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Embracing change: from recalibration to radical overhaul for the field of school attendance

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In a world characterized by dynamic demographic shifts, rapid technological transformations, and evolving pedagogical practices, the need for reimagining school attendance and a relationship with education has become paramount. This Research Topic, boldly titled “The Unlearning of School Attendance: Ideas for Change,” compels us to challenge conventional thinking and working in this domain. The collection of 12 articles offers compelling opportunities for change, ranging from subtle recalibrations to radical overhauls, depending on the extent to which our current ideas and methods have grown outdated. This opening article serves as a thematic guide, curating the diverse prospects for transformation found within the collection. Four themes encourage us to reconceptualize school attendance and a relationship with education, while another four themes inspire new ways of working in this realm. Furthermore, we explore the pivotal role of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) in facilitating change, as it strives to foster relationships with education, forge alliances among interested parties, and promote interdisciplinary research. As you engage with this article and the other 12 contributions in this collection, we invite you to reflect on your current ideas and methods, embracing the call for transformative change with compassion and a strong sense of purpose. Together, we can shape a future where school attendance and engagement with learning thrive in harmony with our evolving world.

KEYWORDS

relationship with education, engagement with learning, school attendance, school absenteeism, education, intervention, alliances

1 Introduction

The title for this Research Topic is provocative. “The unlearning of school attendance: Ideas for change” emphasizes that change is needed in the field of school attendance to better support learners’ readiness for adulthood. (We employ the term “learners,” rather than “youths” or “young people,” to underscore individuals’ ongoing connection with education regardless of age.) The world is changing, schooling is different, and our approach to school attendance and each learner’s relationship with education must be different too. The expression “unlearning school attendance” conveys the central notion that current ideas and methods need to be recalibrated or even overhauled, because they have not resulted in the progress

needed in the field to adequately support readiness for adulthood among all learners. Whether our ideas and methods require a small recalibration, or a radical overhaul depends on how antiquated our current ways of thinking and working are. Current ideas and methods represent our best intentions for learners, but they may be out of touch with our changing world. They may be based on outdated assumptions or practices; insufficiently driven by data; not fully aligned with the current needs of learners, families, and communities because they are insufficiently flexible; overly focused on cure relative to prevention; or not supported by available research. “The unlearning of school attendance” is not intended to suggest that everything we currently think and do needs to be recalibrated or overhauled. To be sure, we do not encourage interested parties to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Rather, we encourage all parties involved in school attendance to consider the need to shift their mindset or way of working, so that, collectively, we engage in the most fruitful work possible. (Regarding the term “interested parties”, we have chosen to use this term instead of “stakeholders” because the latter is contested due to its colonial connotations.)

At the heart of our collective endeavor to reshape school attendance and enhance learners’ relationship with education stands the integral role of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA). INSA recognizes the profound impact of a relationship with education on overall development and preparedness for adulthood, advocating for school attendance while addressing the challenges of absenteeism. INSA’s journey began in 2018 during a pivotal gathering, a Lorentz Centre Workshop, when researchers and practitioners in the field of school attendance came together to nurture collaboration and consensus. Since that inception, INSA’s Executive Committee has been diligently collaborating with its members to curate, create, evaluate, and disseminate information, tools, and strategies for understanding absenteeism, promoting consistent attendance, and intervening effectively in school attendance problems (SAPs).

INSA forged a partnership with the open access journals *Frontiers in Education* and *Frontiers in Psychology* to host this Research Topic. Under the leadership of INSA’s Vice President, Carolyn Gentle-Genitty, and with the support of esteemed research scholars Arya Ansari, Ineke Marshall, and Michael Gottfried, our call for articles received an enthusiastic response from the scholarly community. In this context, INSA’s Executive Committee takes great pride in presenting this introductory article, underscoring the profound significance of the Research Topic and reaffirming our collective commitment to empower all learners to embrace the world of learning.

The 12 other articles in this collection shine a light on a multitude of ways to unlearn attendance and effect change. For some readers, the articles will stimulate them to replace punitive responses to absence with a focus on learners’ relationship with education (e.g., [Kearney and González, 2022](#)), to think more broadly about influences on attendance (e.g., [Purtell and Ansari, 2022](#)), to re-think the key elements in a multi-tiered system of supports for geographical areas with high rates of chronic absenteeism (e.g., [Kearney and Graczyk, 2022](#)), or to unlearn the notion that home education is counterproductive (e.g., [Paulauskaite et al., 2022](#)). The richness in the current collection of articles is enhanced via the diversity in article types (original research, review, systematic review, perspective, hypothesis and theory), the locations in which the authors work (Australia, Belgium, Chile, England, Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States), and the different

perspectives they bring to our work in the field (anthropology, business studies, computer science, computer engineering, criminal justice, education, epidemiology, law, psychiatry, psychology, public health, research data science, social work, and sociology).

The solutions that seem pertinent in some geographical areas (countries or localities) may be less needed or less transferable to other areas due to differences in education systems ([Heyne et al., 2022](#)) and socio-cultural influences on attendance and absenteeism ([Kearney et al., 2023](#)). However, there are key themes that emerge from the collection, and we believe these themes are of global relevance. In this overview article, we summarize the key themes emerging from the 12 articles in the collection (Section 2). We then describe ways in which INSA is working to help the field of school attendance move forward (Section 3).

2 Themes from the work presented in this Research Topic

In this section, we present eight themes that encapsulate the concept of “unlearning attendance.” These themes derive from a thorough curation of articles in the Research Topic, incorporating insights from the collection along with our own contributions. We have organized the themes into two principal areas: four themes focusing on thinking about school and attendance, and four focusing on ways of working to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism. This dual categorization establishes a framework for navigating the diverse array of topics, findings, and insights presented across the 12 articles. Importantly, an inherent interplay between thinking and working exists: our *thinking* shapes our *working*, and reciprocally, our *working* on attendance and absenteeism further shapes our *thinking*. This relationship reflects the broader distinction and interplay between theory and practice.

2.1 Thinking broadly about the meaning of attendance

When we think about attendance, it is natural for our minds to conjure images of children or adolescents at school and to have ideas about them attending school until graduation. These images and ideas, while neither inherently correct nor incorrect, represent a narrow rather than broad understanding of how we can think about attendance.

2.1.1 Attendance is about more than seat time

Familiarity with the literature on attendance and absence reveals a predominant focus, until now, on learners being at school. In effect, the focus has been on “seat time”; whether or not learners are in class. [Kearney et al. \(2022\)](#) refer to in-seat class time as a traditional metric which is “becoming obsolete for many students” (p. 8) because of changes in the contexts and strategies for teaching and learning, including online learning, hybrid learning which combines online with in-person learning at school, and self-learning.

“Unlearning attendance” is an invitation to think more broadly about the concept of attendance. Drawing on newer definitions of school attendance, [Kearney et al. \(2022\)](#) shift the emphasis away from the physical location for learning toward engagement with learning.

Engagement includes learners' "cognitive, behavioral, and emotional investment in academic work and progression" (p. 8), and new metrics might include log-ins to online learning, time on task, and interactions with teachers. Kearney et al. also draw attention to the role of education in community settings such as internships, again countering the notion that education only occurs during in-seat time at school.

According to [Kearney and Graczyk \(2022\)](#), we need to prioritize "more flexible, valid methods to define attendance for diverse, contemporary learning formats" (p. 4). Learning formats are determined not only by contemporary changes in education, but also by the unique learning needs of specific populations of learners. [Paulauskaite et al.'s \(2022\)](#) work, for example, points to the potential value of elective home education for learners with neurodevelopmental conditions. For these learners, and others, traditional metrics of attendance will fail to capture their engagement with learning. (For more on engagement with learning, see Section 2.2.1.)

