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A scoping review of the research on school absences and return to school

Tiina-Reetta Laurén-Knuutila^a , Jaanet Salminen^b , Niina Junttila^b  and Katarina Alanko^{a,c} 

^aDepartment of Psychology, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland; ^bDepartment of Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; ^cDepartment of Science, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

Prolonged school absence is linked to serious individual and societal consequences, including psychological distress and increased dropout risk, making effective reintegration strategies essential. This review synthesizes 45 years of research on school re-engagement through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. A search across nine databases identified 67 eligible studies involving students aged 6–18 from high-income countries. Descriptive analysis examined publication trends, disciplines, methods, informants, and types of school attendance problems (SAPs). Research was dominated by psychology and concentrated in Europe, the United States, and Australia. Most studies focused on emotionally based school avoidance, often using case or intervention designs, with cognitive-behavioral therapy as the dominant approach. Interventions primarily targeted micro- and mesosystem levels, with limited attention to broader systemic factors. This imbalance risks reinforcing individualised explanations and constraining sustainable solutions. Future research should emphasize systemic, family-, and community-level approaches to support long-term school re-engagement and resilience.

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School attendance problems (SAPs); school absence; return; re-integration; Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model; student

Introduction


School plays a crucial role in the cognitive and social-emotional development of children and young people, hereafter CYP (Heyne et al., 2019a; Melvin et al., 2019). It fosters shared socialisation experiences and cultural values through its curriculum and routines, positively impacting students' social, mental, and physical health (Bonell et al., 2019; Heyne et al., 2019a). School absence represents a significant developmental risk for CYP, being associated with lower academic achievement, social-emotional difficulties, mental health problems, substance use, and later disengagement from education and employment (Kearney et al., 2019). These risks are amplified for youth growing up in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, highlighting how school attendance problems intersect with broader patterns of social inequality (Heyne et al., 2019a; Klein et al., 2020). Beyond individual consequences, school absence carries substantial societal implications, with UNESCO (2024a) estimating global economic losses linked to early school leaving and low academic and socio-emotional skills in the trillions of U.S. dollars.

Defining school attendance problems

Problematic school absence has no universally accepted definition (Heyne et al., 2019a). While absence rates of 10% or more are commonly viewed as concerning (Palmu et al., 2021), Kearney (2008) argues that problematic absence is defined less by frequency than by its negative impact on students' academic functioning and well-being.

Early research on school absences categorised all child-motivated absences as either school refusal or truancy (Elliott & Place, 2019; Kearney & Silverman, 1996). The concept of school refusal behaviour (SRB) later emerged to provide a more functional understanding of non-attendance.

Heyne et al. (2019b) classify school attendance problems (SAPs) into four types: school refusal (SR), truancy (TR), school withdrawal (SW), and school exclusion (SE). SR involves severe difficulty attending

CONTACT Tiina-Reetta Laurén-Knuutila  tiina-reetta.lauren-knuutila@abo.fi

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school, emotional distress, parental consent to absence, and no significant antisocial behaviour; it has previously been described as school phobia and more recently as emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) to highlight emotional and mental health-related causes (Corcoran et al., 2022; Halligan & Cryer, 2022; O'Hagan et al., 2022). Truancy refers to unauthorised absences without parental or school consent (Heyne et al., 2019a). School withdrawal is parent-driven, whereas school exclusion results from school-based decisions, such as failure to accommodate special educational needs, excluding formal disciplinary exclusions (Heyne et al., 2019b).

Today, SAPs is a commonly used umbrella term to cover a wide range of behaviours related to difficulties attending school as well as absence (Heyne et al., 2022; Enderle et al., 2024). In addition, the researchers have pushed for a semantic shift in the field from absence to school attendance.

Understanding SAPs through ecological frameworks

SAPs are multifaceted phenomena influenced by a range of individual, familial, and societal factors. In high-income countries, where most SAP research is conducted (Kearney et al., 2022), there is increasing recognition that these issues cannot be fully understood or addressed through narrow clinical or behavioural lenses alone. Instead, ecological perspectives offer more comprehensive frameworks for understanding both the emergence of SAPs and the conditions that support successful reintegration.

Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model provides a multidimensional lens to explore how children's development, including school engagement, and school absence, is shaped by nested and interacting systems. At the microsystem level, immediate environments such as family, school, and peer relationships influence attendance directly. The mesosystem includes interactions between these microsystems, such as communication between home and school. The exosystem encompasses broader influences like parental employment conditions or healthcare access, while the macrosystem reflects societal values, cultural expectations, and educational policies. Importantly, the chronosystem introduces a temporal layer, capturing both individual life transitions and broader societal changes, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased chronic absence (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025), or shifting norms and reforms in schools that influence attendance trajectories over time. Recent SAP studies have applied this model to highlight the complex interplay between environmental systems in shaping students' risk and resilience (Enderle et al., 2024; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lee et al., 2023; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025; Singer et al., 2021; Forsell, 2020; Melvin et al., 2019; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Research on SAPs

SAPs have been studied for more than a century across diverse disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, medicine, law, and public policy (Kearney et al., 2021; Kearney et al., 2022). Early research largely viewed SAPs as individual or psychological issues, emphasising student traits and internal difficulties (Elliott, 1999; Kearney et al., 2022a). Over time, attention expanded to include family and school contexts (Ingul et al., 2019). Despite this development, knowledge translation into educational and clinical practice has been slow, and interdisciplinary integration remains limited (Elliott & Place, 2019).

To organise this expanding body of work, Kearney et al., (2021, Kearney et al., 2023a, 2022) distinguish between analytic and systemic approaches to SAP research. Analytic approaches focus on specific variables within the immediate environment, primarily at the microsystem and mesosystem levels, whereas systemic approaches examine broader influences located in the exo- and macrosystems, such as school climate, educational policy, and socioeconomic conditions. Health-based interventions often draw on analytic frameworks, while school-based initiatives more frequently reflect systemic perspectives (Melvin et al., 2019; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Although both approaches contribute valuable insights across developmental stages (Kearney et al., 2023a; Smerillo et al., 2018), the overall research landscape remains fragmented, with limited theoretical and methodological coherence. Geographic and cultural variation in education systems further complicates comparative research and synthesis (Porto, 2020).

Intervention studies have primarily targeted SR and TR (e.g. Pérez-Marco et al., 2025). Evidence syntheses indicate that SR interventions are dominated by psychosocial, especially CBT approaches (Jakobsen et al., 2025; Maynard et al., 2015) and, to a lesser degree, pharmacological treatments (Melvin et al., 2019; Tobón

et al., 2018). TR interventions, in contrast, often emphasise behavioural and school-based strategies (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020a; Maynard et al., 2013). More recently, Eklund et al. (2020) synthesised school-based interventions supporting attendance after chronic absence. However, SW and SE perspectives remain underexplored, limiting understanding of SAPs as multidimensional and systemic phenomena.

Macro-level determinants of school attendance and absence vary both within and between countries, reflecting broader socioeconomic inequalities, institutional arrangements, and policy contexts. Within countries, attendance problems disproportionately affect youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, where poverty, housing instability, residential mobility, limited access to student welfare services, and unequal school resources intersect with disciplinary practices (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020b; Fredriksson et al., 2024; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025; Sosu et al., 2021). Cross-nationally, variation in attendance patterns is linked to differences in education system design, welfare regimes, and cultural meanings attached to schooling and absence. Comparative research indicates that early tracking, exclusionary discipline, and punitive attendance policies are associated with increased disengagement among marginalised youth, whereas welfare-oriented and preventive systems may better support sustained participation (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2022). Broader macroeconomic conditions, migration and asylum policies, and access to health and social services further shape attendance trajectories, particularly for youth living in poverty, youth with disabilities, and racially and ethnically minoritized youth (Kearney et al., 2023b; UNESCO, 2021). Consistent with bioecological models of development, these findings highlight that SAPs emerge through dynamic interactions between CYP and their social, institutional, and policy environments, underscoring the need for youth research that attends to structural conditions alongside individual developmental processes.

Despite SAPs being a global concern, research remains heavily concentrated in high-income countries and a limited number of geographic regions. Studies from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), especially in Africa, often focus on health-related determinants such as menstruation (Hennegan et al., 2021), early pregnancy (Denya, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022.; Mashulane et al., 2023; Morgan et al., 2023) and HIV (Henning et al., 2016; Kimera et al., 2020). Other perspectives are also emerging, including research on anxiety-related absence across 69 LMICs (Dalforno et al., 2022) and studies adopting an ecological resilience lens in South Africa (Theron et al., 2014; Van Rensburg et al., 2019). In South America, the educational crisis following prolonged COVID-19 school closures (Reimers, 2022; UNESCO, 2024b) has intensified national attention on attendance, with research and interventions expanding in countries such as Uruguay (Ajzenman et al., 2022; Vinas-Forcade et al., 2021; Zanoni et al., 2023) and Chile (Arbour et al., 2023; Arrigada Hernández et al., 2022; De los Reyes, 2024).

