. As will be demonstrated, this was a time when school absenteeism began to be taken seriously as a problem, the school health service became involved, and scientific explanations were developed. Drawing on two types of empirical material – archived student records from the school health service concerning students with perceived problematic absenteeism, and published texts by experts such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and teachers – we analyse how perspectives on children's unwanted school absenteeism developed and changed over time. We address the following research questions:

1. What terms and definitions were used to describe the problem?
2. What explanations were offered for unwanted school absenteeism, and what measures were proposed?
3. Which experts were involved?

These questions are analysed in relation to the concept of psychoculture, which refers to ways of thinking shaped by the language and ideas of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis.[8] In doing so, the article highlights how the problem of school absen-

4 Oscar Elis Leonard Dahm, *Skolmästarkonst: Antydningar för lärare och skolinspektörer* [1846], reprinted in *Minnen och dokument 8.* Årsböcker i svensk undervisningshistoria 76 (Uppsala: Föreningen för svensk undervisningshistoria, 1995), 134.

5 Dahm ([1846] 1995), 163–65.

6 Gunnar Richardson, "Folkskolan tar form – de första decennierna," in *Ett folk börjar skolan: Folkskolan 150 år 1842–1992,* ed. Gunnar Richardson (Stockholm: Allmänna förlaget, 1992).

7 Björn Norlin, *Skolagans historia och pedagogik: Sedlighetsfostran, disciplinering och väldsbruk i den tidigmoderna skolan, 1560–1820* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2021).

8 Petteri Pietikäinen, *Neurosis and Modernity: The Age of Nervousness in Sweden* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

teeism is historically contingent and shaped by institutional arrangements, prevailing norms, and available interventions.

Previous research

Historical research has not specifically focused on unwanted school absenteeism during the period in question, but several areas touch upon the issue directly or indirectly. One major field of research concerns the development of society's responsibility for children. In Sweden, the state took during the early twentieth century increasing responsibility through child welfare boards and legislation, allowing children to be taken into care when families were deemed inadequate.[9] Over time, the care system became more differentiated, with schools playing a central role.[10] In the 1930s, inspired by the Anglo-Saxon mental hygiene movement and child guidance clinics, special counselling agencies for child-related problems were established. Schools or parents could refer children to these agencies for investigation or support. Reasons for referral included, for example, "truancy," "running around outdoors," and "vagrancy."[11]

The development of child psychiatry in Sweden has also been explored in research.[12] During the first decades of the twentieth century, child psychiatry primarily targeted pupils who struggled to adapt to school or had come into contact with the judicial system. As a result, the field became closely associated with the social problems of the time.[13] Effective treatment methods were largely lacking. As in other countries, the first step toward state-funded child psychiatry came in the 1940s with the establishment of child psychiatric clinics at hospitals.[14] However, scholars have noted that the Scandi-

9 Maria Sundkvist, *De vanartade barnen: Mötet mellan barn och föräldrar och Norrköpings barnavårdsnämnd 1903–1925* (Uppsala: Hjelm, 1994); Thom Axelsson, "De svåruppfostrade barnen; Skolpsykiatrins framväxt och etablering i Sverige 1910–1955," *Scandia* 87, no. 2 (2020).

10 Cf. Roger Qvarsell, "Ungdomars brottslighet och samhällets vård," in *Vård av ungdomar med sociala problem: En forskningsöversikt,* ed. Bengt-Åke Armelius (Stockholm: Liber, 1996), 36.

11 Ulf Jönson, *Bråkiga, lösaktiga och nagelbitande barn: Om barn och barns problem vid en rådgivningsbyrå i Stockholm 1933–1950* (Linköping: Linköping University, 1997), see e.g. 224; John Stewart, *Child Guidance in Britain, 1918–1955: The Dangerous Age of Childhood* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016); Margo Horn, *Before It's Too Late: The Child Guidance Movement in the United States, 1922–1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

12 Margareta Brandell-Forsberg, *Barnpsykiatri i tiden: Den värmländska barn- och ungdomspsykiatrins historia* (Karlstad: Landstinget i Värmland, 1996). Karl-Henric Karlén, *Barn- och ungdomspsykiatrin i Sverige: Dess historia, problem och patienter* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1985).

13 Roger Qvarsell, "Från vanart till psykopati: Om barnpsykiatrins framväxt i Sverige under mellankrigstiden," *Lychnos* (1985), 167–88; Karin Zetterqvist Nelson, "'A Reason Behind Every Action': The Early Years of Swedish Child Psychiatry, 1930–1945," *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance "irrégulière"* 18, no. 1 (2016).

14 Karin Zetterqvist Nelson, "Från samhällets barn till egna individer: Barnpsykiatrisk behandlingsideologi 1945–1985," *Scandia* 78, no. 2 (2012); see also e.g. Nelleke Bakker and Milou Smit, "'An Oedipal Conflict on an Epileptic Basis:' The Diagnosing and Treatment of Behavioural Problems in a Dutch Child Psychiatric Clinic (1952–1962)," *Paedagogica Historica* 56, no 3 (2020); Helmut Remschmidt and Herman Van Engeland, eds., *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Europe: Historical Development, Current Situation, Future Perspectives* (Darmstadt: Steinkopff Verlag, 1999).

navian model was characterised by a strong emphasis on preventive social work and a high degree of trust in expert authority.[15]

Another significant area of research concerns the expansion of compulsory schooling in response to urbanisation and demographic changes during the twentieth century.[16] As more children attended school for longer periods, various types of special classes were introduced, particularly in larger cities. These included remedial classes (for students with intellectual disabilities), reading classes (for those with reading and writing difficulties), school maturity classes (for students deemed not yet ready for regular instruction) and observation classes (more or less temporary placement for students with "mental special characteristics," often used when professionals found assessment difficult).[17] The practice of assigning students to the most appropriate class type drove the expansion of testing from the 1920s onwards.[18] This, in turn, created a demand for teachers with special education training, as well as for professionals capable of determining appropriate student placements.[19]

Although the division of responsibilities between schools, clinics, and advisory bureaus varied, schools gradually assumed increasing responsibility for children's mental health and emotional well-being. As in many other countries, the focus of school health services shifted toward mental health as poverty-related issues such as infectious diseases and malnutrition declined.[20] This shift increased the importance of psychiatric expertise. Per-Anders Rydelius has described a form of "school psychiatry" that flourished between 1920 and 1970. However, ideologically rooted in eugenics, racial biology, and brain injury research, this approach came to be seen in the 1960s as

15 Åsa Lundqvist and Klaus Petersen, eds., *In Experts We Trust: Knowledge, Politics and Bureaucracy in Nordic Welfare States* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010); Björn Hamre, Thom Axelsson and Kari Ludvigsen, "Psychiatry in the Sorting of Schoolchildren in Scandinavia 1920–1950: IQ Testing, Child Guidance Clinics and Hospitalization," *Paedagogica Historica* 55, no. 3 (2019), 391–415.