2.1.2 Attendance is about more than completing compulsory education at a specific time

Another traditional notion is that school completion is a singular event ([Kearney et al., 2022](#)). While a graduation ceremony is certainly a singular and special event, symbolizing and celebrating the learner's completion of requirements for compulsory education, focusing solely on school completion detracts attention from the need to provide ongoing education opportunities for those not following a traditional time-frame for school completion. As noted by [Kearney et al. \(2022\)](#), many learners are not in a position to complete compulsory education at a legally predefined age (e.g., 18 years), especially those with disabilities. These learners need more time to complete schooling, and graduation policies need to be revised to "blur the line between completing high school and beginning the adult readiness process" (p. 7). Alongside revised policies, there needs to be an expansion of existing options to provide "alternative, creative, and viable pathways to school completion" ([Kearney and Graczyk, 2022](#), p. 4). Suggestions for flexible pathways to school completion include personalized methods of completion based on learners' circumstances and interests ([Kearney and González, 2022](#)), partnerships with community-based learning centers and credit recovery initiatives ([Kearney and Graczyk, 2022](#)), and options to participate in vocational training programs or community college ([Kearney et al., 2022](#)).

In essence, a broader and more flexible conceptualization of attendance involves viewing readiness for adulthood as a process, which necessitates a reconceptualization of school completion ([Kearney et al., 2022](#)). This broader conceptualization also focuses attention on the value of post-secondary education, a topic addressed in another Research Topic in *Frontiers in Psychology* ([Education Not Cancelled: Pathways from absence to post-secondary education](#)). Post-secondary education is also addressed in the current Research Topic via [Korotchenko and Dobbs' \(2023\)](#) article about college enrolments (see Section 2.6).

2.2 Thinking broadly about the function of attendance

The broader conceptualization of attendance described in the previous section compels us to relinquish seat-time and the completion of compulsory education as the sole objectives. Interested

parties are encouraged to focus on the functions of attendance. Two primary and related functions are engagement with learning and readiness for adulthood.

2.2.1 Attendance in the service of engagement with learning

Student engagement emerged as a construct in the 1980s, with roots in the literature on the prevention of school dropout. Recent work places engagement at the center of high school reform efforts and school-based interventions to enhance outcomes across academic, social, behavioral, and emotional domains ([Reschly and Christenson, 2012](#); [Fredricks et al., 2019](#)). Student engagement is a nebulous construct. At present, there is no consensus on a definition, nor on how it can be differentiated from motivation. For instance, [Fredricks et al. \(2004\)](#) view engagement as a meta-construct which subsumes motivation. Others view engagement as the outward manifestation of motivation ([Skinner et al., 2009](#)) and as closely aligned with effort ([Nagy et al., 2022](#)).

Despite the conceptual haziness, there is broad agreement that engagement is a multi-dimensional construct comprising behavioral, cognitive, and affective domains. [Fredricks et al. \(2004\)](#) describe the domains as follows. Behavioral engagement "draws on the idea of participation," including involvement in academic and extracurricular activities (p. 60). Cognitive engagement "draws on the idea of investment," incorporating thoughtfulness as well as willingness to exert effort to comprehend ideas and to master skills (p. 60). Emotional engagement "encompasses positive and negative reactions" to school and different aspects of school such as teachers, classmates, and academics. There is also agreement that engagement is amenable to the effects of intervention and highly affected by contexts, including peer, school/classroom, family, and community contexts. Aspects of the classroom and school contexts that are known to increase student engagement include teacher warmth and supportiveness, instructional strategies that encourage student interaction, organizational aspects of the school (especially smaller school size), and feeling physically and psychologically safe at school ([Finn and Zimmer, 2012](#); [Fredricks et al., 2019](#)).

Articles in this Research Topic take up the important theme of engagement. [Niemi et al. \(2022\)](#) explored absenteeism among learners with ADHD. In their Discussion, they call for more support for school engagement among those with ADHD as a way to prevent attendance problems among this group, and thus to support their learning. In [Kearney et al.'s \(2022\)](#) review article, there is the suggestion that engagement with school is augmented by restorative practices, including school-family-community partnerships and strategies to enhance safety and social relationships.

[Bowen et al. \(2022\)](#) describe a program that leverages technology and a gamification system to engage learners from underserved communities in an intervention that fosters social and emotional qualities for success. The program does not directly address engagement with learning, but it does so indirectly by supporting the development of learner's social and emotional skills and competencies, which the authors associate with in-class participation. In their empirical study, they explored factors in the behaviors of elementary school children (kindergarten to 6th grade) that are connected with absenteeism. Some of the factors they analyzed pertain to "core values associated with in-class participation" (p. 1), including "enthusiastic in class", "focused

within class”, “meet or exceed expectations on assignments”, and “demonstrates initiative”. Children at low risk for absenteeism were found to have a strong work ethic, to contribute to class discussion, and to complete course work as per the instructions, suggesting that engagement in the form of in-class participation is connected with school attendance.

LeBoeuf et al. (2023) investigated absenteeism among learners in Montessori schools, an alternative system of education renowned for high student engagement. In their introduction they note that Montessori classrooms aim to maximize learners’ interest, concentration, and intrinsic motivation, offering individualized instruction and free-choice about what is worked on and whether work is done individually or with peers, and providing a consistent teacher across several years. They note prior research in which Montessori students report a stronger sense of community at school, and more enjoyment of schoolwork, relative to those at conventional schools. Their study was based on the assumption that Montessori schools are adept at increasing the engagement of students and families, which is reflected in higher levels of school attendance relative to those at conventional schools. In other words, attendance in the service of engagement with learning can further facilitate attendance when learners are well-engaged, constituting a virtuous cycle.

2.2.2 Attendance in the service of readiness for adulthood

Attendance is in the service of engagement with learning, which is in the service of learners’ readiness for adulthood. According to Kearney et al. (2022), readiness for adulthood for all learners is the primary long-term outcome related to school attendance. Readiness includes the skills needed to be successful in one’s further education (i.e., beyond compulsory education) and employment, including career and life skills. This will require changes in education with respect to pedagogical goals, such as greater focus on “a whole child/citizen approach where learning is ... competency-based ... and in part focused on student well-being” (p. 5). Kearney et al. argue that this kind of learning emphasizes the skills needed for adult readiness, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, interpersonal skills, and self-management. For a discussion about school-based promotion of well-being, see McNeven et al. (2023).

At the other end of the developmental spectrum, Purtell and Ansari (2022) write about school readiness. They note that young children from low-income families are more likely to be absent from preschool relative to those from higher-income families, and that numerous efforts are needed to increase school readiness among disadvantaged children. Thus, efforts to prepare learners for adulthood need to commence as early as preschool, to improve school attendance, in the service of learning, in the service of readiness for adulthood.

2.3 Thinking creatively about the provision of education

Articles in the Research Topic draw attention to the need for broad, creative thinking about the provision of education, with respect to the setting in which education occurs and the curriculum.

2.3.1 The setting in which education occurs

Two articles in the collection focus on home-based education, in one case because parents de-registered their child from school (i.e., elective home education; Paulauskaite et al., 2022), and in the other case because schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., emergency remote education; Havik and Ingul, 2022). We address these articles in turn.

Paulauskaite et al. (2022) provide a wide-ranging account of the functioning and needs of UK learners with neurodevelopmental conditions (autism and/or intellectual disability) who participated in elective home education before and/or after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers elicited parent perspectives on home education and found that the most common reason given for de-registering their child from school, whether de-registering occurred before or after the start of the pandemic, was that their child’s additional needs were not met sufficiently at school (e.g., learning and mental health needs). It is not surprising then that the main advantage of elective home education according to parents was the opportunity to provide “personalized education and one-to-one support” (p. 8). This included the freedom to tailor education to the needs and interests of their child. This study thus challenges the notion that learning among those with neurodevelopmental conditions needs to happen in a school setting. In support of this, the researchers found that there was no difference in levels of internalizing or externalizing problems between those in home education and those still registered at a school.

Havik and Ingul (2022) report on Norwegian teachers’ perspectives on remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic, including their perspectives on whether it was likely to make school return following school closure easier or harder for learners with attendance problems. Motivation for the study included the notion that learners with attendance problems might benefit from remote education (e.g., reducing gaps in learning) and acknowledgement that there are disparate perspectives on whether remote education is indeed helpful. The authors found that forced school closures led to teachers feeling more confident about using digital tools to facilitate engagement with schoolwork, and the teachers wished to make more use of hybrid solutions (i.e., education at school and digitally) for learners who find it difficult to attend school regularly. In addition, two-thirds of teachers believed a return to school following closure would be more difficult for those with attendance problems whereas one-third believed it would be easier. The authors suggest that digital contact with learners absent from school may reduce the sense of alienation from school, that contact with these learners *at* school can increase opportunities for teachers to provide close monitoring and greater structure, and that teachers and parents need to cooperate in considering the advantages and disadvantages of home-based education for learners with attendance problems. They conclude that there is scope for variability in interventions for SAPs by incorporating digital tools for remote education.

