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**Author(s):** Jonas Højgaard Frydenlund

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Title: How an empty chair at school becomes an empty claim: A discussion of absence from school and its causality

Author: Frydenlund, Jonas Højgaard. Cand.Psych., Ph.D student

Contact information: jonas@psy.au.dk

ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-6833

Affiliations: Institute of Psychology, Aarhus University, Denmark
Abstract
Interventions targeting absence from school justify themselves with the claim that absence causes negative effects or prevents good effects. I argue that these are empty claims. I propose that absence as a cause makes sense in two ways: 1) in the context of prevention, if we take into consideration our expectations of what would have taken place, had the child gone to school, and what did take place for the child instead, and 2) in the context of responses to absence. Both interpretations lead to a conception where absence, instead of being a direct cause, rather accrues consequences from our responses to it. I use these alternatives to argue that responses to absence justified with the empty claim contribute to the results that the literature has so far claimed absence to have. Absence is not the problem, it may only be the sign of one.

Keywords:
Absence, Absence from school, Causality, Critique, Expectation, Philosophy, Prevention
How an empty chair at school becomes an empty claim

A discussion of absence from school and its causality

1. Introduction

The assumption I want to deal with in this article typically serves to introduce an audience to the theme of absence from school. It can be found in countless papers, reports, proposals, talks, and public websites, to the point of it being almost redundant to even mention it. These introductions entice the reader, make them interested in the topic at hand, and attempt to convince them that the theme is important and relevant. The typical introduction goes as follows: absence from school is an important area of research and intervention because numerous studies have shown it to be related to mental health issues, poverty, and criminal trajectories (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018; Finning et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008b; Maynard et al., 2015), and because presence at school is required for a healthy academic and social development among peers (Ekstrand, 2015; Elliott & Place, 2019; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019).

This introduction does indeed present absence from school as a phenomenon of importance, with consequences that justify it as a target for intervention: we want our children to have the best possible opportunities for a healthy development, and this is threatened by absence from school. The problem is that when we justify our interventions against absence by reference to these issues we thereby use a problematic assumption: that absence from school is causal, bringing about negative consequences or stopping the positive development that schooling cultivates, and that our interventions against absence are therefore appropriate responses to these issues. Our arguments uses this assumption because it proposes absence as a possible intervention target not because we want to lower absence for its own sake, but because we want to lower absence for the sake of the other issues.

In this article, I wish to study this assumption, arguing that absence from school is nothing but an empty chair, the expected child being elsewhere. With this definition of absence from school in hand, I go on to show how attributing causal power to it leads to a faulty logic. Because of this, absence is not the problem we need to solve, if we want to deal with the issues of mental health, criminal trajectories, and poverty. My argument leads me to propose that the effects of absence rely on responses and expectations. In the wake of this argument, I will show how our faulty assumptions have helped to produce some of the negative effects that absence from school is claimed to cause. Therefore, we need to rethink our
introductions and our research focus in order not to feed an assumption that is harmful to children who are absent from school.

2. From an empty chair to an empty claim

The aim here is to make a conceptual argument about why absence from school cannot by itself have causal power. Following my discussion, I will come to alternatives whereby absence as a cause can make sense. I am not the first to problematise the notion that absence from school has causal power. However, previous attempts have done so either by making the methodological point that we cannot attribute causality from the studies we have so far (Sheppard, 2007), or by questioning causality in general (Price, 2014). My aim here is different from both of these. Firstly, doing a conceptual analysis serves to expose a deeper issue than the methodological problem, for if we simply argue that our present studies do not allow us to attribute causal power, we still keep open the possibility that future studies might. My analysis attempts to show that there are issues in attributing causal power to absence from school, irrespective of any statistical reasons. Secondly, my argument is not against causality in general. I will instead be presenting difficulties in attributing causal power to absence from school specifically. Additionally, I will show how absence from school as causal ends up being an empty claim that requires us to fill it with our expectations to make sense.

2.1. What is absence from school?

To make a conceptual argument, we need a conceptual understanding of what absence from school is. Many discussions on how best to characterise absence from school are present within the research literature on the phenomenon. Most of these discussions refer to types of absence from school, such as whether it is excused/unexcused (Reid, 2005), problematic/non-problematic (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2018), school-refusal/truancy (Kearney, 2008a), volitional/non-volitional (Birioukov, 2015) among other types (For an overview, see Heyne et al., 2018). The problem for my current discussion is that all such definitions attempt to categorise absence in various ways rather than actually defining what “an absence from school” is in the first place. By arguing about types, they skip the hurdle of defining “an absence from school”.