Recent research has also highlighted the importance of stakeholder perspectives, particularly those of CYP. Hejl et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative synthesis of 17 Nordic studies and found that students, parents, and school staff shared the goal of successful reintegration after absence. Their findings underscored the need for more qualitative and context-sensitive research that foregrounds lived experiences and captures the complexity of school absence in changing educational environments (Spruyt & Keppens, 2020).

The current study

Understanding of SAPs is crucial for developing effective interventions and policies that support students' return to school. However, research on SAPs is diverse, spanning multiple disciplines, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks. The review examines the existing literature to map the scope and characteristics of research conducted on support for reintegration in severe cases of SAPs or longer periods of absence. By analysing study designs, the specific types of SAPs investigated, disciplinary perspectives, and the geographical and temporal distribution of studies, we aim to provide an overview of how the field has evolved in high-income countries with school systems that are different but hold several comparable features.

This mapping is essential for several reasons. First, it helps identify trends and gaps in the research, revealing areas that have been extensively studied and those that require further attention. For example, understanding which types of SAPs (e.g. SR, TR, SW or SE) have received the most focus allows researchers and practitioners to assess whether certain forms of absence are underrepresented. Second, examining the disciplinary focus of studies (e.g. psychology, education, sociology, or public health) clarifies how different

fields conceptualise and address SAPs, highlighting potential interdisciplinary approaches that could enhance future research and interventions. Lastly, by analysing when and where studies have been conducted, we can assess whether research has kept pace with evolving educational and societal challenges and whether findings are generalisable across different contexts.

Materials and methods

To ensure no previous reviews on the topic were conducted, the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) was consulted. No prior studies with the same perspective were found.

The search, conducted in February 2023, was carried out across eight electronic databases: ERIC, CINAHL, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Teacher Reference Centre, and Medline. The search terms encompassed various aspects of school attendance issues, as well as factors associated with return, re-integration, and resilience. The search string included the following terms: 1) 'school attend*' OR 'school absen' OR 'school non-attend*' OR 'school absen*' OR 'school refusal' OR 'school withdrawal' OR 'truan*' OR 'school exclusion'; and 2) reintegration OR return OR resilien* OR coping OR re-engagement. The initial screening yielded 1,027 hits.

In addition, articles from the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) collection in March 2023, which provides selected articles on school attendance and absence, were incorporated into the search. A total of 782 articles from the INSA website were screened at the title and abstract level.

Eligibility criteria restricted the review to studies conducted in high-income countries, as defined by the World Bank (Mestre et al., 2024), to ensure comparability across educational systems, resources, and cultural frameworks. Studies were included if school absences were not primarily attributable to somatic illnesses or physical injuries, but instead reflected broader ecological factors.

The SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was used to help determine study eligibility criteria (see Table 1). The SPIDER tool was chosen to guide the search strategy because of its suitability for exploratory reviews of qualitative and mixed-methods research. Although it adapts elements of the PICO framework, SPIDER allows for greater flexibility in identifying diverse study designs beyond intervention-focused research.

The inclusion criteria, developed in collaboration by the authors, focused on studies addressing problematic school absence and return to school. Only studies conducted in high-income, industrialised countries with comparable educational systems were included. The primary focus was on the social, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of return after absence, with cases related to somatic illness or physical injury excluded. During the selection process, articles were removed for irrelevance. Peer-reviewed English-language studies published after 1980 were included, with no restrictions on study design. The SPIDER checklist was used to structure the inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, both the first and last author reviewed 20% of the studies and discussed unclear details and conflicts and made some specifications to the criteria. After that, the first author screened the remaining articles. After full-text screening of the database searches, 33 articles met the focused selection criteria. From the articles screened from the INSA website, 39 full texts were reviewed. This process led to the inclusion of 34 new articles, bringing the total to 67 articles for final analysis. (See Figure 1 and Table 2 below).

The included studies were analysed using descriptive content analysis to map key characteristics such as publication trends, disciplinary focus, study design, informants, and SAP types. This approach aligns with

Table 1. Spider inclusion criteria.