The aforementioned articles illustrate flexibility regarding the setting for education, whether due to parent choice or the imposition of remote teaching during school closures. The articles present arguments in favour of home-based education for learners with developmental conditions (Paulauskaite et al., 2022) and to some extent for those with school attendance problems (Havik and Ingul, 2022). Kearney and Graczyk (2022) also suggest that home-based education and online programs are a flexible way to facilitate school

completion by accounting for individual circumstances and interests. At the same time, it is important to note that inclusive education does not allow for segregation (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2016), the argument being that school systems need to adapt in order to support and engage all learners – including those with difficulty attending school. With this in mind, “unlearning attendance” also calls upon interested parties to re-imagine academic, behavioral, and social–emotional learning provided within school systems so that there is less need for learners to participate in home education.

2.3.2 The curricula for education

Kearney et al. (2022) argue that readiness for adulthood (described in Section 2.2.2) will require creative educational efforts, such as reconfigured curricula in secondary education. They describe the fundamental shift that is occurring worldwide in instructional formats, and the prospects for learning via formats which are “accessible, collaborative, inclusive, personalized, [and] self-paced ...” (p. 5). As noted in Section 2.1, this includes education that occurs outside the school setting and via ongoing education opportunities for those who do not follow a traditional path toward school completion (e.g., blended and self-learning, non-profit agency-based instruction, and vocational and fieldwork).

In the article by Purtell and Ansari (2022), there is indirect reference to curricula for education. They argue that positive experiences at preschool are likely to increase children’s motivation to attend and parents’ willingness to send their child to school, thereby reducing absenteeism. Indeed, they found that children who enjoyed school attended more often, as did children who were in classrooms rated as higher quality. It is highly conceivable that the children’s enjoyment of school, and the quality of the teacher–child interactions, were influenced by the curriculum.

2.4 Thinking broadly about influences on attendance

The articles in this collection encourage and inspire us to think broadly about influences on attendance and absence. We firstly curate ideas from the articles according to the need to think broadly, and then present examples of broad thinking based on the empirical studies in the collection.

2.4.1 The need for broad thinking about influences

When we think broadly about influences on attendance and absence, we are better placed to develop grand theories, offer more effective intervention, and reduce stigma for learners and families.

In Kearney and González’s (2022) overview of risk factors for attendance problems and factors protecting against these problems, they describe the forked approach to understanding attendance and absence. Some parties adopt a broad “systemic” focus (e.g., examining structural economic inequalities) while others adopt a narrow “analytic” focus (e.g., examining parental involvement in education). Kearney and González acknowledge that it is understandable that professionals from the many disciplines focusing on absenteeism bring specific foci to their efforts to understand absenteeism, but they lament the forked approach because it impedes the development and

testing of grander theories of attendance and absenteeism, and it restricts avenues for intervention. They thus call for a more inclusive approach to understanding attendance and responding to attendance problems in order to derive grander theories and more effective intervention.

Indeed, a primary aim of broad thinking is to improve our work to promote attendance and reduce attendance problems. Kearney and González (2022) explain, for example, that increased attention to racial equity in educational institutions has shed light on the role that biased processes in schools and communities play in attendance problems (e.g., exclusionary discipline in the form of suspensions; arrests). These processes warrant attention in intervention for attendance problems. According to Kearney and Graczyk (2022), “unlearning school attendance” calls for attention in intervention to broad political and economic issues. They explain that many school districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism are in areas where there are deep structural inequalities and few support services which are often fragmented. They note the need for enhanced equity in intervention, calling for trauma-informed practices because of high rates of adverse child experiences; culturally relevant interventions (e.g., program content; interested parties who reflect learners’ values and culture); and support for learners so that they can “navigate hostile racial school climates” (p. 3).

Broad thinking also reduces learners’ and families’ sense of being blamed for absenteeism. According to Kearney et al. (2022), a broader perspective helps us move away from a deficit narrative around absenteeism. In other words, absenteeism will no longer be understood as arising from problems with the learner. Absence from school may be an adaptive option for some learners, such as avoiding victimization, pursuing employment, or rejecting an education system that is biased against some learners with respect to disciplinary policies (Kearney et al., 2022). By expanding the focus from specific risk factors (e.g., a learner’s mental health challenges; family dynamics) to broader contextual influences outside a family’s control (e.g., the physical environment at school; housing insecurity; neighborhood violence), less blame is placed on learners and families and they will experience less undue burden for resolving attendance problems (Kearney et al., 2022). These are important conditions for successful intervention.

Comprehensive models that reflect and foster broad thinking about influences on attendance and absence include the Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) bioecological framework (Melvin et al., 2019). Melvin and colleagues draw attention to multiple simultaneous influences and their interactions over time, including influences in the microsystems (e.g., a child’s or adolescent’s sleep problems; a family’s economic hardship), the mesosystem which represents interconnections among microsystems (e.g., student–teacher relationship; parent–school contact), the exosystem (e.g., school climate; educational policies), the macrosystem (e.g., neighborhood violence; government policies), and the chronosystem (e.g., time of the school year; changes in the other systems as the learner moves from primary school to high school). Examples of research on these influences are presented next.

2.4.2 Examples of broad thinking about influences

The eight empirical studies in the collection address a range of influences on attendance, including combinations of micro-, meso-,

exo-, macro-, and/or chronosystem influences. Furthermore, the studies involve examination of new variables and/or the examination of previously studied variables but among different populations.

Arbour et al. (2023) examined the effects of universal strategies to promote attendance among preschool children in Chile as well as targeted strategies to reduce absenteeism among those at risk for chronic absence. Their theory of change for improving attendance has six primary determinants that span child-level factors (e.g., motivation to attend), family-level factors (e.g., focus on attendance at parent-teacher meetings; incentives for families), school-level factors (e.g., a health corner in the classroom to reduce child illness; formation of a School Attendance Committee to analyze attendance data, identify children at risk of chronic absence and the causes of absences in each case, and develop an individualized approach to help each child and family overcome barriers to attendance), and a macrosystem factor (i.e., free school van to provide transportation to school). The researchers found that attendance rates were better when schools participated in the intervention *and* prioritized school attendance, compared to when schools participated in the intervention but did *not* prioritize attendance, or simply did not participate in the intervention. While Arbour et al.'s study was not designed to investigate factors contributing to absenteeism, their evaluation of a professional development intervention points to the probable impact of micro-, meso-, and macrosystem influences on attendance and absenteeism.

Purtell and Ansari's (2022) study directly addresses the influence of multiple systems on the attendance of US preschoolers in non-compulsory education (Head Start) who come from low-income families, the majority of whom come from ethnic minority families. Absenteeism was found to be influenced, for example, by family necessity (e.g., whether or not parents were in full-time employment and thus needing their child to be in preschool), family routines (e.g., children's sleep patterns), stressors for the family (e.g., adequacy of medical care; perception of living in a violent neighborhood), classroom characteristics (e.g., quality of teacher-child interactions), and social support for parents (e.g., from other parents in the Head Start program). The authors note that there was no single mechanism driving absence; rather, multiple factors across contexts influenced absenteeism. They align their findings with the bioecological theory that multiple systems shape absenteeism, arguing that attention to one factor alone will have little impact on absenteeism. They call for attention to complex family circumstances in order to reduce absenteeism, and recommend the fostering of relationships among parents of preschoolers.

Paulauskaite et al. (2022) address influences on elective home education. As noted previously (Section 2.3.1), parents' reasons for de-registering their child from school were broadly similar across parents who de-registered prior to the pandemic and those who de-registered during the pandemic. The main reason given by both groups of parents was low satisfaction with school for not meeting their children's additional needs. Health concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic were influential in decision-making for fewer than one-quarter of parents who de-registered their child after the onset of the pandemic. Because the study addresses the impact of the pandemic, it includes the chronosystem in efforts to understand learners' participation in education at school or at home.