16 See e.g. Henrik Edgren, "Folkskolan och grundskolan," in *Utbildningshistoria: En introduktion,* ed. Esbjörn Larsson and Johannes Westberg (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2024).

17 *Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1955), 231–64. See also Karl-Gustaf Stukát and Ulla-Britt Bladini, *Svensk specialundervisning: Intentioner och realiteter i ett utvecklingsperspektiv* (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 1986).

18 Thom Axelsson, *Rätt elev i rätt klass: Skola, begåvning och styrning 1910–1950* (Linköping: Linköping University, 2007); Karin Zetterqvist Nelson and Bengt Sandin, "The Politics of Reading and Writing Problems: Changing Definitions in Swedish Schooling During the Twentieth Century," *History of Education* 34, no. 2 (2005).

19 Ulla-Britt Bladini, *Från hjälpskolelärare till förändringsagent: Svensk speciallärarutbildning 1921–1981 relaterad till specialundervisningens utveckling och förändringar i speciallärarens arbetsuppgifter* (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 1990); Christian Lundahl, "Making Testers out of Teachers: The Work of a Swedish State Research Institute 1946–1956," *History of Education* 48, no. 5 (2019); Christian Ydesen, Kari Ludvigsen and Christian Lundahl, "Creating an Educational Testing Profession in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, 1910–1960," *European Educational Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (2013).

20 Astri Andresen, "Skolbarn, hälsopolitik och försöken att ändra på framtiden," in *Barnen och välfärdspolitiken: Nordiska barndomar 1900–2000*, ed. Astri Andresen et al. (Stockholm: Dialogos förlag, 2011); Cathy Urwin and Elaine Sharland, "From Bodies to Minds in Childcare Literature: Advice to Parents in Inter-war Britain," in *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare 1880–1940,* ed. Roger Cooter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Anna Larsson, "Physical, Emotional, and Social Illness: Changing Problems for School Health Care in Twentieth Century Sweden," *History of Education Review* 46, no. 2 (2017).

stigmatising and segregating, and it was largely abandoned in the 1970s.[21] At the same time, the media began to play a more prominent role in shaping public perceptions of mental health. As Peter Skagius and Karin Zetterqvist Nelson have noted, these "popularised" portrayals were often alarmist in tone.[22]

Alongside these changes, a new psychosocial field of expertise was established within schools, with positions for psychologists and counsellors/social workers (*skolkuratorer*).[23] From the 1940s, school psychologists and their assistants primarily focused on testing and assessment, but over time their roles expanded to include addressing students' psychosocial problems. Similarly, the responsibilities of school social workers evolved, from facilitating students' access to societal support and services, to providing psychosocial counselling.[24] This shift reflects a broader discursive transformation in how school-related problems were conceptualised: from a medically oriented framework, through an individual psychological lens, to a more socially oriented discourse.[25] Although similar developments can be observed internationally, it is important, as research has emphasised, to examine specific national contexts to understand the unique cultures and practices that have emerged.[26]

Previous research thus points to a growing professional differentiation within the field of school health care and an increasingly clear division between schools and the healthcare system during the period under investigation. By focusing on unwanted absenteeism during this period of transformation, the present study will complement existing research and contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of school health care in Sweden.

21 Per-Anders Rydelius, "Svensk barn- och ungdomspsykiatri 50 år och om hur kunskapsområdet utvecklades till ett vetenskapligt ämne," stencil 2012.

22 Peter Skagius and Karin Zetterqvist Nelson, "Den konstanta oron: Barn och ungas psykiska ohälsa i svensk dagspress," *Scandia* 87, no. 2 (2020).

23 Kari Ludvigsen, "The 'Psy-experts' and the Minds of Children: Transfer of Knowledge in Inter-war Norway and Sweden," in *In Experts We Trust: Knowledge, Politics and Bureaucracy in Nordic Welfare States*, ed. Åsa Lundqvist and Klaus Petersen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010); Larsson (2017); Anna Larsson, "School Psychologists as Experts: Some Notes on the Uses of Behavioral Science in Post-War Sweden," in *Social Science in Context: Historical, Sociological and Global Perspectives,* ed. Rickard Danell, Anna Larsson, and Per Wisselgren (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2013).

24 Karin Zetterqvist Nelson and Bengt Sandin, "Psychodynamics in Child Psychiatry in Sweden, 1945–85: From Political Vision to Treatment Ideology," *History of Psychiatry* 24, no. 3 (2013).

25 Eva Hjörne and Roger Säljö, *Att platsa i en skola för alla: Elevhälsa och förhandling om normalitet i den svenska skolan* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2008), 53; Mats Börjesson and Eva Palmblad, *I problembarnens tid: Förnuftets moraliska ordning* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2003).

26 See e.g. Annette Mülberger, "The Need for Contextual Approaches to the History of Mental Testing," *History of Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2014); Inbar Graiver, "A Historical Perspective on Mental Health: Proposal for a Dialogue Between History and Psychology," *History of Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2021); Anne Koskela and Kaisa Vehkalahti, "Child in a Form: The Definition of Normality and Production of Expertise in Teacher Statement Forms – the Case of Northern Finland, 1951–1990," *Paedagogica Historica* 53, no. 4 (2016).

Materials, methods, and theory

The material used for this study comprises two types, both consisting of documents written by experts within the psychological field.[27] The first type includes handbooks, scientific reports, and articles from professional journals focusing on children, schools, psychology, and psychiatry. Identifying relevant texts on school absenteeism is not straightforward, as terminology has shifted over time. Therefore, the search was conducted broadly, with an awareness that any selection risks overemphasising certain aspects while overlooking others. For this article, we searched using terms historically associated with unauthorised school absence: truancy (*skolk)*, school boredom or school fatigue (*skoltrötthet/skolleda*), school anxiety (*skolskräck/skolfobi*) and absenteeism (*frånvaro*). Our focus is on texts where absenteeism was the primary concern why more general terms such as misconduct, asociality, or school problems were excluded as search terms. The term home-sitter, now common in Swedish media, was not used during the period under study.

The second type of material consists of student records from school health services, archived in the school archives at Malmö City Archives (MSA), the Regional Archive in Gothenburg (RAG), and the Stockholm City Archives (SSA). These records were produced within institutional settings by professionals in their official capacities and concern children perceived as problematic for various reasons. Files may include information from multiple institutions. The organisation of records varies slightly between the archives but is generally by year of birth and sometimes by gender. Early records are relatively brief, while later ones are significantly more detailed – up to five times longer. Due to the volume of the material, a random selection was made by selecting one in every ten volumes. Within these, cases were chosen where absenteeism was described as a central or partial issue. Same search terms were used, including truancy, school boredom, school fatigue, school anxiety and absenteeism.

