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How Rounders Revealed Group Dynamics in a Fifth-Grade Class

A methodological exploration of the possibilities for preventing school attendance problems by setting the classroom community into play and assessing group dynamics.

Motivated by empirical findings from a hermeneutic-phenomenological field study, this article examines teachers' and pedagogues' role in discovering barriers to and facilitators of school attendance during students' play. Through field observations of interactionist factors for school attendance and qualitative interviews with students and school professionals, it is examined how moving bodies provide insights into the classroom community.

The study aims to identify how authentic, interactive, participatory, informal, and formative assessments of play can prevent school attendance problems. The study suggests that play is prioritized as part of the school curriculum and that school professionals are given the possibility of professional followership roles.

Keywords: School Attendance Problems; Play; Assessment; Classroom Community; Somaesthetics

Introduction

More and more students have globally experienced school attendance problems (SAPs) (Kearney, 2008; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020; Gren-Landell, 2021). Danish schools have experienced a general rise in school absences since 2013¹.

Motiveret af empiriske fund fra et hermeneutisk-fænomenologisk feltstudie udforsker denne artikel læreres og pædagogers muligheder for at opdage barrierer og betingelser for skoledeltagelse gennem elevers leg. Via feltobservationer af samspilsbetingede faktorer for oplevelsen af skoletilhør samt kvalitative interviews med elever og skoleprofessionelle undersøges det, hvordan kroppe i bevægelse giver indsigt i gruppedynamikker i klassefællesskabet.

Formålet er at identificere potentialer til, hvorledes autentisk, interaktiv, partcipatorisk, uformel og formativ evaluering af leg kan benyttes til at forebygge skolefravær. Dette medfører behovet for, at leg prioriteres som en del af skolernes pensum, og at skolens professionelle får tid og ressourcer til at give elevernes leg følgeskab.

Nøgleord: Skoledeltagelsesmuligheder, Leg, Evaluering, Klassefællesskaber, Somaestetik

Furthermore, when a student is experiencing SAPs, the problems are often individualized and handled within a pathological framework (Lund, 2021). Failing to address SAPs in a timely manner often means that school counselors, school leaders, and well-being personnel wind up tackling them, placing the responsibility outside the classroom community (Szulewicz & Tanggaard, 2015).



¹ <https://uddannelsesstatistik.dk/Pages/Reports/1833.aspx>

Belonging in the classroom community

There are strong indications that a school's social environment, also termed the *school climate* (Thapa et al., 2013), is crucial to a child's experience of belonging and inclusion in the classroom community and affects school attendance factors (Knage, 2023; Hansen, 2019; Akar-Vural et al., 2013). Brochmann & Madsen (2022) described SAPs as the *school refusal mystery* and called for a more phenomenological approach to examine SAPs' complexities, backgrounds, and causes. Such an approach facilitates a research process dominated by wonder and insights into possible reasons and explanations of SAPs.

This article adopts as a hypothesis that a connection exists between group dynamics, the experience of school belonging, and the level of psychological safety (Andersen et al., 2023) within the classroom community. Furthermore, this article posits that group dynamics show when students engage in play and that assessing these group dynamics relates to the prevention of SAPs within the classroom community. When students develop SAPs, teachers must grasp the possibilities of dealing with them in a pedagogical frame within the classroom community (Lund & Winslade, 2018).



Professional judgment

I recently conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with school professionals regarding facilitators of and barriers to school attendance. A school leader at a large community school in Denmark elaborated on the need for an alternative approach to SAPs and emphasized the importance of listening to the teacher's professional judgment:

(...) There has clearly been a need – also concerning absence issues – for us to have data and not just sit back and think, he [referring to a student] has been away a lot this autumn (...) But we just must be careful that we don't come across as thinking that everything can be solved if we have enough data, because it also becomes a question of the judgment of the good teacher (...) It is also about having an eye to the personal and educational aspects of helping children in communities (...) When running a school and children's learning and well-being, you must not do that by leaning too heavily toward natural scientific thinking, where we constantly think we can explain cause and effect (...) The required courage is having a more playful or artistic, if you will, creative, risk-taking, probing, curious, exploratory approach. That is sometimes what pushes the boundaries to where there is something we haven't tried before, that turns out to be powerful (...) An aesthetic approach, in a public management paradigm – then you must lean back and say: We're doing it – damn it.