Two other studies in the collection addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Havik and Ingul (2022) explored Norwegian

teachers' perspectives on how teachers could apply their experience of remote education during the pandemic to help learners with attendance problems return to school after school reopening. Study findings thus contribute to an understanding of the maintenance and remediation of attendance problems, rather than the development of these problems. The findings (summarized in Section 2.3.1) have implications for micro-, meso-, and exosystem influences on attendance and absence, including learners' sense of alienation from school, teachers' confidence in using digital tools to facilitate engagement with schoolwork, schools' policies concerning educational formats to engage learners and support those who have difficulty attending school, and family-school contact to determine optimal learning pathways for learners. Korotchenko and Dobbs (2023) explored the impact of the pandemic on university enrollment in Texas, the USA, and argued that future research should consider the additional impact of the political environment in areas where universities are located (i.e., the macrosystem) and the extent to which universities have adapted to the new circumstances ushered in by the pandemic, such as the percentage of courses offered online (i.e., the exosystem).

Niemi et al. (2022) examined absenteeism and the symptoms and functions associated with absenteeism among Finnish adolescents with ADHD, relative to those without ADHD, accounting for other factors such as the family's socioeconomic status. Learners with ADHD were more often absent from school, and their absences were more often due to separation anxiety, agoraphobia/panic, school aversion/other attractive alternatives, aggression, problems with parents, and family-related problems. The authors suggest that ADHD may serve as a risk factor for these other difficulties, increasing risk for absence from school. For example, those with difficulty concentrating might not receive the extra support they need at school, leading to school aversion and thus absence.

Bowen et al. (2022) studied US elementary school children's behaviors related to core values, such as enthusiasm in class, being focused within class, respecting others' space, and respectful communication. Peer relationships emerged as a major factor influencing absenteeism. Behaviors commonly observed among learners at high risk for absenteeism included being argumentative and insulting peers. Kearney et al.'s (2022) review article underscores the need to also address broader influences on peer relations, such as the impact that increasing migration has on the need to help different groups of learners integrate in a school's culture.

LeBoeuf et al. (2023) explored the relationship between school type – Montessori or non-Montessori – and chronic absenteeism, as well as racial disparities in chronic absenteeism across the two school types, while attempting to account for the characteristics of families who self-select into Montessori schools. In this way, the researchers addressed micro-, meso-, and exosystem influences on attendance and absence.

In sum, the empirical studies largely represent what Kearney and colleagues (Kearney, 2021; Kearney et al., 2022) refer to as the analytic perspective, whereby the focus is on specific contexts and individual concerns, rather than the systemic perspective whereby the focus is on overarching contexts and structural concerns. However, some of the studies directly or indirectly address broader influences in the exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. For other recent examples of studies addressing the influence of multiple systems on attendance and absence, see Singer et al. (2021), Leduc et al. (2022), and Lee et al. (2023).

2.5 Working on attendance, not only on absence

For some, working to promote attendance might simply sound like the inverse of working to reduce absence. However, from a practice perspective, there are important differences between the two, whereby interventions to ensure regular school attendance are largely different from the interventions used when learners display emerging or chronic attendance problems (Heyne et al., 2022). Theoretical and empirical articles in the current collection underscore the great need to promote attendance, alongside our work to reduce absence.

The three theoretical articles include important insights about the need to promote attendance. Kearney and González (2022) argue that a focus on attendance and not only absence places value on the efforts of learners and families who have overcome barriers to attendance. Kearney and Graczyk (2022) present the multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports (MD-MTSS) framework for attendance and absence, which places attendance at the forefront of efforts by interested parties to support learning and development. This three-tiered framework, which the authors introduced a few years earlier (Kearney et al., 2019a,b; Kearney and Graczyk, 2020), underscores the importance of universal interventions to augment learners' current attendance and prevent absence (Tier 1), alongside early intervention strategies to assist when absenteeism is emerging, mild, and moderate (Tier 2), and intensive intervention when substantial assistance is needed because absenteeism has become severe or chronic (Tier 3). Kearney et al. (2022) note that the multi-tiered approach "allows for a broader reframing of school absenteeism toward efforts to enhance school attendance," so much so that there will be more focus on attendance than on absenteeism (p. 12). It should also be noted that prioritizing the promotion of attendance among all learners, in effect preventing absenteeism, can reduce the time and effort that would otherwise be needed to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

Kearney and Graczyk (2022) remind us that MD-MTSS frameworks for addressing attendance and absence are a work in progress, but they have potential, especially because the strategies that can be applied in each Tier have empirical support. Indeed, it is pleasing to see increased awareness and use of such frameworks to address attendance and absence (e.g., Barnes, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Karel et al., 2022), suggesting that interested parties increasingly appreciate the importance of working on attendance, not only absence.

Empirical articles in the collection directly or indirectly address the topics of promoting attendance and/or addressing absence before it becomes chronic. In this way, the work represented in these articles corresponds with Tiers 1 and 2 of the MTSS framework for promoting attendance and reducing absence.

Arbour et al. (2023) describe and evaluate an intervention with preschool children, including the efforts in five schools prioritizing the promotion of attendance among all preschool children, paying "special attention to the regular and rigorous application of ... attendance-promoting strategies" (p. 9). Because school readiness is regarded as one of the universal interventions at Tier 1 in the MTSS framework (Kearney and Graczyk, 2022), Arbour et al.'s (2023) focus on preschool children represents work to promote school attendance. The intervention they evaluated also emphasizes the use of targeted or "individualized" strategies to prevent chronic absenteeism among

preschoolers already displaying some absence, representative of Tier 2 in the MTSS framework.

Purtell and Ansari (2022), who also focused on preschool children, argued that their study of reasons for absences could help identify factors to be targeted to increase preschoolers' attendance and thus their readiness for school. Thus, while the immediate aim was to identify ways to reduce absenteeism, the ultimate aim was to promote attendance beyond preschool.

Bowen et al.'s (2022) investigation of factors underlying absenteeism aimed to increase knowledge about thresholds for prevention and intervention (in terms of learners' low, medium, and high risk for absenteeism), in order to effectively influence school attendance. Peer relationships were found to be a critical factor affecting absenteeism, and they thus warrant attention in efforts to promote attendance and prevent absenteeism. Because the authors referred to the prevention of absenteeism and targeted support, their work relates to both Tiers 1 and 2 of the MTSS framework to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism.

Niemi et al. (2022) do not focus *per se* on the promotion of attendance and prevention of absence, but in the discussion of their results, they draw attention to the importance of prevention. Specifically, they call for research examining interventions to prevent SAPs among adolescents with ADHD (e.g., by supporting engagement with school).

2.6 Working with attendance-related data

Researchers often use school attendance data to investigate influences on absence (e.g., associations between absenteeism and socio-economic factors), the impact of absence (e.g., associations with subsequent academic achievement), and the outcome of interventions to reduce absence (e.g., change in attendance between pre-intervention and post-intervention). Five empirical studies in the current collection are exemplary.

Purtell and Ansari (2022) tested associations between child, family, and center factors, and preschoolers' levels of absenteeism across the school year. Absence was based on parents' approximations of the number of days their child had been absent from preschool since the start of the school year.

Niemi et al. (2022) compared absenteeism among adolescents with and without ADHD. Absence was measured via an item in the Inventory for School Attendance Problems (Knollmann et al., 2019) which asks learners to estimate the frequency of absence in the previous 12 school weeks.

Bowen et al. (2022) used a data-driven approach to understand underlying factors affecting absenteeism, through the lens of pattern recognition. They employed machine learning methodologies to identify learners at low, medium, and high risk for absenteeism, drawing on more than 26,000 student-level datapoints, representing the behaviors of 332 students in one school. The behaviors, reported by educators, relate to core values associated with in-class participation. While the analyses did not make use of attendance data *per se*, they led to the identification of behaviors the authors associate with attendance (e.g., whether or not learners attend class on time and report to class prepared to learn). In effect, the researchers measured participation at school and engagement with learning.

Arbour et al. (2023) used publicly available databases from the national Ministry of Education in Chile to determine rates of absence over time (2011 to 2017), in order to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention to promote attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism. These databases include individual-level daily attendance of learners enrolled in public schools.