SPIDER strategy	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Setting/population	Students 6-18 years old with school attendance problems, Students from high-income -countries	Student's wrong age ($X < 6$ or $X > 18$) Students from low- and middle -income-countries
Phenomenon of Interest	1. School attendance problems and school absenteeism (truancy, school refusal, school withdrawal, school exclusion), AND 2. Return, re-integration and re-engagement to school, supportive factors, coping, resilience	Absence due to purely somatic illnesses/ physical injuries
Design, Evaluation, Research	All study designs Primary studies Peer-reviewed English studies 1980 - >	Irrelevant Reviews Inadequate methodological information Foreign language

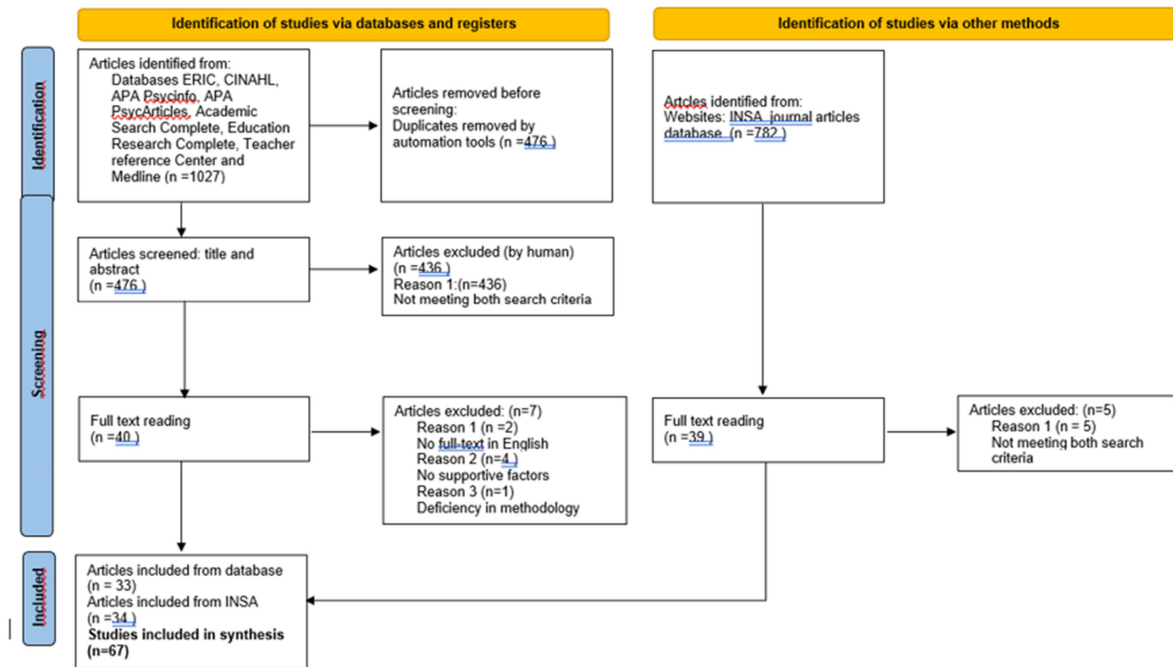


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of study selection.

the objectives of scoping review methodology, which aims to provide an overview of the existing research landscape rather than evaluate quality or synthesise findings.

Results

Research on SAPs and return to school has increased markedly since the 1980s. Only three studies were published in the 1980s, whereas over half (58%) appeared after 2010, with a peak in 2010–2019 ($n = 26$). This trend reflects growing scholarly attention to SAPs and student reintegration. Table 3 presents decade-by-decade research trends by field, SAP type, study design, Bronfenbrenner's ecological level and informants.

Most studies drew on multiple informants. CYP were included in 82% of studies, underscoring the centrality of youth perspectives. Parents were represented in 60% and professionals in 34% of studies. Multi-informant designs have become more common over time, with 36% of studies published after 2000 including CYP, parents, and professionals. When only one informant was used, CYP predominated (18%), while parents alone were rarely included (1.5%). This shift is significant, as students, caregivers, and schools often construct absences differently (Havik et al., 2015; Heyne et al., 2019a; Kearney, 2008; Kreitz-Sandberg & Fredriksson, 2023; Malcolm et al., 2003; Molinari & Grazia, 2023): institutional accounts tend to emphasise attendance and behavioural compliance, whereas youth and parents highlight emotional distress, relational dynamics, and contextual stressors that may remain invisible in school records.

Geographically, research was concentrated particularly in the United Kingdom (33%), the United States (22%), and Australia (13%), together accounting for 68% of studies. Beyond language, this concentration likely reflects shared Anglo-American macrosystem characteristics shaping how SAPs are conceptualised and addressed, often privileging individual-level explanations. Additional studies originated from Germany and Japan (6% each), the Netherlands (4.5%), and several other countries.

Across the review period, psychology dominated the field (63%), followed by education (21%), medicine (10%), and social sciences (6%). The dominance of psychology increased over time, reinforcing an individual-focused orientation to SAPs. Methodologically, intervention studies ($n = 25$), largely CBT-based, and case studies ($n = 21$) were most common. Longitudinal research was rare ($n = 3$). Since the early 2000s,

Table 2. Included articles ($N = 67$) in chronological order.