This study does not aim to quantify the prevalence of absenteeism. Rather, it explores the discursive practices through which absenteeism was understood and managed. The focus lies on the descriptions, arguments, and classifications found in the records, and how these evolved over time. By analysing how school staff, authorities, and psychiatric professionals described and categorised absent pupils, the study highlights the norms and disciplinary practices underpinning institutional responses to absenteeism.

The records are subject to strict confidentiality. A coding system has been used to anonymise all individuals. The records contain names or refer to individuals as "the girl" or "the boy," particularly in teachers' notes, while medical professionals more often use the term "patient." No real names of individuals, schools, hospitals, and neighbourhoods are disclosed. Terms used in the original documents are reproduced in direct quotations, including diagnoses, which are often specific to the historical context and difficult to translate. For professionals mentioned in the material, only their roles and titles are cited, not personal names except in the case of authors of published articles from the period.

The time frame for this article is limited to the years 1945–1975. The starting point is motivated by the growing attention to problematic school absenteeism in the 1940s,

27 This research project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, Dnr 2023-00138-01.

coinciding with debates on comprehensive schooling. During this time, psychosocial issues became part of the school health service's remit, child psychiatry gained institutionalised footing, and scientific interest in absenteeism emerged. The endpoint after the expansion of compulsory schooling to nine years is marked by the publication of the SIA inquiry, which led to major reforms in school health services, including new state funding, support resources, and the introduction of the action programme, a concept that would later become central. Our study concludes before these changes were implemented.[28] The chosen timeframe captures the establishment of psychosocial professions such as school social workers, psychologists, and, in some cases, psychiatrists within schools. This complemented the existing medical services provided by school doctors and nurses, introducing a distinct psychosocial dimension.

During this period of expansion, discourse on school absenteeism reflected a broader psychological worldview, what historian Petter Pietikäinen terms a "psychoculture." Emerging in Sweden in the 1920s–1930s, psychoculture replaced earlier "neurocultural" models focusing on nerves and nervousness with psychological and psychodynamic models for understanding behaviour and well-being. Psychological language became normalised, shaping how both professionals and laypeople interpreted human experience, including that of children.[29] As a theoretical starting point for this study, psychoculture refers to a mode of thinking shaped by the language and ideas of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. This aligns with Nikolas Rose's discussion of a "psy-complex," where the influence of "the psy disciplines" is fundamental.[30] This framework points to how psychological discourse permeates institutions like schools. Psychoculture also carries normative assumptions, influenced by broader social factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity. However, psychoculture was neither uniform nor static. This article critically examines how different professional groups interpreted and responded to school absenteeism, revealing both continuity and change over time. Shifts in discourse and practice are evident within the psychoculture and will be explored.

This theoretical approach reflects the study's fundamental social constructionist perspective. School problems are socially constructed emerging within specific organisational, ideological and historical contexts. What is seen as problematic or trivial is shaped by prevailing norms and values, and by the actors involved. Interpretations of causes and interventions, whether medical, psychological, or educational, must be understood within their historical frameworks. Recognising this does not diminish the real impact of problems but rather situates them in context.[31]

In line with this, "unwanted school absenteeism" must be historicised. It depends on which children were expected to attend school. The 1842 elementary school act introduced compulsory schooling in the sense that parishes had to provide schools, but not all children were required to attend. Over time, attendance obligations were

28 SOU 1974:53, *Skolans arbetsmiljö: Betänkande av Utredningen om skolans inre arbete* [SIA] (Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet, 1974).

29 Pietikäinen (2007).

30 Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England 1869–1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

31 See e.g. Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 1995).

strengthened, e.g. in 1882 (ages 7–14) and 1936 (seven-year compulsory schooling).[32] These developments increased expectations for school attendance, making absenteeism a growing concern.

Simultaneously, more children were included in schooling. As education expanded, children of more ages and backgrounds entered the system. However, some groups, such as children who were assumed "uneducable" due to severe disabilities, were long excluded.[33] Others could be exempted due to geographic isolation or economic necessity.[34] This study does not focus on such structural absenteeism. We are instead interested in what can be defined as students' absenteeism from school in cases where the school expected them to be there. Although, as the initial examples show, such absenteeism existed earlier, it was during 1945–1975 that it became widely recognised as a serious issue in both educational and scientific discourse.

The article is broadly structured chronologically, dividing the period into three phases based on dominant interpretations of absenteeism. However, these phases are not rigid and multiple perspectives coexisted throughout. The division serves to highlight three themes that represent time-bound tendencies.

Truancy: school absenteeism as an obedience or maturity problem (1940s and 1950s)

During the 1940s and 1950s, the term truancy was commonly used to describe school absenteeism, regardless of its underlying cause. It was often framed as a moral issue: a pupil absent without valid reason was seen as failing in their duty and thus behaving improperly. While various explanations were offered, a frequent one was the pupil's lack of school maturity. Within the prevailing psychocultural framework, truants were often viewed as morally or developmentally immature, and interventions were shaped accordingly.

In school health service records, truancy typically appeared as one aspect of a broader pattern of problematic behaviour. Investigations usually began with a class teacher reporting a pupil to the headteacher, accompanied by notes on the pupil's educational history and behaviour towards teachers and peers. The headteacher would then decide whether to initiate further assessments. A pedagogical assessment was made in which the ability to benefit from instruction was evaluated. A medical assessment was conducted by the school nurse and/or school doctor, in which the student's physical condition and any defects were noted. Thereafter, a psychological examination could be conducted with various tests, with intelligence tests being particularly central at the beginning of the period. In severe or doubtful cases, the student was referred to hospital clinics for child psychiatry.

32 SOU 1946:11, *1940 års skolutrednings betänkanden och utredningar 4. Skolpliktstidens skolformer, 2. Folkskolan, A. Allmän del* (Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet, 1946).

33 Thomas Barow, "Begreppet 'obildbar' som en social konstruktion: Teoretisk diskussion och praktisk tillämpning inom den svenska sinnesslövården under 1900-talets första hälft," in *Omsorg i förändring: En vänbok till Karl Grünewald,* ed. Olov Andersson, Thomas Barow, and Magnus Tideman (Stockholm: Intra, 2011); Karl-Georg Ahlström, Ingemar Emanuelsson, and Erik Wallin, *Skolans krav – elevernas behov* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1986).

34 Åke Isling, *Kampen för och emot en demokratisk skola. 1. Samhällsstruktur och skolorganisation* (Stockholm: Sober, 1980).