LeBoeuf et al. (2023) used school-level data on the number of chronically absent learners (missing 15 or more school days), derived from the Civil Rights Data Collection survey of public schools in the United States, to study racial disparities in absenteeism across 116 Montessori schools and 116 non-Montessori schools (representing over 94,000 students). They critiqued the publicly available data on absenteeism, noting that it does not allow researchers to answer questions about why learners are chronically absent, making it difficult to develop intervention that meets the needs of learners. They called for improved record-keeping of the reasons for absences (e.g., health, transportation).

A sixth study, conducted by Korotchenko and Dobbs (2023), made use of official enrollment data as opposed to attendance data. The enrollment data pertained to post-secondary education, specifically universities in Texas, USA. Time-related changes in fall semester enrollment counts were examined between 2009 and 2021, to investigate the impact of the pandemic on enrollments generally, and on different study programs (e.g., criminal justice, social sciences, natural sciences). The researchers reported a small negative effect of the pandemic on overall enrollments at universities, but a small positive effect for enrollments in the natural sciences.

The articles in the Research Topic also underscore the value of working with school attendance data to identify and respond to the needs of individual learners, schools, and communities. Arbour et al.'s (2023) article is particularly illustrative. Their intervention makes use of a real-time data platform, based on the notion that strategies informed by data are more effective. A software engineer developed the platform which reads schools' attendance data, creates a database of each child's percent of attendance, and signals which children attended less than 90 percent of school days. Data was used in the context of two intervention strategies that rely on regular monitoring of the real-time data. The "Success Plan" involved showing families their child's absences to date and the number of absences remaining before the threshold for chronic absenteeism was reached, and asking families to develop a concrete plan with goals and strategies for preventing chronic absence. The "School Attendance Committee" reviewed data on a monthly basis, identified learners at risk of chronic absenteeism, and designed personalized strategies for working with each child and their family. Those using data were provided with coaching, to support the development of data literacy skills and processes. The use of data to manage absenteeism by implementing tailor-made interventions, as reported by Arbour et al., contrasts with the reporting that the historical use of data was primarily for administrative purposes (Heyne et al., 2022).

The theoretical articles in the current collection also draw attention to the need to use attendance-related data and other data to advance our work in the field. Writing about the promotion of attendance and prevention of absenteeism, Kearney and Graczyk (2022) note that schools are encouraged to use data to shape their policy decisions. Kearney and González (2022) write about the collection of data at multiple points (e.g., during the school day; during the school year) and in relation to constructs other than

attendance (e.g., log-ins to online learning; completed assignments; mastery of skills). Kearney et al. (2022) write about the need for large data sets and sophisticated analysis of data to: define problematic absenteeism; identify causes of absenteeism for a given learner, school, or community; design attendance tracking and early warning systems that combine data from multiple agencies and provide feedback to caregivers; and inform best practices for education and school attendance. While acknowledging privacy concerns, they argue for the use of disaggregated data to facilitate the use of "growth or on-track metrics" (p. 9) and to better identify groups at higher risk for absence, helping ensure *all* learners are supported in their readiness for adulthood via school attendance.

Going forward in practice and research, our use of attendance and absence data will require attention to the quality of the data and how it is used. Kearney and Childs (2022) addressed these topics in detail. Regarding quality, for example, they raise issues about the accuracy of recorded data, the importance of immediate recording as opposed to later recall, and variation in data according to who reports on attendance and absence. Issues related to the use of data include whether a 10% cut-off to define problematic absenteeism is equally applicable and helpful for all student groups and regions, the fact that important information is missed when interested parties simply rely on aggregated attendance data, and the need for guardrails that ensure data are used to improve outcomes for *all* learners rather than data leading to negative consequences for sub-groups such as those prone to exclusionary attendance policies (e.g., suspension). The quality and utility of data related to engagement should also be considered.

2.7 Working on the needs of specific groups of learners

There are many influences on attendance and absence (Section 2.4). While it is conceivable that all learners are exposed to one or more risk factors for absenteeism, not all will experience problems with attendance. As Kearney et al. (2022) explain, absenteeism disproportionately affects vulnerable groups of learners. For example, in developed countries, higher rates of absenteeism occur among vulnerable groups such as migrants, those of color, and those with disabilities. For learners in low-income countries, barriers to education include food and housing insecurity and long distances to school. Learners with intersecting risk factors are especially vulnerable, such as those with disabilities who lack transportation to school, and those of various racial and ethnic groups who have health problems. Intersecting risk factors are also addressed by Kearney and Graczyk (2022). They call for a fundamental reconfiguration of the MTSS framework to better address the needs of learners in geographical areas where there are high rates of chronic absenteeism, such as in large urban school districts with deep structural inequalities, fragmented support services, and residential mobility.

Five of the empirical articles in the current collection underscore the need to address specific risk factors and broader contextual influences that render particular groups of learners vulnerable to absenteeism. We address each in turn.

Niemi et al. (2022) summarized prior work documenting the difficulties learners with ADHD experience during schooling (e.g., failure to complete schoolwork) and beyond (e.g., greater difficulty finding a job). In their own empirical study, they found that

adolescents with ADHD had a higher level of absence relative to those who were neurotypical, and among those with ADHD the most common reason for absence was “school aversion” (e.g., I’d rather do something at home that is more fun than school; I think it’s OK if I skip school every now and then). Niemi et al. suggest that school aversion might arise among those with ADHD as a result of their difficulty concentrating and not getting sufficient support in school. They argued that preventing absence among learners with ADHD could thus focus on increasing school engagement.

Paulauskaite et al. (2022) summarized prior work on the experiences and needs of learners with autism and/or intellectual disability. Absenteeism occurs at higher rates relative to typically developing learners, many feel isolated and/or bullied at school, and they require individualized support for their learning and development. According to Paulauskaite et al., these challenges are often a precursor to parents de-registering their child from school and providing elective home education, commonly because parents are dissatisfied with the school’s capacity to meet their child’s learning needs and mental health needs. Paulauskaite et al. found similar results in their own study. The most common reason parents de-registered their child from school was that the school did not sufficiently meet their child’s learning needs and mental health needs. Furthermore, one of the main difficulties for parents who provide elective home education is supporting their child’s complex needs. Clearly, school-based adaptations are needed (e.g., improved one-to-one support) so the needs of all learners with autism and/or intellectual disability can be met within the school environment. Fortunately, there has been increased attention to school attendance and participation among those with neurodevelopmental conditions (Totsika et al., 2020, 2023; Heyne, 2022; Melvin et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024).

Purtell and Ansari (2022) addressed the question of which preschool children are more likely to be absent from school, focusing on children from low-income families, a group known to be at greater risk for absenteeism. They found that absenteeism was shaped by multiple factors related to family circumstances (including social and economic disadvantages) and school processes. They thus call for a comprehensive approach to reduce preschool absenteeism, including consideration of the complex circumstances experienced by families across the school year, a focus on family outreach, easily accessible information on transport and medical referrals, the promotion of relationships between the parents of children in the preschool program, and the promotion of positive classroom experiences for children.

LeBoeuf et al. (2023) explored chronic absenteeism in learners from Montessori and non-Montessori schools, focusing on low-income schools and racial disparities in absence. These two foci were motivated by prior research showing higher absence rates in low-income schools, higher absence among Black and Hispanic learners relative to White learners, higher rates of suspension among colored learners relative to White learners, and higher proportions of Black and Hispanic learners in low-income schools. LeBoeuf et al. also note that chronic absence may perpetuate the racial disparities identified in learners’ academic achievement, arguing that effective intervention to lower absence needs to focus on racial disparities in absenteeism, and that evaluation of an intervention “must consider whether it is appropriately lowering rates for all student demographic groups” (p. 2). In their conclusion they suggest that Montessori

schools may benefit from the provision of extra support for Black and Hispanic students.

Arbour et al. (2023) evaluated an intervention to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism among preschool children. Unlike the forementioned studies in this section, Arbour et al. did not focus on a circumscribed group of children identified in prior studies as being at higher risk for absenteeism. Rather, the intervention involved school personnel working with individual families to develop and evaluate a strategy to help each family overcome a specific barrier to attendance (e.g., intrafamilial violence contributing to a child’s absences). The study reminds us – as educators, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers – to simultaneously consider the unique needs of every learner and family, alongside the identified needs of specific groups of learners, such as those described in the empirical studies in this collection, including those with ADHD, those with autism and/or intellectual disability, or those from lower-income families.