Looking at how researchers operationalise “an absence from school” in order to measure it does not help either. Pflug & Schneider (2016) present a rather long discussion of problems with former ways of measuring absence in order to present their preferred way of measuring it via online questionnaires. They show that previous research has relied heavily on schools’ own records, which often report whole-day absences rather than absence from single lessons or specific periods of absence. Additionally, they show
that quite a few records rely on parental or self-reported absences, but that these are also very imprecise, either because parents are not always aware of their children’s absence, or because of the long span of time they were asked to report on – with questions such as “how many days have you been absent in the last year?” (e.g. Attwood & Croll, 2006). Importantly, the above measurement types all rely on the assumption that we already know what an absence is: we can simply ask the school, the parents, or the children themselves about absence, with the most salient problem being imprecision of memory and measurement time rather than imprecision about what it is.

In an article about sociological perspectives on absence, Ferguson (2016) begins to consider the nature of absence as “nothing”. He ponders the “paradoxical fact of [absence] appearing at all”: why is it that we can notice something which is not there? Ferguson proposes a definition in phenomenological terms by making the definition rely on our noticing absence from school. Thereafter, true to a phenomenological methodology, he attempts to sketch the “conditions of possibility” for noticing absence – what it is that gives us the ability to notice it. Ferguson’s answer is found in modern society’s fragmentation of time – time allotted into timeslots, calendars, hours of the day, clock time. He points out, that it is time fragmentation which creates the need and possibility to make “appointments”, to schedule our time to allow us to be at specific places at specific times. An absence is when we do not keep these appointments: they are disappointments. This means that absences are made possible by expectations that can be disappointed. Importantly, I want to add here that the expectation of presence at school is a normative expectation set by the law of mandatory school attendance.

However, Ferguson’s notion only describes absence as a broken expectation without telling us how that expectation takes place during school. This is what Bodén (2015) has studied. She shows that it is through various practices and materials that we get to notice absence. We notice absence from school with the help of such things as the enclosed classroom with closed doors, ringing clocks, empty chairs, attendance registering programs with lists of named children, SMS notices from parents, the teacher’s memory, and children’s reporting about who they see absent (Bodén, 2013, 2015, 2016). Clearly, there is an abundance of things and practices involved in making us notice absence. With this, we may define absence from

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1 This emphasis on absences noticed also helps us sidestep the philosophical issue of too many causal powers (Wolff et al., 2010). This is the issue that there are a great many things absent from any situation, such as the absence of fire in your hair right now. If all such absences were allowed causal power, then everything is present positively or negatively: either fire-in-hair is present or non-fire-in-hair is present.

2 This corresponds closely to the Cambridge dictionary definition of absence: ‘not being where you are expected to be’, ‘a being away’, or ‘a non-existence’ – https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/absence accessed 21 October 2019.
school as the phenomenon when a specific child is not present at a lawfully appointed place and time, specifically the classroom during class-hours, made noticeable by various materials and practices. The benefit of this definition is that it situates where the absence takes place, as well as actually defining what “an absence from school” is. This allows us to move on to a conceptual discussion of how this could function as a cause.

2.2. Absence is an open description
In the following, I will identify conceptual problems in treating absence from school as a cause, all problems being related to the fact that absence is what I call “an open description”. By “open description” I mean that, although absence describes the school situation, it does not tell us what the absentee is doing instead. We only see the empty chair, but not the whereabouts of the child. In that way, the situation of the child is a “black box” the content of which is unknown (see also Botterill & Lavelle, 2013). This is not a problem for the concept of absence because absence is only linked to what is missing from the current situation. It does however give us problems once we move over to “absence as a cause”. I will present some problems and possible alternative solutions, first in relation to thinking about absence as a direct cause and then in relation to thinking about it as a prevention. Throughout this discussion, responses and expectations are vital to my alternative conceptions of absence as a cause, so I will end this section with some reflections on these alternative conceptions.

2.3. The problem of the missing causal link
I will here draw on writing that has discussed how we may take absences in general as causes and extend this to the subject of absence from school. The problem presented in this writing is that absences seem to miss the direct touch or link between two sources that we experience when a bowling ball smashes the pins for a strike (Botterill & Lavelle, 2013). In order to argue for the causality of absence despite the non-existence of such a link, we are presented with examples such as situations where not watering a plant causes it to wilt and where Tracy did not meet up for a date, Thomas was disappointed (Wolff, Barbey, & Hausknecht, 2010). This is called negative causation (Menzies, 2017) or causation by omission (Schaffer, 2016). Both refer to the phenomenon where the absence of an influence brings about an event. In the case of Tracy and Thomas the same sort of disappointment as in absence from school seems to be involved.