There were pupils in the early school years, particularly the first year, who did not want to go to school due to reasons such as general anxiety and stomach aches. From 1946, these children could undergo a school maturity assessment and, if deemed unready, be placed in a school maturity class or have their school start deferred by a year. Pupils who struggled to keep up academically or were considered immature could be held back to repeat a year. Others, initially placed in mainstream classes, might later be transferred to special classes, such as remedial, outdoor or observation class, depending on their assessed needs.[35]

A clear example of how truancy was interpreted as school immaturity can be found in a 1946 case, in which a boy, initially placed in observation class, was referred to the Göteborg advisory bureau for upbringing issues. The examining doctor described him as a small, immature child who should have waited to start school. "Everything is play to him," the doctor noted; the boy lacked the maturity to remain seated without becoming disruptive. He had stolen, lied, and skipped school. The boy's mother, who had two younger children, reportedly appreciated that he was at school during the day and playing outside in the afternoon. However, the boy took this freedom too far. On one of his first days in the observation class, he persuaded another pupil to skip school with him. They spent the day wandering the city and returned home late. The journey to school was also problematic, as the trams proved too tempting as play spaces. Despite these challenges, the doctor described the boy as bright, sweet and pleasant when allowed to work at his own pace in a calm environment where expectations were not too high. Although somewhat combative, he got along well with peers. He enjoyed schoolwork but tired easily. Over time, the situation improved: no further thefts were reported, and the boy was considered capable of managing independently. Nevertheless, the doctor recommended continued placement in the observation class.[36]

Another case from Gothenburg in 1946 concerned a boy who, following the advisory bureau's recommendation, was transferred to an observation class in the second grade. Outwardly, he was described as cheerful and pleasant, with a desire to appear confident and nonchalant. However, the examining doctor found him beneath the surface to be "quite cowardly and uncooperative, never getting along with the other boys." The boy had stolen from home, including a large banknote from his mother's purse, which he spent with a classmate on a cinema visit, sweets, and a toy pistol he proudly displayed at school. Although he admitted the theft, he showed no remorse. On another occasion, he returned home with a large bicycle he claimed to have borrowed and rode around the city until late in the evening, without his mother knowing his whereabouts. He had also skipped school for four consecutive days, spending the time playing in the city. The boy's mother, a single parent and sole provider, struggled to supervise him due to work obligations. As a result, the child welfare board arranged for his placement in an orphanage. While awaiting placement, he remained in the observation class and spent the summer with relatives in the countryside, a period described as beneficial for him.[37]

Truancy was frequently associated with what was considered generally poor behaviour, such as theft, vandalism, and fighting. In some cases, it was seen as temporary

35 Stukát and Bladini (1986).

36 Elevakter 1940-tal: Hjälpskolan Anmälningsblanketter med följesedlar (RAG).

37 Elevakter 1940-tal: Hjälpskolan Anmälningsblanketter med följesedlar (RAG).

and affective in nature. There are also examples where truancy and misconduct were linked to hereditary factors, particularly by medical professionals. In 1958, a boy in Gothenburg was reported by his class teacher to the advisory bureau for upbringing issues. The reason cited was "neglect at home, plus repeated truancy." The examination included not only an assessment of the boy but also a detailed description of his family by the assistant child psychiatrist and assistant school psychologist: "Arrives in a group, a typical vagabond entourage. Patient is dressed in outdated clothes. All are dirty." According to the investigators, the home was "poor but apparently has good cohesion." They noted that some siblings attended a remedial class, but there were no known physical injuries, and the boy's development was described as unremarkable. Although he reportedly liked his teachers and classmates, the experts still recommended a transfer to an outdoor school.[38]

Although heredity was rarely given explicit prominence, this case illustrates that professionals did consider it a contributing factor. Medical investigations often included detailed information: the circumstances of the child's birth, the presence of hereditary diseases, substance abuse within the family, and whether siblings attended remedial or other special classes. Importantly, explanations were not mutually exclusive – a home could be deemed deficient from both hereditary and environmental perspectives.

In the 1940s, the first attempts to systematically understand unwanted student absenteeism emerged. One of the earliest scientifically oriented studies was reported by school home director Harald Vrethammar in 1946. The study concerned 83 boys placed in protective custody, just over half of whom were classified as truants, based on having missed school "at least three times without a valid excuse."[39] Vrethammar argued that truancy should not be seen as a symptom of delinquency, but rather as "an indication that something has been neglected in the pedagogical or psychological treatment of the individual."[40] Truants were often described as "deficiently gifted" or "mentally defective," and Vrethammar advocated placement in remedial class as a first step. He also emphasised that mild, well-considered interventions methods were more effective than harsh disciplinary measures in fostering "socially valuable and happy people."[41]

Relocation was a common intervention, taking various forms in the student record, such as changing class, school, or transferring to a special class. These options were typically available only in urban areas, meaning some pupils had to be moved considerable distances. A change of environment was often seen as beneficial, offering a chance to break away from negative influences, such as unsuitable peers.

In some cases, the home environment was deemed harmful. A move to the countryside, preferably to relatives, was sometimes proposed. If parental capacity was considered insufficient, the child could be taken into care by the child welfare board, either temporarily or permanently. Placement options included boarding homes, school

38 Elevakter 1950-tal: Hjälpskolan Anmälningsblanketter med följesedlar (RAG). It is not entirely clear what this entailed in practice. Open-air schools (friluftsskola) were generally intended for children who had tuberculosis, while health classes (hälsoklasser) were meant for the so-called weak children, but there appears to have been a certain ambiguity.

39 Harald Vrethammar, "Om skolkning och skolkare," *Skola och samhälle* 27 (1946), 60.

40 Vrethammar (1946), 61.

41 Vrethammar (1946), 62.

homes, protective homes, reformatories, or foster care.[42] The first two were generally for children living far from school, while protective homes were for so-called delinquent children, and reformatories for those who had committed offences. Foster care was used when home conditions were clearly inadequate. However, terminology and practices varied between the municipalities.

These relocations were pedagogical or socially motivated responses to behavioural issues, common in practice and often recommended in expert reports by educators such as remedial teachers and school home directors.[43] Also medical professionals sometimes proposed environmental change. Psychiatrist Svante Nycander, for example, argued that some cases required a "total or partial change of environment," though he stressed that the most important factor was "insightful cooperation between the home, the school, and the doctor."[44] His entry on "Truancy and Running Away from Home" in *Psykologisk-pedagogisk uppslagsbok* (Psychological-Pedagogical Encyclopedia) in 1945 reflects a more medically oriented interpretation, viewing truancy as a symptom of "psychological maladjustment, sometimes serious mental health conditions."[45] Nycander acknowledged that truancy and running away could be understandable responses to adverse circumstances, citing causes such as mental, poor home conditions, or even flaws in the school environment. Severe cases, he argued, should "invariably" be handled by psychological and psychiatric expertise. This illustrates how a dominant psychoculture could manifest differently depending on professional perspective.