The systematic review by Jay et al. (2023) centers around learners with chronic health conditions (CHCs) such as asthma, cancer, chronic pain, epilepsy, obesity, and type 1 diabetes. Citing previous research, they note that CHCs affect over one quarter of learners in early adolescence, learners with CHCs are more often absent from school, and in many cases they have lower academic achievement relative to those without CHCs. Further, they note that it is widely hypothesized that absence from school explains the lower achievement among those with CHCs. They conducted an umbrella review (i.e., systematic review of systematic reviews) to examine the role of absences in the lower academic achievement of these learners, reviewing 27 systematic reviews that quantified the association between CHCs and academic achievement. The 27 reviews covered 441 studies. Surprisingly, only 7 of the 441 studies (2%) tested the mediational role of school absence in the relationship between CHCs and academic attainment. None of these yielded evidence that absence is a mediator. To improve educational outcomes among learners with CHCs, Jay et al. call for better understanding of the causes of absence, which can include acute illness, management of the condition, and healthcare appointments. They argue against rigid attendance policies focused solely on the reduction of absence because they may fail to improve academic attainment for learners with CHCs, and they could even be harmful. Instead, school attendance policies should allow flexibility, including the provision of resources for learners to stay engaged with education even when not physically present at school.

2.8 Working on alliances, dissemination, and implementation

Alliances within and across interested parties (e.g., learners, caregivers, educators, health professionals, community partners, researchers, policymakers, national and international organizations) and across disciplines (e.g., computer science, education, psychiatry, psychology, public health, social work, sociology) are essential to recalibrating and overhauling the way we think and work to promote engagement with learning and readiness for adulthood. Alliances foster greater understanding among interested parties, promote much-needed consensus in the field of school attendance, and are key to promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2020).

The theoretical articles in the collection stress the importance of alliances. [Kearney and González \(2022\)](#) plead for the abandonment of compartmentalized discipline-specific approaches in favour of multidisciplinary alliances “to better conceptualize and manage the full ecology of school attendance and its problems” (p. 1). They call for alliances involving professionals, lay persons, educational and government entities, and systems of care. [Kearney and Graczyk \(2022\)](#) draw attention to the need for alliances among community services (e.g., housing, public health, welfare) and with schools, to improve tracking of learners separated from the educational process and to develop early intervention appropriate to particular localities. They also note the need for collaboration across school districts to track learners who transfer from one school to another. [Kearney et al.’s \(2022\)](#) article aims to support multi-party partnerships that involve the sharing of resources and expertise, a mutual vision for well-coordinated ongoing interactions among partners studying the complexities inherent to attendance and absence, cohesive narratives that can influence policy and practice, and the formation of family-school-community partnerships. Their theory of change for school attendance and absence is presented as a starting point for discussion among interested parties, especially those who come from different perspectives. They also note that technological advances have increased scope for coordinating data systems across key agencies that have ordinarily not collaborated (e.g., educational, governmental, and public health entities).

Examples of alliances are found in the empirical articles in this collection. Researchers [Paulauskaite et al. \(2022\)](#) consulted with a parent advisory group during their study, working together on the development of the survey for parents, analysis of the data, and interpretation of the results. Researchers [Bowen et al. \(2022\)](#) collaborated with the Fight for Life Foundation to access school-based data derived from a platform created by the Foundation, in order to learn more about factors underlying absenteeism. [Arbour et al. \(2023\)](#) describe an intervention that cultivated various alliances in the context of a model of professional development, including: collaboration between school leadership, teachers, aides, and parents, to develop and test strategies to promote school attendance and reduce absenteeism; a networked peer learning community occurring across traditional hierarchies, in which teams from different schools observed each other’s work and shared learnings, data, successes, and failures in the service of the common goal of promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism, using a common theory of change and measures; and collaboration between school personnel and families to prevent occasional absenteeism from becoming chronic absenteeism. The development of the intervention was itself the result of a partnership between leaders in an early childhood education foundation, schools, and local and national government.

The outcomes of alliances need broad dissemination and implementation, which are essential to change in the field of school attendance ([Heyne et al., 2020](#)). Dissemination involves actively distributing ideas and materials to specific audiences (e.g., information, instruments, interventions) and implementation involves actively promoting the adoption and integration of these ideas and materials (e.g., policies, skills, practices) ([Greenhalgh et al., 2004](#)). In the current collection of articles there are examples and suggestions related to dissemination and implementation. [Niemi et al. \(2022\)](#) employed a translated version of a new instrument, the

Inventory of School Attendance Problems ([Knollmann et al., 2019](#)), to understand SAPs among Finnish learners. [Arbour et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that improvements in attendance will only be maintained via rigorous application, monitoring, and problem-solving of attendance strategies, and that improvements will disappear without “intentional support for implementation” (p. 17). [Kearney and Graczyk \(2022\)](#) call for investment in training so that multi-professional assessment and intervention can be provided when there is need for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, and [Kearney and González \(2022\)](#) suggest that MTSS approaches be implemented within existing frameworks that are culturally responsive. According to [Kearney et al. \(2022\)](#), there is currently insufficient dissemination and implementation of positive interventions for attendance and absenteeism across schools and community agencies. Positive interventions are intentional, foster well-being, and are empirically supported, and the authors contrasted them with punitive interventions such as exclusionary discipline. High fidelity delivery, another important issue for implementation in the field of school attendance ([Heyne et al., 2020](#)), also warrants attention.

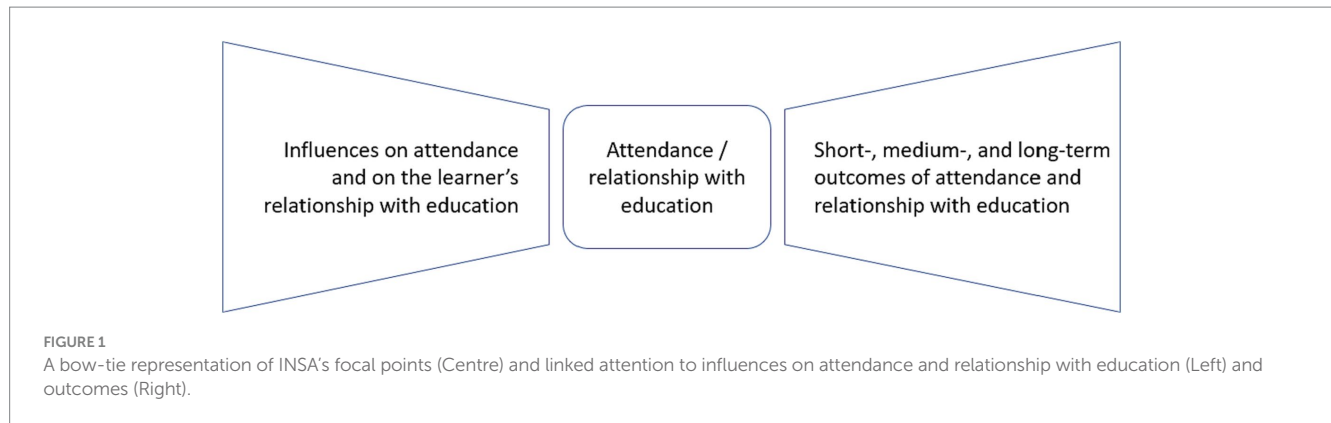
3 INSA’s work to move the field forward

INSA and her members are attuned to the need for change. There is a growing number of learners absent from school ([Heyne et al., 2020](#); [Gren Landell, 2021](#)); socioeconomic inequalities impact participation in education (e.g., [Ripamonti, 2018, 2023](#); [Sosu et al., 2021](#)); absence is negatively associated with short-term academic performance, final educational attainment, and economic outcomes through the life cycle (e.g., [Cattan et al., 2023](#)); there is imprecision in national policies and practices for recording, reporting, and using attendance data to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism ([Heyne et al., 2022](#)); cross-national research is hampered by inconsistencies in the definitions of SAPs (e.g., [Kreitz-Sandberg et al., 2022](#)); and current interventions for SAPs are ineffective for some learners (e.g., [Heyne, 2022](#)).