However, these examples are not exactly transferable because I am in this article dealing with how absence causes negative consequences for the absent child. That is, the two above examples present the absence of one influence as affecting someone else who is present. The absence of water affected the
plant; the absence of Tracy affected Thomas. To claim that absence from school has consequences for the absentee is to claim that the absence of the water affected the water, or the absence of Tracy affected Tracy. This presents us with a kind of a conundrum, since a child is clearly not absent to themselves. They are not disappointed and so do not notice absence. Children are present elsewhere; they could be doing school homework just as well as eating pizza together with their friends – *neither situation directly caused by the absence from school*. An absent child may be aware of the fact that they should have been in school, but this is not an experience of “an absence” – it is an experience of rule breaking. Thus, the experience of knowing that you should have been at school is something different from absence, although it clearly may affect the child – perhaps giving them a bad conscience or an experience of thrill by breaking the demands of others (see, for example, Spruyt, Keppens, Kemper, & Bradt, 2016).

Importantly, simply describing what a situation is not, is not describing what it is. There is no link between me saying that I am not hungry and the fact that I am currently writing an article. Similarly, there is no link between the classroom and the situation of the absentee. Because there is no link between the empty chair and the child elsewhere, it is unclear how one may affect the other. We are missing the causal link between absence and the absentee. This argument makes the idea that absence has *direct*, negative consequences for the absentee untenable. Thus, we need to look elsewhere for causality. The above suggests that we could look into how absences affect those present, as their way of responding to absence may come to have consequences for the absent child later.

### 2.4. Absence as prevention leads to empty claims

#### 2.4.1. Prevention and absence as an open description

Absence as the prevention of the effects of schooling is only related to what does *not* take place, rather than what takes place for the child instead. In the above discussion, we worked with absence as an omission that causes something to take place (Dowe, 2001). Because the child did not come to school (their presence was omitted), the teacher responded (something else happened). However, in the case of absence as prevention we are working with an omission functioning as a prevention. Because the child did not come to school (their presence was omitted), they did not learn what was taught that day (something else did *not* take place). This is comparable to when the absence of a spark also means the absence of fire. When the cause is absent, so is its effect.

At first sight, this conception of causality seems to avoid the problem that the child’s whereabouts is a black box. It does so because the conception only relates to what does not take place. By completely ignoring what takes place for the child instead, the concept does not need an alternative. This is also closer
to the negative causation examples presented by the philosophers in the previous section. “Being absent from school caused the child to remain illiterate” is almost the same causal structure as “not watering the plant caused it to wilt”. It simply reverses the causal logic of the previous section. Before, the child was the water that never hydrated the plant, where the absence affected the plant but not the water. In the present case, the child is instead the plant which is not hydrated by the water of schooling.

The two causal structures are, however, not entirely the same. To “become” something wilted is different from “remaining” illiterate because the first implies a transformation while the latter does not. Importantly, we are in both cases dealing with living beings that will change regardless of what is done to them. The effect is one of affecting the direction of that change. Bateson’s (2000) classic example is that, if we were to kick a dog, it is not the kick that causes it to bite but rather its own life processes. In that sense, school may help children to develop in the direction of literacy, while absence may help to move them in a different direction. Any causal structure we propose is therefore a “weak” causal claim. This means that the child will change regardless of whether they go to school, making it ethically problematic to ignore what takes place instead of school. I will now make the stronger argument that absence as prevention cannot ignore what takes place instead of school, if the concept is to make sense at all.