Author & Year	Country	Sample	SAP subtype	Study design/method or intervention type (name of intervention)	Field	Bronfenbrenner's levels: micro-, macro-, exo -and mesosystems
Conway et al. (2022)	USA	$N = 932$ (CYP (age range 3, 5–18, 7 yrs)	SR	intervention/home-based psychological treatment (IICAPS)	medicine	micro, macro
Cunningham et al. (2022)	UK	$N = 8$ school staff members	SR	cross-sectional/qualitative	education	micro, meso
Halligan and Cryer (2022)	UK	$N = 19$ CYP (age range 15–16 yrs)	SR	cross-sectional/mixed-methods	psychology	micro
Heyne and Brouwer-Borghuis (2022)	NL	$N = 76$ professionals, $N = 39$ CYP	SR	cross-sectional/mixed-method with CBT SR-intervention (Knowing what works-project)	psychology	micro, meso
Melin et al. (2022)	SWE	$N = 86$ parents	SR	cross-sectional/qualitative	psychology	micro, meso
Corcoran et al. (2022)	UK	$N = 12$ clinical practitioners	SR	case study	psychology	micro, meso
O'Hagan et al. (2022)	UK	$N = 2$ CYP	SR	cross-sectional/qualitative	education	micro
Bitsika et al. (2022)	Australia	$N = 3$ CYP (age range 13–15 yrs) and their parents and key adult	SR	cross-sectional/quantitative	psychology	micro
Strömbeck et al. (2021)	SWE	$N = 58$ CYP and their mothers	SR	intervention/CBT (Hemmasittarprogrammet)	psychology	micro, meso
Lowri (2021)	UK	$N = 84$ students (age range 10–17 yrs) and their parents	SR	case study	education	micro, meso
Lall (2020)	India	$N = 1$ girl (11 yrs)	SR	case study	psychology	micro
Lomholt et al. (2020)	DEN	$N = 1$ boy (17 yrs)	SRB	intervention/CBT (Back2School)	psychology	micro, meso
Young et al. (2020)	USA	$N = 24$ CYP (age range 7–16 yrs) and their parents	TR	intervention/school-based intervention by social worker (PAWS)	social work	micro, meso
Reissner et al. (2019)	Germany	$N = 41$ CYP (age range 11–13 yrs)	SRB	Intervention/Modular CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019)	NL	$N = 112$ CYP (age range 6–12 yrs)	SR	intervention/school- & CBT-based (The LINK)	psychology	micro, meso
Maeda & Heyne (2019)	Japan	$N = 30$ CYP (12–17 yrs)	SR	intervention/school-based intervention (rapid return)	education	micro, meso
McKay-Brown et al. (2019)	Australia	$N = 39$ parents	SR	intervention/School based support (In2School)	education	micro, meso
Hannan et al. (2019)	USA	$N = 7$ CYP (age range 12–14 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT (Intensive CBT for SR))	psychology	micro, meso
Kljakovic and Kelly (2019)	UK	$N = 25$ CYP (age range 9–18 yrs)	SR	cross-sectional/mixed-method	psychology	micro, meso
Rosen et al. (2019)	USA	$N = 47$ CYP	TR	longitudinal retrospective	education	micro
Embeita (2019)	UK	$N = 2110$ CYP	SE	cross-sectional/qualitative	psychology	micro, meso
Atkinson & Rowley (2019)	UK	$N = 3$ parents	SE	cross-sectional/mixed-method	psychology	micro, meso
Sibeoni et al. (2018)	France	$N = 9$ CYP (age range 10–12 yrs)	SR	cross-sectional/qualitative	medicine	micro, meso
Preece & Howley (2018)	UK	$N = 20$ CYP (age range 13–18 yrs)	SR	case study	education	micro, meso
Finning et al. (2018)	UK	$N = 21$ parents	SAPs	cross-sectional/qualitative	psychology	micro, meso
Brede et al. (2017)	UK	$N = 16$ educational practitioners	SE	cross-sectional/mixed method	psychology	micro, meso
Maeda (2017)	JAP	$N = 9$ CYP (age range 10, 9–18.1 yrs) and their parents	SR	case study (Morita therapy-based consultation))	psychology	micro, meso
Maeda (2016)	JAP	$N = 1$ young person (14 yrs)	SR	case study (school-based behavioural constultation)	psychology	micro, meso
Baker & Bishop (2015)	UK	$N = 3$ CYP (age range 13.14 yrs)	SR	cross-sectional/qualitative	psychology	micro, meso
Blackmon & Cain (2015)	USA (LA)	$N = 4$ CYP (age range 11–16 yrs)	TR	cross-sectional/qualitative	social work	micro, meso, macro
Mann et al. (2015)	USA	$N = 6$ professionals (case managers)	TR	cross-sectional/mixed-method (REAL girls)	education	micro, meso