Moreover, one teacher explained the problematic issues of sidelining teachers when students fail to thrive within the classroom community:

If we notify the municipal authorities about a child who is failing to thrive or notify about too many absences and things like that, we submit it, and then we get a receipt that it has been submitted, and then it closes for our part. In other words, it is our concern and we are the ones who want to help the child, and then we are sidelined rather than being called to a network meeting and having to present our side of the matter, and then it is suddenly others who take over.

These abovementioned statements indicate that a more robust authorization to address SAPs needs to be given back to teachers and pedagogues, requiring a supplementary methodology to strengthen professional competencies regarding classroom management and assessment of group dynamics, as well as ensuring that as many students as possible experience the most possible belonging and psychological safety within the classroom community.

Preventing SAPs through play

This article addresses prevention of SAPs through a somaesthetic approach and contributes to research on SAPs by suggesting that when assessing students' play, the method can be used as valid qualitative information about the group dynamics in the classroom community and as an early intervention to prevent students from being excluded or denied the experience of belonging in the classroom community.

Playing is connected intricately to communication and collaboration (Thorsted, 2010). Our bodies carry our lived experiences and muscular memories of earlier attachment patterns (Shusterman, 2008, 2012). Through an aesthetic-playful and philosophical practice of wondering, it is possible to connect with an existential dimension and a state of pure being (Hansen & Thorsted, 2022). Play and nonverbal communication (Kjeldsen & Jensen, 2007) are ways to access qualitative information about students' experiences while being part of the classroom community.

Play and its inherent human qualities have already been researched excessively (Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021), also in a school context (Møller et al., 2018). When playing, the students become part of each other's lifeworld, thereby including an element of surrendering to the playing community (Thorsted, 2010). The level of psychological safety and the overall experience of pedagogical atmospheres (Bollnow, 1989) may reveal something about the classroom community's coherence (Ryan & Deci, 2000), including its collective coping level (Andersen et al., 2023, p. 42).

Thorsted (2010) describes playing communities as focusing mainly on connectedness, cohesion,

presence, sincerity, and openness. In a playing community, the participants dare to set themselves into play (Thorsted, 2010).

Structure of the article

This article begins with a short presentation of the challenges in responding to SAPs in schools. SAPs are then connected to play in a somaesthetic framework by analyzing a game of rounders, a well-known bat-and-ball game, often played in Danish schoolyards, in which two teams compete by pitching a ball into a field and running rounds to collect points. The game rounders was practiced during my empirical field study conducted in two Danish public schools (in Danish: "folkeskoler") during autumn 2022. Finally, I discuss the possibilities of assessing group dynamics through play and provide suggestions on the practice of assessing play in schools.

CHALLENGES IN RESPONDING TO SAPS

Teachers sidelined

SAPs are often handed over to a school counselor, who lacks the preconditions for understanding classroom interactions – due to a lack of relations to the children in each classroom (Szulevicz & Tanggaard, 2015). At worst, this serves as part of the school exclusion process itself, potentially turning the excluded student into what Knage (2023) termed an *absent student subject*.

This position is both stigmatizing and exceedingly difficult to change. Other school-related research also criticizes this individualistic approach, arguing that interactionist factors determine a child's challenges and that school attendance problems are connected to the school culture of which the child is a part (Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Lund, 2021) and the overall experience of school connectedness (Shochet et al., 2006).

SAPs measured only as a physical absence

Another problem with SAPs is that the absences are registered and assessed individually. By measuring absence only as physical nonpresence in schools or approaching interventions primarily

through cognitive behavioral interventions (Thastum et al., 2019), there is a risk of connecting SAPs to a within-child deficit model, making the given student (or the student's family) responsible for the school absences (Lund, 2021). This is problematic, as SAPs are intertwined in complex cases that involve all participants in the student's social surroundings (Knage, 2023).