The Swedish National Board of Education's 1947 guide *Skolhygien* (School Hygiene) addressed various behavioural and developmental issues**,** including truancy, "wandering impulses," and the turbulence of puberty. In his article, Elov Tengblad highlighted unauthorised absenteeism:

> Unauthorised absenteeism is one of the standard offenses in our schools. The reasons are varied, and the severity of the cases particularly diverse. One wakes up too late for morning prayer or the first lesson and prefers to stay home. One fears not knowing the homework, or is simply tired and fed up, granting oneself a day's rest without being truly ill.[46]

The same year, a study was published involving 44 elementary school pupils aged 7–14 (mostly younger children) who had been reported for severe truancy to Stockholm's advisory bureau. Gerd Wittrock, an assistant at the bureau, conducted the study in 1944 and identified causes ranging from poor home environments to problematic personality (e.g. weak-willed, vagabond nature, shyness, immaturity). Some children were described as cheerful and carefree but poorly behaved; however, the most common explanation was a nervous, anxiety-prone disposition. "Fear of strict teachers, teas-

42 See e.g. Qvarsell (1985).

43 Beside Vrethammar (1946), a similar perspective is found in for example Lars Landin, "Skolkningsproblemet i folkskolan," *Folkskolan – Svensk lärartidning,* no. 1–2 (1953) and Lars Landin, "Skolk," *Psykologisk-pedagogisk uppslagsbok* 3 (1956).

44 Gunnar Nycander, "Skolkning och rymning från hemmet," *Psykologisk-pedagogisk uppslagsbok* 3 (1945), 1650.

45 Nycander (1945), 1648–50.

46 Elov Tengblad, "Grövre beteenderubbningar och deras behandling i skolan: Pedagogiska synpunkter," in *Skolhygien* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1947), 392–93.

ing peers, and dislike of schoolwork are common," Wittrock wrote. In some cases, she noted "severe anxiety hysteria" and outright "school horror."[47]

Although the psycho-cultural landscape of the 1940s and 1950s was not uniform, it was dominated by views that linked absenteeism to deficiencies in personality, intelligence, or home environment. Student records show that many pupils returned for repeated assessments, some annually, others after several years. The prevailing view was that absenteeism was a symptom of deeper issues, a perspective reflected in most case notes. Yet the reasons for absenteeism were rarely clear-cut, and in the often vague descriptions from school health services, symptoms and causes were not clearly distinguished. One boy's record from the late 1950s reads:

> Truancy is likely a matter of a condition involving generally deficient maturity, emotional instability, restlessness, poor concentration, and low endurance. Tendency towards headaches, so-called navel colic, and vomiting. Poor bowel control, unstable peer relationships, and pronounced suggestibility.[48]

Truancy was thus used as a general label, regardless the underlying cause. While anxiety and fear were acknowledged, as in the work of Wittrock and Nycander, proposed remedies often focused on environmental change. Nycander's approach also reveals a moral undertone, equating truancy with running away from home, implying that the core issue lay in disobedience itself. Over time, however, greater attention was paid to the diversity of causes. The relationship between school and home, or more precisely between expert and family, was typically paternalistic in the early period, influenced by class and gender biases, with professionals often adopting a patronising tone.[49]

School phobia: school absenteeism as an anxiety problem (1960s)

During the 1960s, growing attention was paid to school absenteeism linked to anxiety-driven refusal to attend school, a condition increasingly referred to as "school phobia." Although both practitioners and expert texts in the 1940s had acknowledged anxiety and "school horror," the topic became significantly more prominent in the 1960s. With the emergence of the term school phobia, truancy was conceptually divided within the prevailing psychoculture into two distinct phenomena. Previously regarded as variations of the same issue, truancy and school phobia came to be seen as fundamentally separate, sharing only the outcome of school non-attendance.

In 1960, a boy was examined for school refusal at the school counselling bureau in Malmö. As the case proved difficult to resolve, it was referred to the child psychiatric clinic. Following assessment, the chief physician informed the headteacher that the boy's refusal to attend school was "nervously conditioned." Several treatment options were considered, including applications to two "school homes for nervous children," though no places were available. The physician noted that the boy's intelligence was adequate, ruling out cognitive impairment as a cause. To support the boy's recovery, individualised instruction was recommended. The physician proposed home instruc-

47 Gerd Wittrock, "Skolkningsproblemet," *Folkskollärarnas tidning*, no. 83 (1947), 6.

48 Elevakter 1950-tal: Meddelande från skolpsykologibyrån (RAG).

49 Cf. Börjesson and Palmblad (2003), 106–7.

tion, ideally provided by a "teacher already known and accepted" by the boy. The boy's father, himself a teacher, suggested a suitable candidate for this arrangement.[50]

Another case from 1960 involved a boy in Göteborg who was reported by his teacher due to serious difficulties interacting with peers. The problems were considered so severe that he was referred for assessment at a child psychiatric clinic. According to the school psychiatrist, the boy was diagnosed with a "severe neurotic syndrome." Despite showing a very positive attitude towards his teacher, he experienced intense anxiety related to school and his classmates. He was described as "almost constantly troubled by headaches, poor appetite, and night terrors." The school psychiatrist and assistant school psychologist concluded that, despite the school's commendable efforts, it had failed to provide a sufficiently safe environment for this "psychologically handicapped child." As a result, the mother was advised to move with the boy to the countryside, where he could continue his education in a calmer setting. If this was not possible, home instruction was recommended as an alternative. The professionals emphasised that this was a case of "neurotic school refusal" that should not be classified as truancy.[51]

In a referral to the advisory bureau in Malmö in the early 1960s, a girl was treated who had developed what was described as "some kind of inferiority complex" during her schooling. According to the bureau's physician, she struggled academically and had become resigned to her schoolwork. Her indifferent and disengaged attitude was interpreted as "an expression of nervous blockage phenomena." The girl was assessed as well-gifted, and it was deemed that targeted pedagogical interventions were needed to restore her self-confidence and motivation. Supported by the headteacher, the physician recommended placement in a pedagogical observation class. This intervention was initially considered successful: the girl reportedly became more confident and socially engaged, and the placement was concluded. She returned to a regular class the following school year. However, she soon began to skip school again, prompting a new investigation. The physician described this as a paradoxical and difficult-to-understand development. As a possible explanation, he pointed to the emotional impact of her father's death a few years earlier, suggesting that unresolved grief continued to affect her. Psychological testing indicated that the girl had "a sense of her own inadequacy" but expressed a desire to improve academically. She admired her older brother, who was studying at a folk high school, and aspired to emulate him. The physician at the advisory bureau therefore concluded that:

> …behind the girl's truancy there was not some ordinary, trivial school fatigue, but rather the truancy could be better described as a form of "school phobia," behind which lies, from certain perspectives, a weak constitution, now probably further reinforced by a sense of inadequacy in terms of performance due to the frequent school absences.[52]

With this diagnosis, a return to the pedagogical observation class would hardly solve the problems. Instead, the doctor recommended another relocation: that the girl should