Table 2. (Continued)

Author & Year	Country	Sample	SAP subtype	Study design/method or intervention type (name of intervention)	Field	Bronfenbrenner's levels: micro-, macro-, exo -and mesosystems
Reissner et al. (2015)	Germany	N = 112 CYP (age range 6–12 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT (modular treatment)	psychology	micro, meso
Oner et al. (2014)	TUR	N = 2 CYP (age range 15 & 8 yrs)	SR	case study/CBT	medicine	micro, meso
Walter et al. (2014)	GER	N = 141 CYP (age range 12, 1–18, 1 yrs)	SR	intervention/inpatient CBT	psychology	micro
Wu et al. (2013)	CHI	N = 75 CYP (age range 8–18 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT + medication	psychology	micro
Nuttall & Woods (2013)	UK	N = 2 CYP and their parents	SR	case study	psychology	micro, meso
Maeda et al. (2012)	Japan	N = 1 child (14 yrs)	SR	case study/School-Based Intensive Exposure Therapy for SRB	psychology	micro, meso
Heyne et al. (2011)	NL	N = 20 CYP (age range 11–17 yrs)	SR	intervention/developmentally sensitive CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Walter et al. (2010)	GER	N = 147 pupils (age range 12–18 yrs)	SR	intervention/inpatient CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Tolin et al. (2009)	USA	N = 4 CYP	SR	case study/CBT	psychology	micro
Rodríguez & Conchas (2009)	USA	N = 6 CYP	TR	case study/community-based truancy programme	education	micro, meso, macro
Wilkins (2008)	USA	N = 4 CYP (age range 8–11 graders)	TR	cross-sectional/qualitative	education	micro
Prabhuswamy et al. (2007)	India	N = 33 CYP (age range 8–16 yrs)	SR	longitudinal	medicine	micro
Head & Jamieson (2006)	UK	N = 4 students, N = 2 parents	SRB	cross-sectional/qualitative	education	micro, meso
Milne et al. (2006)	NZ	N = 66 CYP (age range 11–16 yrs)	TR	Intervention/community-based truancy intervention	social sciences	micro, meso
Aviv (2006)	N =	N = 12 CYP (age range 12–15 yrs)	SR	intervention/tele-hypnosis	medicine	micro
Place et al. (2002)	UK	N = 17 CYP (age range 12–15 yrs)	SR	cross-sectional//qualitative	psychology	micro, meso
Heyne et al. (2002)	AU	N = 61 CYP (age range 7–14 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT (child therapy, parent/teacher training, and the combination of child therapy and parent/teacher training for SR)	psychology	micro, meso
Kearney et al. (2001)	USA	N = 2 CYP (9&10 yrs)	SRB	case study	psychology	micro, meso
King et al. (2000)	AU	N = 1 child* (8 yrs)	SR	case study/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Bernstein et al. (2000)	USA	N = 67 CYP (average age 13, 6 yrs)	SR	Intervention/CBT + medication	psychology	micro
King et al. (1999)	AU	N = 20 CYP (age range 6–14 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Meyer et al. (1999)	N =	N = 1 child (18 yrs),	SRB	case study	medicine	micro, meso
Rollings et al. (1998)	Australia	N = 1 child (13 yrs 8m)	SR	case study/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Anderson et al. (1998)	Australia	N = 1 child (13 yrs)	SR	case study/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Last (1998)	USA	N = 56 CYP (age range 6–17 yrs)	SR	intervention/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Roberts (1998)	UK	N = 1 CYP	SR	case study	psychology	micro
King et al. (1998)	Australia	N = 34 CYP (age range 5–15 yrs)	SR	intervention CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Chabrol & Foursale (1996)	France	N = 1 child (13 yrs)	SR	case study	psychology	micro
Tansey (1995)	UK	N = 1 child (7th grade)	SR	case study	education	micro, meso
Coulter (1995)	UK	N = 2 CYP (10 yrs & 12 yrs)	SR	case study	social science	micro, meso
King et al. (1994)	AU	N = 1 child* (8 yrs)	SR	case study/CBT	psychology	micro, meso
Hess et al. (1990)	USA	N = 26 CYP (age range 11, 1–16, 6 yrs)	TR	intervention design/school-based intervention	education	micro
Kearney & Silverman (1990)	USA	N = 7 CYP (mean age 12, 5 yrs)	SRB	intervention design/tailored intervention on each SAP-types	psychology	micro
Goh (1989)	Singapore	N = 27 CYP (age range 6–17 yrs)	SR	intervention design/psychotherapy, family therapy + medication	medicine	micro, meso