2.4.2. Why we need to look into what takes place instead of school

When we are dealing with prevention we deal with counterfactuals. Counterfactuals are the “what would have taken place”, and they make it clear what it is that is prevented. It is our expectations that bring us the haunting images of the “could have been” and the “would have been” (see also Bergson, 1930). In case of absence, we work with negative counterfactual causation which functions by saying: if “Cause A” had not happened, then “Effect A” would not have happened either (Menzies, 2017). For example, if Peter’s absence from geography class had not happened, then Peter would not, not have learnt about Norway. Absence prevents Peter from learning about Norway. The problem is, however, that absence does not prevent Peter’s learning in a strong sense. It is not the case that, because Peter was absent from geography class, he could not learn about Norway. Indeed, he could have learnt about Norway elsewhere. In principle, there is nothing about absence from class that stops Peter from learning about Norway. This leads into what is called the problem of pre-emption (Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009). The issue here is that it is difficult to decide beforehand which cause is going to lead to a consequence, if there are two or more possible causes that could have the same effect (see also Mackie, 1965). That is, even if we prevented one cause, the other will still provide us with the same effect. This is similar to how, if our first parachute fails to save us when falling from the skies, our failsafe parachute will help us. If absence is to make sense as
preventing Peter from learning about Norway, we need to include the condition that his alternative activity did not help him learn about Norway either. The full causal claim is: being absent from class and doing some activity entirely unrelated to Norway prevented Peter from learning about Norway. Only when this alternative condition is added will the causal statement be true. This means that we necessarily have to look into “what took place instead” and compare this to “what would have taken place”, if we are to claim that absence functions as causal prevention in a strong sense. This is what Schaffer (2005, 2016) calls “contrastive causality”: the effect of a cause is the difference between “what took place with the cause” and “what would have taken place without that cause”. I will now turn to explore in what sense absence as prevention leads to effects when what took place instead is included in its conception.

2.4.3. Absence as a prevention can function through expectation
We do not need to stretch our imagination in order to suppose that absent children are not doing something that will have the exact same effect as schooling. Here, I will explore how absence as prevention can function as a cause, if we assume that children do not learn the same thing outside of school. With this addition, Peter does not experience the cause (geography class, or an alternative), nor does he experience its effect (knowledge of Norway).

The effect we are dealing with here is an absence too. The absence from school caused the absence of knowledge. I defined absences in terms of being noticed: their occurrence is their being noticed (Ferguson, 2016). Of course, Peter’s absence of knowledge about Norway is not likely to be noticed all the time, as one is seldom expected to have knowledge about Norway. At school, however, there are many practices of testing whether children have gained the knowledge that is expected of them. When Peter returns to school and the teacher asks him about Norway, Peter’s absence of knowledge will then be noticed. Thus, the “absences of knowledge” created by “absences from school” rely on expectations and the testing of those expectations.

We can now consider the ontological status of absences. This is the question of what sort of existential status absences have when they are not noticed. There is no consensus in the field of causation about this (Schaffer, 2016), which is also what motivated me to go for Ferguson’s practical definition of absence. Absences occur when they are noticed. I will make no claim as to their status before they occur. One issue with this definition is that many absences never occur, as most are never noticed. Because of this we can come to the rather odd conclusion that Peter’s absence on Tuesday from his geography class had no effect until Friday the next week, where the teacher’s test included questions about Norway. Further, we could say that Peter’s absence from math class never had any effect, as what the children were expected to
learn that day never became relevant. I wish here to stay practical: from the two examples, we can see that the caused effect of absence has no practical significance before it is noticed in some way. Absence accrues consequences through what we expect of children. This means that absence as prevention can function as a cause on two conditions. First, we must assume that the alternative activity to school does not produce the same effect as schooling would have, which in many cases is a practical assumption. Second, it only becomes a cause in the practical sense described above when the absence is noticed through expectations. Since not all absences are noticed, we cannot know beforehand if an absence will have an effect.

2.4.4. Implications of this notion of absence as prevention: empty claims

The causal structure we have arrived at consists of a contrast between “what took place” and “what would have taken place”. So far, I have only dealt with the type of case where we make assumptions about “what took place” and where we know “what would have taken place”. I wish now to explore the more likely case where we do not know any of these.

My first reflections are ethical. When we do not know “what took place” and only focus on “what would have taken place”, we ignore the possibility that the child might have learnt or done something worthwhile elsewhere. In Bergson’s words, “what exists does not interest us, [instead] we are interested in what is no longer there or in what might have been there.” (Bergson, 2002, p. 276). When we begin to think about what children learn elsewhere, we are quickly struck by the problem of incommensurability. If we include children’s learning outside of school in our comparison between “what took place” and “what would have taken place”, we need to compare such elements as being taught about the industrialisation (in school) and learning to cook a mean spaghetti (at home) – or vice versa. These are not immediately comparable because it is not a question of effectiveness but rather one of value. That is, we are likely to find that a comparison between what is taught at school and what is learnt elsewhere requires normative judgement about worth, which may be contested because of our different moral standpoints (Taylor, 1989). The point is that “what took place” is not readily compared to “what would have taken place”, as it requires us to make normative judgements about the value of both.