50 Elevakter 1960-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

51 Elevakter 1960-tal: Handlingar, skolhälsovården och andra skolsociala frågor (RAG).

52 Elevakter 1960-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

be placed in a parallel class with a health focus, so he could also continue to maintain contact with the girl.[53]

As these examples show, anxiety-related school absenteeism became more distinctly separated from truancy. This division also appeared in expert texts.[54] In his book *Skolpsykiatri* (School Psychiatry), published in 1962, Elis G. Regnér, chief physician at the child and adolescent psychiatric clinics in Gothenburg, presented a typology of school absenteeism based on earlier studies and his own clinical experience. Regnér identified three distinct forms of absenteeism. The first, truancy among younger children, was seen as a sign of emerging maladjustment, typically attributed to poor parenting and a lack of attention in homes marked by "social deficiencies." The second type, puberty-related school aversion, referred to older pupils whose truancy was understood as a different phenomenon, linked to adolescent development. The third and clearly differentiated type was neurotic school refusal, in which the child wanted to attend school but was unable to due to anxiety. These children often experienced physical symptoms, such as stomach aches, headaches, or morning distress, that prevented them from leaving home. The anxiety was typically related not to school itself, but to separation from home, according to Regnér, although causes varied. In some cases, overprotective or anxious mothers were seen as contributing factors, keeping children at home through excessive care. In others, the child's own constitution or increasing academic pressure were cited. Unlike typical truants, whom Regnér described as giving a "primitive lazy impression," neurotic school refusers were often conscientious. They might complete homework and prepare their school bag the night before, only to be unable to leave home the next morning, a behaviour that could be exacerbated by overprotective parents.[55]

Neurotic school refusal, or school phobia as it came to be known, required different interventions than truancy, typically more medical than pedagogical or disciplinary, although environmental change was sometimes considered. According to Regnér, many cases needed to be referred from the advisory bureau to a hospital's paediatric ward or, preferably, to a child psychiatric unit. Some children were admitted for observation and treatment. Regnér argued that such hospitalisation allowed children to realise that living apart from home and their mother was not as frightening as they had imagined.[56]

The student records reveal that long waiting times for child psychiatry were a recurring problem. Students who were placed on the waiting list for a school psychiatric clinic could sometimes wait up to six months before getting an appointment. It is also noted that medication was sometimes used. Sedative drugs like Atarax could be used in cases of aggressive behavior or in connection with severe anxiety.

In summary, the growing focus on anxiety-related absenteeism led to a conceptual division within the psychocultural framework: truancy and school phobia came to be

53 Elevakter 1960-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

54 i.e. Jan Bonnevier, "Skolvägrare och skolskolkare," *Svenska läkartidningen*, no. 58 (1961); Johan Öbrink, *Skolbarns skolkning: En psykologisk-pedagogisk undersökning* (Stockholm: Svensk läraretidnings förlag, 1964). See also Johan Öbrink, "Skolk," in *Skolan och disciplinen*. 2nd ed., ed. Torsten Husén and Ingvar Carlson (Stockholm: Skolvärlden, 1968).

55 Elis G. Regnér, *Skolpsykiatri* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1962), 131–38.

56 Regnér (1962), 137.

understood as two distinct phenomena, each with its own explanations and recommended interventions.

School fatigue: school absenteeism as a dissatisfaction issue (1970s)

From the late 1960s, following the expansion of the comprehensive school system to include grades 8 and 9, and the division of compulsory schooling into lower (year 1–3), middle (4–6), and upper (7–9) stages, student absenteeism increasingly came to be discussed in terms of school aversion or dissatisfaction. While notions of truancy as misconduct or anxiety-related absenteeism remained present in school health practice and academic discourse, absenteeism was now more frequently framed as a response to dissatisfaction. This shift placed less emphasis on constitutional factors and opened the psychocultural framework to interpretations that located the cause of absenteeism within the school environment rather than the individual pupil. One measure that became more common during this period was exemption from schooling in favour of work placements or extended practical training.

In a letter to the Malmö School Board, a doctor reported on a girl in the upper grades who had been treated at a psychiatric clinic for several months in the early 1970s. According to the social worker's report, the girl had expressed dissatisfaction with her schoolwork throughout the upper grades, even as early as grade 6. Due to frequent absenteeism, the school nurse had maintained repeated contact with her over the years. Despite various efforts, it proved difficult to engage her in meaningful education. The doctor noted that the girl "experienced feelings of inferiority and felt too mature compared to her classmates." However, she had completed an internship at a nursing home, which she had enjoyed. Both the doctor and the social worker recommended that she be exempted from further formal education and instead be offered an apprenticeship, something the girl herself also wished for. The doctor warned that if she were forced to continue her education, there was a risk she could become mentally "insufficient."[57]

At the Malmö advisory bureau, a boy was treated who had begun to feel dissatisfied in seventh grade, and by eighth grade, his dissatisfaction had grown to the point where he eventually stopped attending school altogether. According to the doctor's report, during his period of truancy, the boy had fallen into bad company and become involved with a "gang engaged in thinner and wine abuse." The boy stated that he no longer wished to attend school and instead wanted to start working. Given this background, he was granted sick leave and was recommended to be exempted from classroom instruction, with the possibility of engaging in practical work.[58]

The following example illustrates a reversed situation, in which satisfaction was given significant explanatory value. A girl in Gothenburg was referred to a school psychologist in the early 1970s for an assessment due to adjustment difficulties and extensive truancy. According to the psychologist, her absenteeism was peculiar, as the girl claimed to enjoy school. She was referred for a risk assessment and, if necessary, a school psychiatric evaluation. The girl performed well on most of the psychologist's tests, and the results indicated that she had average intelligence, although she exhib-

57 Elevakter 1970-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

58 Elevakter 1970-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

ited some difficulties with reading and writing. As a result, she was recommended for individualised special education in reading.[59] Truancy despite satisfaction was thus seen as surprising and something that warranted a school psychiatric investigation.

As demonstrated in examples above, a common intervention was to allow the student to begin working and be exempted from formal schooling. This approach was typical for students in the upper grades and was relatively widespread. As before, re-placement was used as a measure. However, although special classes such as observation classes and reading classes could still be established, the new curriculum introduced in the early 1970s stated that students with learning difficulties should "as far as possible" attend regular classes or receive special education for only a limited number of hours.[60] Consequently, re-placement into alternative types of classes became increasingly rare. As in earlier cases, it appears that re-placement was often implemented somewhat "on a trial basis" without a clearly defined pedagogical or medical rationale.