In this section we highlight some of the ways INSA is working to help the field of school attendance move forward so that all learners are supported in their readiness for adulthood. We concentrate on three topics: (1) increasing the focus on a relationship with education; (2) strengthening alliances among interested parties; and (3) fostering leading interdisciplinary research to inform practice.

3.1 Increasing the focus on a relationship with education

INSA’s mission has school attendance as a focal point. Simultaneously, there is keen awareness of the myriad factors influencing both attendance and the outcomes of attendance. Moreover, there is growing attention to learners’ relationship with education, and its interconnectedness with their circumstances, their educational journey, and the outcomes of their journey ([Figure 1](#)). We use “relationship with education” to refer broadly to the interactions and experiences individuals have with learning environments, curriculum, teachers, and peers. It is thus broader than constructs that are primarily focused on the school setting, like



“school engagement”, “school attachment”, “school connectedness”, and other related terms (see [Jimerson et al., 2003](#)).

Bioecological models have provided a valuable framework to enrich our understanding of the individual, family, school, and community factors that influence whether a learner attends school (e.g., [Melvin et al., 2019](#)). These models apply regardless of the specific context in which learners attend school, such as mainstream schools, special educational settings, or alternative educational programs. However, the models require updating due to increasing diversity in what it means to attend school. The post-Covid-19 era has given rise to a higher demand for online and hybrid learning models which offer education outside of a traditional physical classroom setting, which some learners and families prefer ([Paulauskaite et al., 2022](#)).

The changing educational landscape urges us to explore the factors that influence learners’ relationship with education, regardless of the context within which they learn. The work of [Maynard et al. \(2014\)](#) will be instructive. These researchers found that school disengagement was influenced by nonshared environmental factors (i.e., contexts and experiences unique to each sibling), when controlling for genetic influences. Thus, individual and contextual factors influencing a learner’s relationship with education need to be considered, including genetics, family, and school influences. For example, there is a need to better understand the specific parenting practices that promote their child’s school engagement ([Yang et al., 2023](#)). The interplay between attendance and engagement also warrants attention. Some studies point to the positive influence of engagement on attendance ([Miranda-Zapata et al., 2018](#)) and on school completion ([Fall and Roberts, 2012](#); [Wang and Fredricks, 2014](#); [Niehaus et al., 2016](#)), encompassing affective, behavioral, and/or academic aspects of engagement. Other studies point to the negative influence of absence from school on engagement ([Kızıldağ et al., 2017](#)) and on the related construct of belonging ([Mooney et al., 2022](#)), indicating that school attendance is important in maintaining positive engagement trajectories that benefit outcomes for learners.

Understanding how the learning environment, whether it is at school or elsewhere, interacts with learners’ relationship with education is crucial. This knowledge will enrich existing bioecological models of attendance so they better account for the diversity of settings in which learning can occur. It will also enable the development and implementation of effective interventions to foster an optimal relationship with education for all learners, wherever their educational journey takes place.

In the process, it will be important to pursue the challenging task of defining and measuring each learner’s relationship with education, alongside our ongoing work to define and measure attendance. For example, will log-ins to online learning be equated to attendance, relationship with education, or both? In a review of 35 years of research on school engagement, [Martins et al. \(2022\)](#) noted that the behavioral dimension of engagement is often investigated via measures of school attendance, participation in class, and compliance with school rules. Alternative conceptualizations and measures of behavioral engagement will be needed when education occurs outside of the school setting.

In conclusion, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers must go beyond an emphasis on improving school attendance, by prioritizing positive educational experiences for young individuals. This entails supporting their active engagement in education, not only for academic learning, but also for emotional and social development (e.g., self-reflection, effective collaboration). Education, as emphasized by [Biesta \(2015\)](#), is about learning for a reason. As he emphasizes, “education always needs to engage with questions of content, purpose, and relationships” (p. 76). Education involves qualifying individuals to do things (by acquiring knowledge, skills, and dispositions), socializing them (e.g., cultural and professional traditions), and empowering them to become subjects of initiative and responsibility, rather than objects of others’ actions—a process Biesta refers to as subjectification. Ultimately, fostering a positive relationship with education, at school and elsewhere, is vital for preparing young individuals for adulthood ([Kearney et al., 2022](#)).

3.2 Strengthening alliances among interested parties

School attendance problems are complex, necessitating action at multiple levels, including the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem (see Section 2.4). Advancing effective multi-level responses requires collaboration with a wide range of interested parties, including but not limited to learners, parents/caregivers, families, educators, health professionals, community partners, researchers, advocates, and policymakers. Therefore, building alliances that bring these individuals and groups together is a key goal of INSA.

Alliances create both opportunities and challenges. They allow us to harness and synergize the knowledge and skills of each party to create changes that would be impossible to achieve on an individual

level. Alliances work best when there is trust, open communication, and a commitment by all to share ideas and listen to the perspectives and experiences of others (Senge, 2006). Working in this way can challenge us; it requires humility (e.g., recognizing that our own knowledge is partial and incomplete) as well as attentiveness to power relations (e.g., recognizing that some groups, such as professionals, typically have more influence over agenda-setting and decision-making than do learners and their families).

Enhancing learners' participation in these alliances deserves special attention, because traditionally the voices of children and adolescents were not sought, or they were subjected to the interpretation of others. School attendance is fundamentally an issue that affects school-age learners, and it is therefore crucial to shift toward bottom-up, democratic, and participatory processes that enable the integration of their perspectives and experiences. This approach was initially stimulated by an increased recognition of the children's right emanating from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Since then, it has been acknowledged that engaging with learners is an essential component of effective interventions and policy initiatives as it increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for them, and for organizations and systems (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

INSA is actively fostering robust alliances and enhancing collaborative capacity across all aspects related to school attendance. Illustrations of these endeavors were highlighted at our recent INSA 2022 Conference in The Netherlands. The conference incorporated a series of dynamic roundtable discussions attended by a diverse range of participants, including researchers, educators, health professionals, family advocates, and learners. These sessions facilitated the exchange of knowledge on specific topics of mutual interest. The notable presence of adolescents at the conference injected valuable insights, energy, and enthusiasm into the discussions. A pivotal keynote session featured young representatives from three Dutch organizations, allowing them to share their personal journeys and articulate their vision for school attendance (further details can be accessed [via this link](#)).

Another example of INSA's commitment to advancing the field is exemplified by the recent establishment of its Education, Training, and Policy Sub-Committee in March 2023. Comprising academics and practitioners from Ireland, Australia, and the United States (Catriona O'Toole, Lisa McKay-Brown, Matthew White, and Patricia Graczyk), the committee is actively seeking youth representation as it prepares to shape its mission and terms of reference. An essential aspect of the committee's envisaged role is to cultivate alliances in alignment with the suggestions outlined in Section 2.8. This includes facilitating various professional learning opportunities that bring together diverse groups to share expertise and resources. The committee aims to collaborate on identifying foundational concepts and good practice principles, offering guidance on policy related to school attendance, supporting the implementation of research-based findings in educational settings, and advocating for comprehensive responses to school attendance challenges on both national and international levels.

3.3 Championing interdisciplinary research to inform practice

The landscape of school attendance and absenteeism research is rich and diverse, as evident from the plethora of publications listed in

the research menu of INSA's website.¹ This repository offers a compelling glimpse into the global investment of time, money, creativity, and collaborative efforts dedicated to advancing our understanding of so many aspects related to attendance and absence. This is to be celebrated. It also leads to questions about the research questions posed, the methodologies employed, and the impact of research findings on the field of school attendance.

Navigating these questions is not straightforward. One significant challenge lies in the fact that the majority of practical, scientific, and scholarly work on school attendance and absenteeism tends to occur within distinct scientific disciplines rather than fostering collaboration across them. This siloed approach results in numerous independent avenues of investigation that are not always well-coordinated or integrated (Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney, 2021). Addressing this challenge calls for an interdisciplinary focus on school attendance and absenteeism research.