When juxtaposing the various understandings, SAPs become an overall question of *inclusion and exclusion processes*, not only for individual students in school but also, to a greater extent, as a matter that involves all students and school professionals within the classroom community. To further understand the qualities of inclusion, Farrell (2004) highlighted three criteria for experiencing inclusion: First, the student must be physically present or represented in the classroom. Second, the student must experience being accepted and recognized as a worthy participant. Third, the student must be involved in classroom activities. Farrell's theory emphasizes that inclusion is more than just a body being present in the classroom. I claim that SAPs must be viewed as situated (Lave & Wenger, 2012) pedagogical phenomena and that registered absences must be investigated by questioning the atmospheres and group dynamics in the classroom community.

THE CHOICE OF ASSESSMENT APPROACH WHEN ASSESSING PLAY AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Informal, formative, and interactive assessment

Today, Danish schools focus strongly on involuntary prolonged school absences, and the procedure for registering absences has been streamlined in the past couple of years so that absences are measured based on different categorizations². These should help schools and administrators to discover whether a student develops too many *illegal absences*. This statistical information is one way to try to prevent SAPs.

² <https://www.uvm.dk/statistik/grundskolen/elever/elevfravaer>

Still, the complex explanations for SAPs invite alternative approaches to capture more nuances of the problem and the given student's underlying lived experiences. If interventions are based only on quantitative data, SAPs become an individualized challenge, missing the opportunity of questioning the lifeworld of which the absent student is a part.

I posit an unexamined connection between assessing play and discovering early signs of SAPs. This connection does not contain every aspect of SAPs. However, it still contributes to the research field by adding a broader understanding of SAPs and developing a common language within school absence research, drawing attention to the important role of the school professionals who are closest to the students. However, the connection process can be viewed through various assessments and approaches. The process serves as feedback for school professionals to inform the next best step for strengthening the classroom community. The process is performed by teachers and pedagogues, though the students are in focus. This is what characterizes informal and formative assessment. The assessment's formative element lies in the focus on process and feedback to achieve a specific goal that teachers and students are working toward. The informal aspect indicates that the assessment process should be a regular part of classroom activities and judged by both students and school professionals (Harlen, 2012).

"Assessing students' play to strengthen the classroom community requires an interactive approach to make the process democratic and involving."

(Krogstrup, 2006, p. 157).

Participatory and authentic assessment

Krogstrup, who has conducted excessive research on assessment processes, describes how participatory assessment has the potential to be development-oriented and aimed at participants within the given organization – in this case, the classroom community (Krogstrup, 2006, p. 168).

One suggestion for a formative, informal, interactive, and participatory assessment of play in schools could be *authentic assessment* (Jensen et al., 2021). Authentic assessment is a methodology developed to comply with experimental and collaborative learning. As play contains experimental and collaborative elements, applying the method when analyzing school attendance factors seems reasonable. Authentic assessment is a formative process that aims to develop reflection based on the idea that assessment activities are part of the situated practice (Jensen et al., 2021, p. 172). The facilitator's role is significant to the outcome of the assessment process, and in this case, it makes the importance of teacher engagement visible.

The prospect of assessing play as a part of school practices and including it in the curriculum challenges the dualistic approach to learning, in which play seems to be viewed as secondary to other types of school learning. Informal and formative assessments of play qualify social assessment processes as relying on more than just the annual well-being questionnaire³ when approaching knowledge about students' thriving and well-being inside the classroom community. Moreover, they are a way of acknowledging the school professionals' professional judgment, turning their pedagogical observations into more than just randomly produced observations, and treating the knowledge as important information that could inform pedagogical strategies in schools.

An approach to assessing students' play to capture experiences of psychological safety, group dynamics, and atmospheres in the classroom community could be to use the annual national well-being measurement as a point of departure. Results that draw attention to potential dysfunctions in the classroom community could then be examined by school professionals engaging in play with the students – to perceive how the group of students interacts. I elaborate further on how this might be done toward the end of the article.