A girl who had been placed in a school readiness class in Malmö toward the end of the 1960s was referred for a psychological evaluation to determine an appropriate educational placement. According to the school psychologist, the case was difficult to assess due to the girl's tense and insecure behaviour during the evaluation. As a result, a second psychological assessment was conducted the following year. Based on this evaluation, the psychologist recommended placement in a pedagogical observation class. However, since no such class was available, she was instead placed in a reading class. A few years later, the girl underwent another psychological evaluation, prompted primarily by her extensive absenteeism. During a conversation with her mother, it emerged that the girl had been bullied due to her poor academic performance and frequent truancy. The psychologist noted: "The girl complains at home about fatigue, headaches, and vague stomach problems. She has been examined by the school doctor, who found no somatic basis for these symptoms." The girl's schooling history was fragmented, including time in a readiness class, a reading class, and a regular class and frequent contact with the school nurse. Previous evaluations had indicated that her cognitive abilities placed her at the borderline between a regular class and a remedial class. She exhibited "adjustment difficulties in the form of school absenteeism, social isolation, and nervous symptoms of a psychosomatic nature." Consequently, the school psychologist recommended that she be placed in a remedial class starting in grade 7.[61]

Sick leave could also be used as an intervention, particularly in cases involving anxiety-related school phobia. In a 1969 letter to a principal in Gothenburg, the examining child psychiatrist recommended that a boy who had repeatedly undergone child psychiatric evaluations be placed on sick leave. The clinic had arranged for the boy to receive instruction at a school clinic, but due to a delay in securing an available spot, the psychiatrist suggested that home instruction be arranged during the interim period. Under these circumstances, the psychiatrist concluded that it was justified to place the boy on sick leave.[62]

59 Elevakter 1970-tal: Rektorsområde: Personakter (RAG).

60 *Läroplan för grundskolan. Allmän del* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969), 76–77.

61 Elevakter 1960-tal: Rektorsområdet för specialundervisning (MSA).

62 Elevakter 1960-tal: Handlingar, skolhälsovården och andra skolsociala frågor (RAG).

Over time, it also became increasingly common to use conversation therapy as an intervention. In this context, the role of the social worker grew in importance within the psychoculture. Previously, the social worker had primarily functioned as a coordinator between the school, the home, and various authorities, particularly the child welfare board. However, from the late 1960s onward, the social worker increasingly took on the role of a conversational partner, primarily for the student but also for their guardians.[63] The social worker could also initiate referrals for evaluations by a school psychologist or physician.

During the 1970s, there were increasing instances in which substance abuse was cited as a reason for a student's absenteeism. In earlier records from the study period, references to substance abuse typically concerned the parents. However, in records from the 1970s, the focus shifted more frequently to the student's own substance use, such as sniffing solvents or consuming alcohol. At the time, youth alcohol consumption was a widely debated issue in the media, particularly in connection with experimental policies allowing the sale of beer in grocery stores.[64] Both substance abuse, and the introduction of work placements and conversations with social workers can be linked to the expansion of the upper stage (years 7–9), which brought older students into the school system than before.

This is illustrated by the following example from Stockholm. At the end of the 1960s, a girl in grade 9 was reported for irregular school attendance after having missed 249 lessons. According to her own account and a certificate from a parent, the absences were due to sleep problems. The class teacher noted that she, when attending, demonstrated an active intellect, showed interest, and had a good capacity to benefit from instruction. In the social investigation, the social worker argued that the exceptionally high level of absenteeism had to be classified as truancy. During the initial contact with the student and her mother, earlier difficulties were also discussed. The social worker's contact with the girl's previous school had revealed that she had "experienced psychological issues before." This was downplayed by the mother, who interpreted it as normal puberty-related problems. The mother emphasised that the girl was receiving conversational therapy from a doctor and was now calmer than she had been following her parents' divorce five years earlier divorce the mother attributed primarily to the father's alcohol abuse. However, the girl reportedly missed her father deeply, as he had been the softer and more affectionate parent.[65]

Then followed what could be described as psychoanalytic explanations for the girl's difficulties.[66] The social worker wrote that the girl was, in some way, unhappily in love with her mother, while at the same time blaming her for the unhappy marriage between the parents. She often brooded over her parents' relationship and the reasons behind their constant arguments. Although she was motivated to attend school, both

63 Anna Larsson, "Mobbningsfrågan i förändring: Efterkrigstidens synsätt på skolbarns kamratliv," *Historisk tidskrift* 130, no. 2 (2010), 241–64.

64 SOU 1971:66, *Mellanölsfrågan* (Stockholm: Finansdepartementet, 1971); Lena Eriksson and Helena Bergman, "Acceptable Use: Morality and Credibility Struggles in Swedish 1960s Alcohol and Illicit Drug (Ab)use Research and Policy," *Minerva* 60 (2022), 419–40.

65 Elevakter 1970-tal: Stockholms folkskolors specialklasser, Elevakter (SSA).

66 Zetterqvist Nelson (2012), 60, has shown that psycho dynamic theory dominated the child treatment ideology of the time.

her own and her mother's high expectations became overwhelming. After a few sleepless nights, she would often stay home, and falling behind only worsened her anxiety. On the first day back in January, after a sleepless night, she broke down in the school nurse's office, tearfully explaining that she had spent the night worrying about the term ahead despite a restful holiday. Her mother was reportedly surprised, as there had been no signs of distress that morning. The mother and the social worker discussed ways to support the girl. A boarding school was considered, offering a neutral setting free from emotional outbursts, but this was ruled out due to cost and lack of space. Instead, they hoped continued support from child psychiatric services would help her complete the term and finish school.[67]

In the 1970s, the distinction between truancy and neurotic school refusal became increasingly pronounced in scientific literature, as research began to focus more specifically on one or the other. Sonja Ilander Åhlén's licentiate thesis from 1972 did not address truancy at all but instead concentrated on emotionally based school refusal. Ilander Åhlén adopted the term school phobia, noting that it had become the most commonly used designation for children's refusal to attend school at the time.[68] Her work provides a thorough critical examination of the concept and a comprehensive overview of international research. Ilander Åhlén's own study was based on patient records from the Child and adolescent psychiatry clinic in Örebro, covering the years 1956 to 1970. She identified 106 patients who met the criteria for school phobia, described as school refusal or periodic school refusal.[69] The records showed a fairly even gender distribution among the treated children. The children were between 9 and 14 years old, with a predominance of older children. The number and proportion of cases had increased over time. The children were described in the records as shy and anxious but also willful and sometimes dominant. They were often described as performance-oriented and (over-)ambitious with a strong attachment to their mothers and difficulties with peer relationships. Separation anxiety did not appear in the descriptions of the children in the records; rather, a passive defiance in refusing to be separated from their parents. The mothers were often described as overprotective and overambitious, while the fathers were seldom mentioned.[70]

In contrast to Ilander Åhlén's focus on school phobia as a fear-based inability to attend school, Lennart H.S. Nilsson's licentiate thesis addressed non-health-related "sporadic absenteeism" or "short-term absenteeism."[71] While previous perspectives often located the problem within the student, Nilsson shifted the focus to school conditions and the organisation of the school itself, which he argued needed to be addressed. By comparing student responses from various high school programs and from grades 8 and 9 in elementary school and relating these responses to factors such as school

67 Elevakter 1970-tal: Stockholms folkskolors specialklasser, Elevakter (SSA).

68 Sonja Ilander Åhlen, *Skolfobi: Skolvägran av emotionella orsaker* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1973), 25.