Against this background, INSA established its Scientific Sub-Committee in February 2022. The committee, composed of four members (Laelia Benoit, Carolina González, Christopher Kearney, and Gil Keppens), represents diverse scientific disciplines (education, psychiatry, psychology, sociology) and countries (The Netherlands, France, Spain, and the USA). Its primary vision is to promote interdisciplinary research and build connections toward a more cohesive and coordinated approach to school attendance and absenteeism. This objective will be realized by crafting a shared research agenda that encompasses common goals and actions across disciplines and research contexts (such as geographical areas of study and methodologies) and by encouraging collaboration among INSA's members and other interested parties. Six strategies are employed to facilitate a more interdisciplinary research agenda, as described next.

First, it is imperative to establish a common language. Researchers from diverse backgrounds and disciplines often employ varying terminology and concepts to describe similar phenomena (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022; Kearney and González, 2022). For example, the term "school attendance problems" may be conceptualized differently among researchers, sometimes serving as a reference to absenteeism without specifying a defined level deemed "problematic". The development of a shared vocabulary and conceptual framework is crucial to enhancing communication and fostering collaboration across disciplines.

Second, there is a need to promote interdisciplinary research. Encouraging collaboration among researchers from diverse disciplines in joint research projects will introduce diverse perspectives and expertise for formulating and addressing complex research questions. This collaborative efforts aims to integrate systemic and analytical perspectives in our approach to researching school attendance and absenteeism (Kearney, 2021). This includes exploring ecological levels associated with school attendance and absenteeism, considering both proximal and distal factors. Microsystem-level or proximal factors, often the focus of researchers and school personnel, serve as valid predictors of school absenteeism. These include challenges such as mental health issues for learners, learning disorders, and low parent involvement in education. A more inclusive and destigmatizing approach to school attendance and absenteeism will entail a deeper

¹ <https://www.insa.network/research/journal-articles>

analysis and integration with broader ecological levels (Kearney et al., 2022). Examples of these broader levels include the quality of interactions between learners, parents, and schools, the type of educational system, economic development, and youth unemployment rates (Claes et al., 2009; Keppens and Spruyt, 2018; Leduc et al., 2022). In sum, considering multiple ecological levels allows us to strategically leverage the entire system in support of learners.

Third, greater use of mixed methods approaches becomes crucial. Integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods offers a more comprehensive understanding of school attendance and absenteeism. For example, qualitative tools like interviews and observations can yield insights into reasons and underlying mechanisms for attendance and absenteeism, while quantitative methods such as surveys and attendance data can provide information on the prevalence and risk factors of absenteeism. A key aspect of employing quantitative methods involves using sophisticated data analytic strategies for large data sets. This aids in pinpointing root causes of absenteeism within specific communities, schools, or student groups (Hough, 2019; Keppens, 2022, 2023). These analytic strategies include algorithm- and model-based approaches designed to unveil predictive patterns or outcomes.

Fourth, enhancing engagement with interested parties is imperative. The inclusion of educators, policymakers, parents, and learners in the research process ensures that research questions are not only relevant and practical but also that findings are actionable. As highlighted in Section 3.2, INSA's recent conference featured round table discussions aimed at fostering dialogue among academics, policymakers, practitioners, parents, and learners facing school attendance problems. One of these discussions centered on the theme "Action on research: What needs to happen next?". The insights derived from this round table discussion played a pivotal role in shaping the strategy for INSA's Scientific Sub-Committee.

Fifth, addressing the social determinants of absenteeism is essential. These determinants encompass non-medical factors that can influence school attendance, reflecting the conditions in which individuals are born, grow, work, live, and age. They are shaped by a broader set of forces and systems that define daily life, such as poverty, housing instability, limited access to healthcare, early childhood development, and considerations of social inclusion and non-discrimination. Notably, researchers have begun incorporating global social justice variables into models of school attendance and absenteeism, particularly in aspects related to migration, racial and income inequality, economic policies and opportunities, labor markets, violence, food insecurity, and healthcare (Keppens and Spruyt, 2018; Kearney et al., 2023). Embracing an interdisciplinary approach is crucial for identifying and addressing these underlying factors, as further discussed in the next paragraph.

Sixth, there is a need to conduct interdisciplinary research and disseminate research findings widely. Such interdisciplinary research is poised to generate insights that inform more comprehensive approaches to attendance and solutions for absenteeism (Kearney and Graczyk, 2020, 2022). An illustrative example of a comprehensive approach could involve addressing the mental health needs of learners, offering support for families to navigate the challenges they face, implementing policies and practices that promote attendance, and utilizing community resources for additional support. It is essential to disseminate emerging insights to a diverse array of interested parties, including families, educators, practitioners, policymakers, and organizations, to ensure their translation into effective practices and

policies. This will necessitate employing different dissemination strategies for various groups of interested parties, including tailoring information to the audience so it can be understood and used.

Implementing these strategies will enable INSA to facilitate a more interdisciplinary research agenda, breaking down silos between different fields and disciplines. This approach fosters collaboration and communication among researchers, educators, practitioners, and policymakers. Such collaboration holds the potential for establishing greater consensus and standardization around the conceptualization and measurement of school attendance and its problems, the development of multilevel assessment and intervention protocols applicable across various contexts, more effective implementation of interventions, and ultimately, better outcomes for learners. Currently, INSA's Scientific Sub-Committee is preparing a review and critique of contemporary systemic and analytic measurement strategies related to school attendance/absenteeism and related constructs. This initiative serves as a benchmark to develop a roadmap for constructing a next-generation common measurement of school attendance/absenteeism and related constructs.

4 Conclusion

Changing how we approach school attendance has the potential to significantly improve attendance rates, foster a meaningful relationship with education among learners, and better prepare them for adulthood. Drawing upon the insights of the 42 authors contributing to this Research Topic, we have curated eight crucial themes, four focusing on transforming our thinking about attendance, and four focusing on innovative work within this space. As you consider the concept of "unlearning school attendance," we encourage a thoughtful reflection on the need for recalibration to radical overhaul across these eight themes: thinking broadly about the meaning of attendance (Theme 1), thinking broadly about the function of attendance (Theme 2), thinking creatively about the provision of education (Theme 3), thinking broadly about influences on attendance (Theme 4), working on attendance and not only on absenteeism (Theme 5), working with attendance-related data (Theme 6), working on the needs of specific groups of learners (Theme 7), and working on alliances, dissemination, and implementation (Theme 8).

Readers are invited to assess the relevance of these themes to their contributions in the field of school attendance. Additionally, three dilemmas merit consideration. First, as we contemplate the meaning of attendance (Theme 1) and the function of attendance (Theme 2), while engaging with attendance-related data (Theme 5), a tension arises between using conventional, easily measurable metrics like in-seat time at school, and the need to develop and use more flexible and valid metrics based on our evolving, nuanced understanding of attendance. New metrics should account for contemporary learning formats and factors associated with an individual's relationship with education. Second, as we delve into influences on attendance (Theme 4), creative thinking about education provision (Theme 3), and addressing the needs of specific learner groups (Theme 7), the challenge is to reconcile flexible approaches to education, which may inadvertently lead to segregation, with the principle of inclusive education. How can the field strike a balance, offering flexible, personalized education that is both inclusive and culturally responsive, without resorting to segregating practices that might detrimentally

impact learners' long-term educational outcomes? Third, when committed to working on attendance, not solely on absenteeism (Theme 6), a potential tension arises in resource allocation for delivering universal interventions to promote attendance (Tier 1), targeted interventions for individuals or groups facing emerging, mild, or moderate absence (Tier 2), and intensive interventions for those displaying chronic or severe absence (Tier 3). While universal promotion of attendance is crucial, the question remains: How can we strike a balance to prevent the dilution of universal efforts and ensure that targeted and intensive interventions effectively address individual needs without creating disparities?

As INSA, these and other questions will occupy the forefront of our minds as we actively seek to advance the field. We extend a sincere invitation for your active engagement with our ongoing efforts detailed in Section 3. To learn more, please visit our website at www.insa.network and contact us at info@insa.network. Together, we can drive meaningful change in the realm of school attendance, paving the way for a brighter future for all learners.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the framing, work, and final version of the article. Lead author and co-founder of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA), DH, lead the curation of materials and

ideas. INSA's six Executive Committee members, the authors of this article, were instrumental in crafting the long-range goals for the future of the field of school attendance. All authors approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of *Frontiers*, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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