Somaesthetics: the theoretical framework

Drawing on Richard Shusterman's philosophy of somaesthetics regarding the communicating and perceiving body (Shusterman, 2008, 2012), the hypothesis is that interactionist information made

visible through play makes it possible for teachers and pedagogues to deal with inappropriate group dynamics. When playing with the students, teachers and pedagogues can experience the classroom community on a preverbal, bodily, and interactionist level (Shusterman, 2008, 2012; Thorsted, 2010). This also provides the potential to notice precarious atmospheres within the classroom community, e.g., a lack of trust between students, poor language, or the sense of being unable to set oneself into play.

When a group of students is viewed as not just *brains on a stick*, but as a whole and as lived bodies who communicate, interact, and move together, it is my contention that it is possible to meet the school leader's call for a more playful approach to school attendance. It is further argued that an aesthetic and phenomenological view of SAPs is lacking within a research field dominated by a more cognitivist and individualized understanding.

Shusterman took both a pragmatic⁴ and phenomenological⁵ approach to bodily perceptions, thereby passing on the idea that our bodily perceptions depend on culture, time, and relations (Shusterman, 2012, p. 4). The core of somaesthetics is that our bodies perceive through our senses and emotions in lived experiences and that these perceptions can be trained through bodily exercises. The body is present here and now, and it interprets what we sense at an unconscious level, as opposed to our thoughts and consciousness, which refer to the past (Shusterman, 2012, p. 123).

Through the somaesthetic approach to the connection between aesthetics, movement, and the perceiving body, play should be viewed as an aesthetic phenomenon that involves the possibility of a more profound realization of oneself and the other. When engaging in play, the individual steps into a particular role and becomes part of the group dynamics, performing a position involving feelings, senses, and perceptions. Our muscular memory is intricately connected to habits and early experiences, manifesting as unconscious actions. The memories are related to the perceptions of oneself, places, social roles, interpersonal recognition, and traumas (Shusterman, 2012, p. 18).

When we move our bodies, muscular memory is activated.

Understanding play from a somaesthetic perspective underlines the body as perceiving and sense-making at a level equal to cognitive processes (Shusterman, 2012), giving the body a more dominant status in school. As much schoolwork still takes place sitting on a chair behind a school desk, this perspective provides insights into the importance of play and movement in schools. Also, the assessment process when playing involves a bodily aspect that could provide a more in-depth lived experience and understanding of pedagogical practices in the classroom community.

FIELD STUDY METHODOLOGY

An explorative approach

This article included parts of a hermeneutic-phenomenological (van Manen, 2014; Hansen & Thorsted, 2022), short-term, ethnographic field study (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). As mentioned above, the field study was carried out during autumn 2022, comprising 92 hours of field observations (Szulevicz, 2020) and eight semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with school professionals' leaders [N = 2], well-being personnel [N = 1], and teachers [N = 3] and students (N = 24) from two Danish public schools (in Danish: "folkeskoler").

3 <https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/test-evaluering-og-skoleudvikling/trivselsmaaling>

4 Referring to the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1953).

5 Referring to the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).

The field study was part of an ongoing Ph.D. project on preventing prolonged school absences within the classroom community and included nine semi-structured interviews with students experiencing SAPs (N = 9). The Ph.D. project's research question is: *What are the experiences of barriers to and facilitators of school attendance within the classroom community?*

Observation criteria

The field observations were based on an observation scheme created from a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews with the nine absent students. Furthermore, the observation scheme was based on Farrell's criteria for the experience of inclusion and van Manen's (2014) existential approach to field observations, explicitly aiming to investigate lived experiences and reflect on essential themes. In the field study, one of the goals was to look for distinct moments that captured the essential themes: 1) atmospheres in the classroom community; 2) ideals of normalcy in a school context; and 3) inclusion and exclusion processes within the classroom community.

A connection between group dynamics and play

Visiting two primary school classes during the field study created assumptions that group dynamic experiences within the classroom community can help teachers and pedagogues understand barriers to and facilitators of school attendance within a given group of students. Particularly during play, I found that these group dynamics were exposed. I had the privilege of playing some community games with the students. When I asked them to gather in a circle facing each other, this provided an instant experience of the group dynamics as to who confidently entered the space, who gave space to others, and who seemed uncomfortable being summoned into play.