69 Ilander Åhlen (1973), 165.

70 Ilander Åhlen (1973), 175.

71 Lennart H.S. Nilsson, *Elevfrånvarons omfattning och samband med skolförhållanden: Problembelysning mot bakgrund av information från skolpersonal och elever inom gymnasieskolor i område av låg urbaniseringsgrad men utan glesbygdens karakteristika* (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 1974).

organisation, unengaging teaching, and poor teacher-student relationships, Nilsson portrayed truancy as a reaction to the school's "faults."

Thus, while Ilander Åhlén's work dealt with school phobia, Nilsson's research focused on truancy among older students, where school fatigue emerged as a prominent cause. One could argue that, within the framework of the psychoculture, unwanted school absenteeism had by this point fragmented into three distinct phenomena: school phobia, truancy as immaturity among younger children, and truancy as school fatigue among adolescents. This division has largely persisted since then, although in recent years a new type of amalgamation has emerged, with some researchers discussing a psychiatrisation of the truant.[72]

Concluding discussion

We have identified three main interpretations of unwanted school absenteeism within the psychoculture of the studied period: truancy, school phobia, and school fatigue. All three appear throughout the period, though with varying emphasis over time.

Truancy, often seen as a matter of disobedience or immaturity, was especially prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s. It was typically explained by poor upbringing in unstable families (e.g., divorce, substance abuse, poverty) or by perceived character flaws in the child (e.g., immaturity, low ability, psychological issues). The most common interventions were reassignments to a new school, class, or home environment. When teachers' efforts proved insufficient, students with high absenteeism were referred to school counseling agencies and sometimes to hospital-based child psychiatric evaluations.

School phobia, initially called school fear or neurotic school refusal, gained prominence in the 1960s. It was understood as an anxiety disorder, often linked to the child's or mother's nervous disposition. Separation anxiety was a common explanation. This diagnosis helped distinguish between disobedient truancy and psychologically rooted school refusal. While truancy called for disciplinary or educational measures, school phobia often required therapeutic interventions. Environmental changes were still common, but homeschooling and medical treatment were also considered. During this period, schools increasingly relied on psychosocial professionals – psychologists, social workers, and occasionally school psychiatrists – while hospital-based child psychiatry also played a growing role. The earlier central advisory bureaus were gradually phased out in favour of school-based and clinical expertise.[73]

School fatigue was linked to teenagers' dissatisfaction with school and gained increasing attention from the late 1960s. School fatigue was primarily an issue among students in the upper grades of the mandatory school. Although the individual or their family could be seen as part of the problem, school fatigue as an interpretation opened up for criticism of the school as boring or meaningless for some students. The most common intervention for severe school fatigue was exemption from regular schooling in favour of work placements or internships. In these cases, the social worker played

72 Ek (2018).

73 See e.g. Rydelius (2012); Jönson (1997); Karlen (1985).

a central role, but school psychologists and the newly established profession of career counsellors also were involved.[74]

In practice, as reflected in student records, the three interpretations truancy, school phobia, and school fatigue are sometimes clearly distinguishable but often appear mixed or overlapping. The choice of intervention often seems tied to what was locally available. A student assessed as needing one type of special class might be placed in another due to limited options. Measures were sometimes applied in sequence, seemingly without a clear rationale.

The discussions and handling of unwanted school absenteeism show both continuity and change over time, reflecting the evolving psychosocial culture. Earlier in the period, genetic and racial hygiene explanations occasionally appeared but had largely disappeared by the end. Throughout, individual psychological explanations dominated, with the child often seen as the bearer of the problem. Even when environmental factors gained more attention later, the focus remained largely on the individual. The family – especially the mother – was consistently seen as central, though more directly in the early years and more indirectly later. The reverse applied to the school, which gained more attention as a contributing factor over time. Peer groups were also considered influential throughout, often evaluated as either positive or negative. Substance abuse was a recurring theme, initially referring to parents but later increasingly to the students themselves.

A morally evaluative tone was more prominent early on, with families described as "socially deficient" or "valuable," and children as "poorly raised" or "nice." Over time, this gave way to a more therapeutic language. Conversation therapy emerged as a treatment method, involving both the child's and the parents' experiences and wishes.[75] Overall, parental perspectives seem to gain increasing significance over time, with a growing emphasis on including them. Although implicit norms related to class, gender, and ethnicity can be sensed throughout the period, expressions of these norms are both more common and clearer at the beginning.

It is clear that school health services underwent significant development during the examined period. Much like Karin Zetterqvist Nelson's characterisation of child psychiatry in the same period, school health services must be understood as "a professional field in motion."[76] Teachers (and their principals) were, of course, always central professional groups in handling unwanted school absenteeism; they were the ones who noticed the absences and initiated an investigation. Depending on the student's placement, remedial class teachers or other special education professionals could be involved.[77] The school nurse and school doctor were often involved, and in more complex cases, also the child welfare committee or child psychiatry. During this time, the psychosocial branch of school health services expanded, with a growing number of

74 Margareta Vestin, *Femtio år med syo: 1940/41–1990/91: Mål, program, verksamhet för svensk studie- och yrkesvägledning: En syo-historia i urval* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1991).

75 Cf. Zetterqvist Nelson (2012) who has placed this change around 1960. Koskela and Vehkalahti (2017), 473, locates a similar change in Finland in the 1970s.

76 Zetterqvist Nelson (2012), 55.

77 Jfr Stukat and Bladini (1986).

school psychologists and social workers employed.[78] While the formulation of school phobia usually required psychiatric expertise alongside special education, school fatigue called more for psychosocial expertise. As a result, school social workers came to play an increasingly prominent role in addressing unwanted school absenteeism.

To conclude, the changes in psychoculture during the studied period can be understood in relation to specific historical and social changes in education and society. The expansion of the school system, accommodating more and older students, introduced new challenges related to discipline, adjustment and support. The growing variety of special classes and residential schools also influenced which interventions were considered possible or appropriate. These institutional changes, along with the diversification of the professional field, shaped how school absenteeism was interpreted and managed. Current models of interpretation are thus not only shaped by politics and scientific knowledge, but also by available treatment options, institutional structures, societal expectations, and the evolving roles of professionals within the school system.

Acknowledgements/funding
This article was supported by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2022-03209).

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78 Cristine Isaksson and Anna Larsson, "Skolkuratorsyrkets framväxt och utveckling i Sverige," *Socionomens forskningssupplement*, no. 32 (2012).

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RAG: Regionarkivet i Göteborg
MSA: Malmö Stadsarkiv

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