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Author & Year	Country	Sample	SAP subtype	Study design/method or intervention type (name of intervention)	Field	Bronfenbrenner's levels: micro-, macro-, exo -and mesosystems
Bryce & Baird (1986)	UK	N = 10 CYP (age range 12 yrs 9 months –15 yrs 10months)	SR	intervention design/family therapy	psychology	micro
Valles & Oddy (1984)	UK	N = 34 CYP	SR	longitudinal (follow up)	psychology	micro

*same case (a child, 8 yrs) in King et al. (1994) and King et al. (2000).

Table 3. Characteristics of studies evaluating factors supporting return to school after absence in different decades.

	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2019	2020-2022	TOTAL
	N	N	N	N	N	N
-Total N	3	13	12	26	13	67
Field of research						
Psychology	2	9	6	17	8	42
Education	–	2	3	6	3	14
Medicine	1	1	2	2	1	7
Social sciences	–	1	1	1	1	4
Terms used for absence						
SR	3	10	8	18	11	50
TR		1	2	3	1	7
SW						
SE				3		3
SRB		2	2	2	1	7
Study design						
Intervention design	2	5	4	10	4	25
CBT		3	2	7	2	14
Case study*		8	4	6	3	21
Cross-sectional study	1		4	5	4	14
qualitative			3	5	3	11
quantitative					1	1
mixed-method				4	2	6
Longitudinal study	1		1	1		3
Bronfenbrenner's level						
Micro	3	13	12	26	13	67
Meso	1	9	6	13	8	47
Exo						
Macro			1	1	1	3
Informants						
Children –13			2	3		5
Adolescents 13+		3	3	8	6	20
CYP (mixed ages)	2	4	7	7	5	25
Parents	1	7	9	15	9	40
Teachers/school staff		6	3	10	4	23
Social workers		1	1	2	1	5
Psychologists	1	4	1	2	4	12
Psychiatrists/Ward staff		2		2		4
Total number	4	27	26	39	29	

Note: *One SR- case study was reported in 2 publications.

cross-sectional and qualitative designs have become more prevalent, reflecting efforts to deepen understanding of SAPs beyond treatment outcomes.

From a bioecological perspective, most interventions targeted the microsystem, often involving parents and teachers. Collaboration among home, school, and services extended many interventions to the mesosystem ($n = 47$). Peer relationships were identified as supportive in 20 studies, though structured peer-based interventions were rare. No exosystem-level interventions were identified, and only three studies addressed the macrosystem through national programmes or policy initiatives.

SR/EBSA dominated the literature (75%), primarily studied within psychology and psychiatry, with anxiety and depression frequently highlighted. TR appeared in 12% of studies, mostly US-based, typically employing educational or social science perspectives and focusing on community-level interventions

targeting socioeconomically and ethnically marginalised populations. SE was addressed in only three UK-based studies, and no studies focused exclusively on SW.

Overall, the findings indicate a strong predominance of individual-focused approaches in SAP research. While recent studies increasingly employ qualitative methods, multiple informants, and ecological framings, exosystem- and macrosystem-level interventions remain largely absent, pointing to a persistent ecological imbalance in the field.

Discussion

This scoping review mapped research on SAPs and return to school among CYP, analysing 67 peer-reviewed studies published between 1980 and 2022. Historically, research emphasised individualised, psychologically oriented approaches, SR/EBSA and CBT, with intervention and case study designs dominating and few longitudinal or controlled trials. These limit understanding of long-term outcomes and mechanisms of change. Although recognition of family, school, and systemic influences has increased since the 2000s, the ecological lens remains unevenly applied. TR studies, often grounded in education and social sciences, highlight community-based interventions (Blackmon & Cain, 2015; Mann et al., 2015; Young et al., 2020), whereas SR research primarily relies on therapy-based models (mainly CBT), reflecting the disciplinary focus and a tendency to emphasise individual-level factors in conceptualising SAPs. At the same time, many SR interventions incorporated collaboration with key microsystem actors, like parents and school. Peer support is identified as protective, yet structured peer-based interventions are rare (Anderson et al., 1998; Mann et al., 2015; Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009), contrasting with evidence of the importance of belonging for adolescent development (Eccles & Qualter, 2021; Osborn et al., 2021).