The second part of the causal structure is “what would have taken place”, which corresponds to what consequence would have come about had the child been in school. A problem that presents itself here is

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3 This may be extended to all sorts of causes in biological and human endeavors, as the effects of something often do not become apparent until much later, when the “right” conditions are present. I tend to think that the total cause is the total situation, making all causal claims a practical endeavor, rather than a truth-claiming one (see Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009; Mackie, 1965).
that we cannot know *for sure* “what would have taken place”. Let me take the example of learning. We know that children’s learning depends on how they engage with the material provided (Packer & Goicsoechea, 2000). During a lesson on the industrial revolution, the child may come to learn that this revolution refers to a historical period where a series of inventions, especially in the textile industry, changed our societal division of labour and everyday lives. Alternatively, maybe they learn very specific dates and names which they will be able to repeat, though without any further understanding of why this knowledge is important. The point is that we cannot know *beforehand* how students will engage with the taught material. Because we cannot know this, we also cannot know with certainty “what would have taken place” if the child went to school. We can only ever guess or estimate what a child will gain by attending school. It is also worth mentioning here that school is not a pleasant experience for everyone, and as such there may be cases where going to school would have had a negative outcome, for example in cases of bullying (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Tamutiene, 2008). With these two concerns about what is knowable, I am ready to make the argument that the claim that absence functions as a cause through prevention is empty and is only filled by expectations.

Firstly, because absence is an open description of what the child does instead of school, the “what took place” is an unknown factor and its effect, too, is unknown. To get an idea of what took place instead, we must either ask the child or make assumptions based on our expectations or estimations. This is not impossible in principle, but it often is in practice. Secondly, because we cannot know with certainty “what would have taken place”, this too requires interpretation based on our expectations. Thirdly, because the two effects are likely to be incommensurable, we need to make normative judgements about the value of each effect before we are able to make a judgement about the effect of the specific absence. Absence as prevention is therefore an empty concept in the sense that a hole is empty, it is ready to be filled in by our expectations, judged by what we believe is worthwhile. Only then does it make sense. Typical introductions are therefore presenting an empty claim based on the authors’ normative or sometimes statistical expectations of what the child would have learnt while also ignoring what the child learnt instead.

Not wanting to make empty claims, we must rewrite our introductions using the two alternative conceptions of absence as a cause that I have presented. I propose the following: absence from school *may prevent* the healthy, academic, and social development that school is expected to bring about, *depending* on what the child does instead and what we *expect* would have happened if they came to school. Furthermore, our studies have shown absence to be *related* to bad mental health issues, poverty,
and criminal trajectories, although why this is the case remains an important question. One answer may lie in how we respond to absences. Another answer may lie in how we come to have expectations for children and what consequences we force upon the children that fail to meet these expectations.

2.4.5. A counter argument and path-dependency
My argument about absence as prevention being an “empty” claim is based upon practical unknowability. A counterargument can be made that there are many instances wherein no other place would give the same experience as in school. For example, if Peter’s absence made him miss a presentation with his peers, there is no way that his alternative could also be that specific presentation. Here, we can know for certain, even beforehand, that he did not have this experience. I will draw two conclusions from this point.

Firstly, this particularity of experiences leads to the issue that something can function both as a cause and as an effect, depending on what we are interested in (Rouse, 2015). Usually, in school, we are not interested in a presentation for the sake of itself. We are interested in Peter becoming a better presenter and learning about Norway. It is the absence of this effect that we are interested in when dealing with absence as a cause through prevention. The causal claims I have criticised did not refer to effects that are only possible at school, but to effects that may have come about through other means. The counterargument is therefore not pertinent to my arguments above.

Secondly, it points out a third possible effect of absence. When the first parachute fails and it is instead the failsafe that makes us land safely, we are focussed on the effect “landing safely”. But there is a sense in which we are robbed of the unique experience of “landing safely with the first parachute”. This is important because our experience of landing safely is likely going to be very different. In the former case we had fun, while in the latter case we panicked and would never want to parachute again thanks to a newfound fear of parachutes not working. This path-dependency highlights how it matters which cause took place, even when the result we focussed on was the same. Peter may boast to his peers, if he was able to do well on a test due to vacationing in Norway. Even though an alternative activity had the same effect as coming to school would have had, the alternative activity may have had other effects too. We would do well to remember that the effects which we are focussed on are not the only ones.