Had it been part of an assessment process, this example of subjective micro-information could invite school professionals to discover, investigate, and act upon group dynamics, atmospheres, and psychological safety. The micro-information holds essential information communicated through the students' bodies that could form the basis for a

student-teacher dialogue about school attendance factors.

In each of the two primary school classes, one specific teacher was followed throughout the period, both being the primary teachers of the classes. Both were language arts teachers, and the related subjects were the primary observation base. Looking for play situations was difficult because none were found while observing the subjects.

Nevertheless, play and bodily interactions were essential themes for my phenomenological investigation, which prompted observations during recess – to observe the students engaging in play. One of the distinct moments in the field study occurred during a game of rounders, which frames the following analysis.

The following is an extract of my fieldnotes focusing on interactionist factors:

During recess, teachers must spend time preparing teaching, and the students are left alone with a few teachers on playground duty. The playground covers a large area around the school. The teachers' narrative is that all students from the fifth grade class take part in rounders, and the teachers have initiated rounders to strengthen the cohesion in the classroom community. However, my observations question the underlying basis for the activity.

Three students sit on the bench, watching the game. When asked why, they tell me that the game is boring and unfair because it is always the same children deciding on the teams. The two girls on the bench follow the game closely and comment on it. A boy sitting on the bench with head in lap says nothing, and after ten minutes he leaves the bench, pacing the edges of the grass area.

On one of my observation days, I joined the game of rounders to obtain a bodily experience:

The same three children sit on the bench, watching. Entering the game gives me the experience of a cozy atmosphere. I notice that the children are handling the ball game very well, but it is also evident that the boys who make long, hard hits and have good pitching skills control the game and decide on rules. They are also the ones choosing the teams. I was even holding back a bit during the game because of my poor rounders skills and the team's pressure to perform. There are no conflicts today, but the students tell me that rounders often leads to quarrels.

One girl from the class never attends the game, nor sits on the bench. She is with another group of girls from another class at the other end of the schoolyard. This girl, I was told, is in a vulnerable position inside the classroom community, as she is often excluded from the community. This girl also has a high frequency of school absences. I wonder if this situation makes her even more excluded from the community.

As I returned another day, the students told me that the teachers had commanded the rounders to stop because of too many conflicts. It struck me how an apparently insignificant activity during a recess uncovered existential human aspects of being in a classroom community.

The class followed at this school was a fifth grade class comprising 17 students.

This case could be an example of a situation in which informal, formative, interactive, and authentic assessment would allow the teachers and pedagogues to engage the students in developing dialogues about their role in the classroom community, as well as the overall dynamics of the play, and address potential social problems.



GROUP DYNAMICS REVEALED DURING A GAME OF ROUNDERS

A bodily experience of playing with the students

The empirical material was gathered during a recess at one of the two field schools.

Pedagogical explorations of play should be part of the curriculum, during lessons, without interfering with the students' right to recess and free time. One way of conducting an assessment could be to recreate a game of rounders during a school lesson. In this way, the students could be involved in reflecting on the group dynamics, and participation could be an opportunity for all students – including the girl who never enters the game.

The importance of pedagogical followership

However, in this case, the students mainly experienced failure and restrictions due to the need for more professional followership. Furthermore, the nonattenders did not have the experience of being included in the game, which, at worst, could intensify the experience of exclusion.

Ensuring that everybody is part of the game, being accepted and recognized as worthy participants, is challenging, particularly when engaging in competitive ball games. Therefore, it is essential to train with the school professionals. Of course, school operators must approach teaching and learning as more than measurable outcomes (e.g., grades) and trained skills through an evolution that focuses on essential human competencies to build strong communities.

Because of the teachers' workload, the pedagogical followership seems to have poor structural conditions, also during recess, even though extant research has found that recesses very often create precarious atmospheres that include quarreling, bullying, and exclusion processes – due to the lack of professional guidance

(Hansen, 2019; Lund, 2021).

So, the decision to stop playing rounders during recess was maybe an overhasty conclusion, thus missing an opportunity to develop further the sense of cohesion in the classroom community, help excluded students, and scaffold play, had teachers or pedagogues been present.

Playing could potentially serve as an excellent pedagogical method to strengthen participation possibilities.