Notably, none of the reviewed studies examined exosystem-level influences, and only three addressed macrosystem factors through national programmes or policy frameworks (Blackmon & Cain, 2015; Conway et al., 2022; Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009). Return-to-school research has focused predominantly on SR whereas Pelkonen et al. (2022) reported that 68% of studies on SAP causes examined TR. This pattern likely reflects the influence of psychological and medical research traditions and underscores the importance of considering how different student groups are represented, as TR interventions often involve ethnically minoritized or socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. Research on SW and SE remains limited, with SE studies primarily focusing on neurodivergent students. From a bioecological perspective, the relatively limited attention to exo- and macrosystem processes suggests an opportunity for greater integration of welfare, health, and social service contexts, which play an important role in shaping schools' responses to prolonged absence. Policy and institutional structures that support families, schools, and multidisciplinary collaboration may therefore be particularly relevant for facilitating return to school.

All included studies originated from high-income countries, mostly Anglo-American countries, reflecting the context where SAP research is most established. However, evidence from LMICs (e.g. Dalforno et al., 2022; Theron et al., 2014; Van Rensburg et al., 2019) highlights distinct challenges, emphasising the need for context-sensitive and globally inclusive perspectives. Global disruptions, like COVID-19, challenge traditional attendance definitions, emphasising the need to reconceptualize attendance as multidimensional, encompassing engagement, continuity of learning, access to support, and a sense of safety and belonging.

Although school absence is often conceptualised as an individual or family-level concern, evidence from high-income countries, particularly the United States, indicates that attendance is also shaped by broader forms of structural violence and institutional safety. Research suggests that experiences of bullying, ostracism, and unaddressed mental health difficulties may contribute to violent trajectories, including school shootings (Kiuru et al., 2025; Leary et al., 2003; National Threat Assessment Center & NTAC, 2021; The Division for Emotional & Behavioral Health (DEBH), 2024). Conversely, exposure to school shootings and ongoing fears of school-based violence erode students' sense of safety and trust in educational institutions, contributing to increased absence and disengagement (Cabral et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2023; Rasberry et al., 2020; Rossin-Slater et al., 2022). From a bioecological perspective, these events disrupt exo- and macrosystems, shaping students' school participation and experiences, especially for marginalised youth, and highlight SAPs as indicators of broader systemic issues of safety, inequality, and institutional trust.

For practice, findings emphasise combining individualised support with systemic approaches that strengthen collaboration among parents, schools, and social and health services. Schools may benefit

from whole-school approaches fostering belonging, inclusion, and mental health awareness, alongside professional development to detect and address attendance difficulties proactively. Policy-level interventions addressing structural inequities, through cross-sector collaboration, long-term monitoring, and inclusive programmes, can further promote equitable educational outcomes. From a bioecological perspective, attention to systemic, contextual, and societal factors is critical to supporting all CYP in maintaining engagement and accessing education.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, the search terms may not have captured all relevant aspects of SAPs. For example, terms such as school phobia were not included in the search string, although they appeared in reviewed studies (e.g. Last et al., 1998). Second, evolving definitions of key concepts such as SR and return to school, along with the use of multiple overlapping terms (49 identified for SRB since 1930; Heyne et al., 2019b), complicate comparisons across studies. Third, the review excluded studies centred on somatic illness and focused on high-income countries, which may limit generalisability.

Finally, a central limitation of scoping reviews is the absence of formal quality appraisal, as their purpose is to map the extent of existing research rather than assess the strength of evidence. As a result, findings cannot be evaluated for methodological rigour. Scoping reviews also privilege breadth over depth, and their still evolving methodological standards may increase the risk of inconsistency and bias compared with systematic reviews.

Conclusion

SAPs are often framed as individual deficits, with research dominated by psychologically oriented interventions. However, a bioecological and de-individualising perspective highlights the role of systemic, structural, and societal factors in shaping absence and reintegration. Effective responses require coordinated action across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, including schools, families, peers, social and health services, and policy frameworks. Future research should expand on SW and SE, use longitudinal and multi-informant designs, and examine how structural conditions influence trust, engagement, and equitable reintegration. Attendance should be reconceptualized to encompass engagement, learning continuity, and a sense of safety, particularly in contexts affected by global disruptions. Integrating individualised support with systemic strategies can promote equitable educational opportunities, ensuring all CYP remain engaged, supported, and able to thrive.

Author contributions

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ORCID

Tiina-Reetta Laurén-Knuutila  0000-0001-8823-5792
Jaanet Salminen  0000-0002-2607-2948

Niina Junttila  0000-0002-9096-377X
 Katarina Alanko  0000-0003-0513-377X

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