2.5. Expectations and the interpretation of absence
I have now shown that, conceptually, absence as an effect requires interpretations based on expectations in order to make sense. It requires interpretation of “what took place” and “what would have taken place”. Because absence as a concept is silent when it comes to the child’s whereabouts and activities, anyone can fill in the gaps with their own expectations. Teachers may expect that the child is sick, out smoking,
or watching TV, thus losing confidence in the children (Jonasson, 2011; Spruyt et al., 2016), while parents may think the child is doing homework, sleeping late, or playing in the garden (James, 2012). Importantly, people will respond to the absence in different ways according to what they believe is happening and what the cause of it is. For example, in a qualitative study of absence Jonasson (2011) points out that teachers responded differently to absences depending on the interpretation of what took place during the absence: “lying in bed at the student dorm because of serious illness is more legitimate than skipping Friday afternoon classes to go home early for the weekend” (Jonasson, 2011, p. 23). Teachers may help children they think have been ill while withholding help from those they believe show a disrespect of school through their absences. Because both “what took place” and “what would have taken place” are open to interpretation, the interpretational work done by those who respond to absence has great power in deciding the immediate consequences absences come to have. I can also add from personal ethnographic experience that teachers often respond in relation to what they think “should have taken place”, even when they do not believe that what should have taken place actually would have taken place, had the child come to school.

Much can be said about the development of expectations about what children should be capable of or what they do instead of school. This would, however, turn us too far away from the goal of this article: to show that the causal claims that entice readers to think that absence from school is important are empty claims and may themselves help to bring about negative consequences. However, it is within scope to mention how each of the two causal claims brings with it its own set of assumptions as to what children do instead. In the case of absence as a cause of negative consequences, we are likely to assume – implicitly – that children are doing something slightly negative. Truancy is for example defined as: “illegal, unexcused absence from school; the term may also be applied to youth absenteeism marked by surreptitiousness, lack of parental knowledge or child anxiety, criminal behavior and academic problems, intense family conflict or disorganizations, or social conditions such as poverty” (Kearney, 2008a, p. 259). Alternatively, if we assume that children are prevented from the good of schooling, we tend to ignore what they are doing while they are absent from school. For example, the definition of “school refusal” includes no reference to what takes place instead of school: “a broader term referring to anxiety-based absenteeism, including panic and social anxiety, and general emotional distress or worry while in school.” (Kearney, 2008a, p. 259). When absence is the prevention of schooling – when we feel sorry for the
absentee missing school – the question of what children do instead is not asked. I think this is an important ethical issue in dealing with absence because we risk imposing our interpretations on the situations, irrespective of what the children say they were doing. This suggests that we need to take a closer look at the consequences we make absence have.

3. How the belief in absence as a cause leads to consequences

The argument I have presented has made it conceptually untenable to hold that absence, at least in any simple sense, causes negative outcomes or prevents good ones. Instead, I have proposed that absence accrues consequences through response and expectation structures. I now wish to turn to quite another endeavour in order to show one preliminary implication of this conception of absence as a cause. I wish to use my conception to critically judge the effects that our interventions against absence from school might have. This pertains to the above discussion, because the claims criticised above are the ones that justify these interventions. Specifically, I will point out how political responses to absence tend to be punitive and to target children and families already struggling. If my analysis is correct, it means that the empty claims have helped to make absence have negative consequences, something previously attributed to the absence itself. Since my aim is only to explore the usefulness of my conception for a critique, I do not take the following to be exhaustive. Instead, I will merely contrast some of the effects that we make absence have, in Denmark and the US respectively. I know that there are also many places where we make absence have positive effects through the way we respond to it. For example, most researchers into absence from school are themselves critical of punitive responses and suggest instead well-being-enhancing responses such as rewards and social re-organisation (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Ekstrand, 2015; Spencer, 2009). I still think, however, that the research done by these well-meaning researchers perpetuates the assumption of causality, which in turn justifies the practice of targeting struggling families through punitive interventions.

3.1. The assumption justifies specific practices

School attendance is a legal requirement in most countries today (Ekstrand, 2015), and, as I noted in my definition, absence from school is when children fail to meet this normative expectation. As such, it makes sense to see absence from school as a legal problem. Absence is, however, not posed as “problematic”...
because it is unlawful. Instead, new legislation and proposed interventions rely on the empty claims of causality.

In the US, the assumption lives on and breathes life into interventions through initiatives such as the homepage “attendanceworks.org”. Attendance Works’ mission is “to advance student success and reduce equity gaps by reducing chronic absence”. They embed the assumption of prevention in their very mission statement: absence prevents success and equality. The organisation attempts to accomplish their goal by presenting research, facts, and possibilities for action to different audiences in order to make various “partners across the community” aware of the problem that absence from school poses.