A “simple” game of rounders revealed many options for assessing group dynamics and individual strategies in the classroom community that could help prevent SAPs and improve the general inclusion processes.

Discussion on assessing play in schools

The discussion on engaging in an assessment of play within the classroom community helps pull the educational discourse on SAPs in a direction that revolves around relationality, values, attitudes, and emotions, instead of primarily focusing on quantifying measurable outcomes, e.g., grades, statistics, and surveys. Assessment processes structured in a pedagogical framework of play could be a way to address children's perspectives *if* discussions with the children as well as professional reflections within the team validate the activities. The assessment process could then serve as a basis for reflection and development rather than a close-knit conclusion.

The somaesthetic perspective offers an alternative understanding of the role of play in schools. This perspective invites school professionals to participate actively in playing with the students and enhancing the general status of play in schools. Here, play is not viewed as secondary or separated from school practices. Students' and school professionals' lived experiences and bodily awareness could be given a more dominant role by conducting interactive, participatory, formative, informal, and authentic play assessments. That is, of course, if teachers and pedagogues are given enough time and resources to do so.

Given that a more bodily approach to teaching and learning focuses more on school professionals' bodily awareness and social competencies, it would probably require reinforcement of this dimension. The body-oriented, playful, and sense-based approach does not come easily and naturally to everyone. Also, this reinforcement would be relevant as to teachers' and pedagogues' education. Strengthening bodily awareness is essential to the pragmatic approach in somaes-

thetic practice (Shusterman, 2008). However, such a discussion lies beyond this article's scope.

Nevertheless, this article suggests that the aesthetic and explorative approach offers new possibilities for preventing SAPs. It emphasizes that a stronger focus on professional-pedagogical competency and judgment when engaging in play with children holds development potential. Bringing in first-person perspectives through play makes it possible to see *with* the students rather than merely at them (Lagermann, 2023).

Awareness of the pedagogical potential in play can be created in many ways – by actively engaging in play, observing games or play during recess, or by incorporating play as part of didactics. Integrating play into the classroom community allows for experiences of atmospheres, e.g., creating a level of psychological safety and comfort that will enable children to be active in the classroom, as well as getting an idea of the level of peer support and appreciation.

This article aimed to discuss how to make space for bodily investigations and existential wondering about coherence and group

dynamics as a natural part of the professional routine in schools, as well as how this routine could help prevent SAPs.

Each student should not necessarily always engage in the same activities, and school professionals should not be obliged to attend every play situation. I posit that play situations in school often need more professional followership, which could provide insights into students' lifeworlds.

Insights into their lifeworlds contain valuable information on the students' experience of belonging in the classroom community, potentially before a student develops SAPs. By such insights it could be examined what positions students are steered toward in the classroom community. Therefore, play is a way to investigate barriers to and facilitators of school attendance as well as students' lived bodily experiences.



As a necessary disclaimer, I acknowledge the potential immanent critique of this approach. i.e., that play is being instrumentalized to serve a more scholastic purpose, which is in contrast with children's need for free play and unsupervised time on their own. However, I regard play as a "serious" element in schools and stress the importance of enhancing social competencies – e.g., cooperation, empathy, and a fundamental sense of community – as critical future skills to make school attendance possible for more students.

A methodological how-to suggestion

Based on this article, I suggest working with play assessments in schools to prevent SAPs by using the following steps:

- Take the national well-being measurement or a shared dialogue about well-being in the classroom community as a point of departure. Discuss the following with the team: What are the "next best steps" for creating a more beneficial group dynamic in the classroom community? What play activities could support the "next best steps"?
- Facilitate play activities with the students. Provide pedagogical followership and stay open to and bodily aware of the situation as professionals.
- Facilitate a group discussion afterward in the classroom community about students' experiences with the play activity. How was the atmosphere during the play situation? Are there hopes for change regarding the group dynamics? Did all students attend, and were they accepted as worthy participants? How was the experience of psychological safety in the classroom community? Were any students left out or on the edge of the community? Were there trust issues? Poor language?
- Follow up on the experiences in the team of school professionals. Are there any critical issues to address and act upon to prevent possible SAPs? What community play activities could support this?



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