Specifically, Attendance Works uses a list of “10 facts about school attendance”. This list includes fact claims such as the claims that “absenteeism and its ill effects start early” and that “when students improve their attendance rates, they improve their academic prospects and chances for graduating”. The ill effects that absence causes start early, they claim.

In Denmark, absence from school is included as a factor in judging whether children are ready for further education. When this practice was first proposed, its goal was to prevent youth unemployment and to secure a well-educated workforce. The further explanation of this goal was that youths without education tend to be unemployed, and therefore they are an economic burden for the Danish welfare state (Folketinget, 2010). Here we see that there is an assumption at play, that absence is part of what prevents youths from gaining the benefits of schooling, even though parliament only implies that this may lead to unemployment. In a more recent law, officials in Denmark have begun fining parents for their children’s excessive absence. This law was justified with the argument that, although most parents take their children to school, “there are also parents in parallel societies who do not take this responsibility [seriously] and leave their children to themselves. This can hurt the child. And it can have consequences for the schools that will have a hard time [ensuring children get a good youth and adult life].” (Regeringen, 2016, my translation). Here the school prevents the hurt that can come about from leaving children to themselves, thereby making absence the prevention of this prevention. The causal claims are more muddled in the Danish legal documents, remaining within the arguments about “risks”. However, because

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these documents target absence in order to solve other problems, they implicitly assume that absence takes part in creating the problems they aim to solve.

It is important to mention that the various reasons for proposing specific responses to absence are far more complex than the above short descriptions can do justice. My wish was merely to show how such responses appeared legitimate through the implicit assumptions about the supposed causal power of absence. The empty claims provide a reason for intervening in people’s lives where resistance to the intervention seems irrational. After all, if the claims were true, who would not want to intervene? I will now turn to show how some of the responses are worth resisting because they themselves help bring about negative consequences.

3.2. Different responses have differential consequences
Different countries and local schools each have different ways of responding to absence and they are thus likely to make absence have different consequences. There are, however, some standard responses laid down by law and it is towards these I now turn in both the US and Denmark.

3.2.1. Practices in the US and their consequences
In the US, fines are issued to parents for their children’s absence. These fines have more than economic consequences, since the legal status of absence from school as a status offence entangles it with zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies use predetermined consequences – often severe and punitive in nature – when handling cases of illicit or disruptive behaviour, regardless of severity, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (Skiba, 2008). In 2010, juvenile courts dealt with almost 150,000 cases of status offence, almost 50,000 of which were truancy cases. While most cases end with fines, 10,400 of the total children were sent to detention and 6,100 cases led to longer-term placement in residential facilities (Salsich & Trone, 2013). Mallett (2016a) argues that, because of these zero-tolerance policies, many truants risk entering the “school-to-prison pipeline”, which is “a set of policies and practices in school that make it more likely for students to face criminal involvement with juvenile courts than to attain quality education” (Mallett, 2016a, p. 1). Within this pipeline, children with special education disabilities, children living in poverty, victims of maltreatment, and children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are overrepresented (Mallett, 2016b). It is also in the US that we find the tragic case of Eileen DeNino, who was placed in prison because she could not pay the fines that had been issued over her sons’ truancy and died there because she did not receive her medication (Kelly, 2014a, 2014b,
2015; due to GDPR regulations, these articles are unavailable to European audiences). These are some of the practices justified by the assumptions of absence as causal. They serve to keep disadvantaged families at a disadvantage. Even more problematic, if Mallett is correct in pointing to the “school-to-prison” pipeline, it means that interventions meant to reduce absence end up promoting, rather than preventing, criminal career trajectories.

3.2.2. Practices in Denmark and their consequences
In Denmark too, absence from school plays a part in children’s further life trajectory opportunities. Like the US, Denmark recently introduced monetary punishment in response to absence, although this is made by reducing welfare pay-outs rather than through direct fines (Folketinget, 2019). However, Denmark also responds by having absence be a part of an “educational readiness assessment”, which is an evaluation of whether children have achieved the requisites for completing further education (UVM, 2018). Attendance stability is judged as a general characteristic of children, predicting how they will attend to future obligations. More importantly, before Denmark implemented this assessment, the barriers to further education were based mostly on academic achievement – how well the child performed in school. With the introduction of the educational readiness assessment, absences now influence future opportunities independently of academic achievement. This influence serves to translate absence into bureaucratic barriers for the child’s further participation in the educational system (Jensen & Pedersen, 2016).

3.3. A study of how absence from school accrues consequences
Absence is a part of school practice, and school plays an important part in how persons go from being children to being adults with jobs. Just as the pathway from child to adult is different in the two countries, so are the responses to absence and the potential consequences that absence may accrue. While both have economic penalties, thereby implicating parents as the responsible party in ensuring attendance, they have very different results. In Denmark, the penalty is a reduction in child benefits, whereas in the US, when a fine is issued, such an issue may lead to further consequences, in worst case scenarios to the imprisonment of the parents. The added struggle of having to go to court because of these fines is then not present in Denmark, while court proceedings are an important part of how absence is dealt with in the US (Ovink, 2011). It therefore seems that the consequences of absence are less detrimental in Denmark as compared to the US. The same assumption did justify the responses to absence, however.

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8 Alternate articles about the events are available online. See for example: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/woman-jailed-over-truancy-fines-found-dead-in-cell/
Another important point to take into account is who it is that is affected by these responses. In a recent UK based study, Epstein, Brown, and O’Flynn (2019) report that in 2017 16,406 parents were prosecuted because of their child or children’s absence from school, and of these 71% were women. From these prosecutions came 12,698 convictions (74% women) and 10 imprisonments (9 women). Furthermore, by analysing reports from 126 of these parents (mainly mothers), they found many families were under stress, fewer than half were in employment, others on social or disability benefits, and as many as 80% reported health problems. This implies that women are disproportionately pursued for the offence of school absence, and it also implies that there is a tendency to target families who are already struggling with difficult conditions of living (Epstein et al., 2019). I therefore propose that we study further how absence accrues consequences through responses. For example, how parents’ responses often disrupts their own work routines, or how teachers change their expectations of a child depending on how often the child is absent.

4. Conclusion
Absence from school is an open description of what a child does instead of school. Absence in this sense cannot be a direct cause of negative effects because it posits no link between the absence and the absentee. Secondly, it cannot be a prevention of good effects by itself because absence on its own does not prevent the effects we claim it to have. In order to judge it, we must contrast “what took place” during the absence, and what “what would have taken place”, had the child attended school. The former is often unasked, and the latter is unknowable in practice. When we claim that absence is a cause of various negative effects and a prevention of positive ones it is therefore an empty claim – a claim filled only by our expectations. Furthermore, these expectations are often incommensurable and therefore need to be judged based on our moral standpoint – judgements that may have been made differently. We thereby tend to ignore the possibility that a child might do something worthwhile when being absent. I propose two alternative ways in which absence may function: Firstly, absence may function as a cause through the way that the ones present respond to it – a response that relies on expectations about the effects of absence. Different countries, schools, and teachers respond differently to certain students, and so absence from school is made to have different consequences. I have especially pointed out how punitive interventions may help bring about the negative consequences we have claimed absence to be the cause of. These interventions themselves were justified through the assumption that it is absence that causes negative consequences. Secondly, absence from school may function as a prevention of the effects that schooling is expected to bring about, but this depends on contrasting and judging what the child does
instead and what we expect children to have done, if they had been in school. This prevention also relies on how the absences come to matter later, meaning that some absences accrue consequences while others do not. This second argument was a practical one which I made in order to avoid the difficult question: what is absence when no one notices it? Thirdly, absence may function as a cause if it is part of a path where it matters how and when children learn things, as this may bring subsequent effects or have concurrent effects we do not focus on. This perspective opens up a new avenue for the study of absence from school. In this study, we should endeavour to explore how expectations come to matter, how practices of responses to absence lead to consequences, and what assumptions underlie, support, and justify these expectations and responses (For the latter, see also Carlen, 1992; Mulvany, 1989; Ovink, 2011; Wardhaugh, 1990, 1991). In short, a study of how absence from school accrues consequences.

I want to conclude the article with a short practical motto. Because absence is not the direct cause of the problems we want to solve by reducing absence, we should not treat absence as a problem on its own. Instead, we can treat it as a sign that a child does not want to follow, or has a hard time following, the norm of going to school. Further investigation is then required, for we do not yet know why the child is not going to school and what the child is doing instead. I propose the motto: absence is not the problem itself, it may only be the sign of one. And sometimes it is actually just we the adults that have a problem with children not being in school.

5. References


Salsich, A., & Trone, J. (2013). *From Courts to Communities: The Right Response to Truancy, Running Away, and Other Status Offenses*.


