

SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

School refusal behavior (SRB) is when a child doesn't want to go to school because they are upset, not because they are skipping school. This affects 1-5% of school-aged children and makes it hard for them to do well in school and stay mentally healthy. This paper reviews existing research and synthesizes evidence from 25 high-quality studies, utilizing PRISMA guidelines to ascertain prevalence, risk factors, interventions, and outcomes. The main findings show that anxiety disorders and family dynamics are the main causes, and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment, with success rates of 60–80%. There are still gaps in longitudinal data and samples from different cultures. For teachers and doctors, this means that early screening and support systems that work together are important. This review emphasizes the necessity for customized, evidence-informed approaches to alleviate enduring effects on academic performance and mental well-being.

Keywords: School refusal, school phobia, anxiety, cognitive-behavioral therapy, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to intentional truancy, school refusal behavior (SRB), also referred to as school phobia or emotionally based school avoidance, describes a pattern of absenteeism motivated by psychological distress. SRB was first proposed in the middle of the 20th century and has been associated with anxiety disorders, such as social phobia or separation anxiety (Berg, 1997). With global prevalence estimates ranging from 1% in community samples to 5% in clinical settings, the condition impedes educational progress, aggravates emotional problems, and strains family systems (Egger et al., 2003).

The purpose of this systematic review is to compile the most recent research on SRB, covering its causes, symptoms, and treatment. We summarize results from peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2023, concentrating on empirical research in child and adolescent psychology, while following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The following research questions serve as a guide for the review: (1) What are the main SRB risk factors and prevalence trends? (2) Which interventions are effective? (3) What knowledge gaps are there now? Clinical practice and policy are informed by this synthesis, which emphasizes how urgent it is to address SRB in light of the rising rates of post-pandemic absenteeism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical frameworks that describe the interplay between psychological, familial, and environmental factors influencing students' attendance at school can help explain school refusal behavior. Christopher A. Kearney's functional model of school refusal behavior is one of the most popular theoretical explanations. According to this model, school refusal is a behavior sustained by four functional conditions: seeking attention from significant others, avoiding school-related stimuli that elicit negative affectivity, escaping unpleasant social or evaluative situations, and seeking tangible reinforcement outside of the school setting (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Albano, 2004).

The functional model states that internalizing issues like anxiety, depression, or evaluation anxiety can cause students to avoid school. In other situations, family dynamics may reinforce a child's refusal to attend school, especially if they receive support or attention from caregivers while they are at home. The model highlights that school refusal behavior is a pattern of behavior sustained by various motivational factors that necessitates tailored interventions rather than a single disorder (Kearney, 2016; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which describes how various environmental systems, such as family, school, peers, and larger societal structures, influence children's behavior, is another helpful viewpoint. This theory

holds that interactions within nested systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, are how children develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to this viewpoint, school refusal behavior results from interactions between personal vulnerabilities and environmental factors like peer relationships, school climate, and parental expectations (Ingul et al., 2019; Heyne et al., 2019).

By combining these frameworks, researchers are able to understand school refusal behavior as a complex phenomenon influenced by social, psychological, familial, and educational factors. Therefore, analyzing SRB from an ecological and functional standpoint offers a thorough comprehension of its causes and guides the creation of focused interventions (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Search Strategy and Selection Procedure

A systematic search of the literature was performed by following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to find all the existing literature related to school refusal behaviour. Four academic databases were searched, including Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and PubMed. The search was conducted for literature published between January 2018 and March 2025 to find all the latest developments related to school refusal behaviour.

The search terms used included keywords related to school refusal behaviour, as well as keywords related to factors and interventions. The search string used is as follows:

("school refusal" OR "school phobia" OR "school avoidance" OR "emotionally based school non-attendance") AND ("risk factors" OR "anxiety" OR "family factors" OR "school climate" OR "bullying" OR "intervention")

Boolean operators and database filters were used to further narrow the search results. Journal articles published in the English language and peer reviewed were used to ensure the quality and reliability of the chosen articles.

Screening and Eligibility Assessment

A total of 1,247 studies were retrieved in the initial search results from the chosen databases. After removing the duplicated articles, the total number of studies was reduced to 1,044, which were further filtered based on the title and abstract. Studies that did not specifically discuss school refusal behaviour or did not contain any empirical studies were excluded in this phase.

A total of 156 studies were further filtered based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the eligibility of the studies was determined. Studies that were included in the eligibility assessment were those that:

- Focused on the topic of school refusal behaviour in school-aged children and adolescents
- Examined the psychological, familial, school-related, and social factors related to SRB
- Examined the interventions and outcomes related to SRB
- Were based on empirical studies

Studies that were excluded in this phase were those that focused on truancy, did not contain any empirical studies, and were based on conference papers and case studies. Finally 25 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of School Refusal Behaviour

School Refusal Behaviour (SRB) is defined as the difficulty that a child experiences in attending school caused by emotional problems such as anxiety, fear, or depression. SRB is different from truancy in that it is experienced with the full awareness of the parents. Research in the last ten years has shown that school refusal behaviour is a multidimensional phenomenon that is affected by psychological, social, familial, and school-related factors.

Recent research has shown that school refusal behaviour is strongly related to emotional distress and mental health issues among school-going children. For instance, Heyne & King (2021) noted that students who are involved in school refusal behaviour tend to experience increased emotional distress linked to school attendance. González et al. (2019) noted that school refusal behaviour is strongly correlated with school anxiety and social anxiety among school-going students. The prevalence of school refusal behaviour has also gained attention globally. Research by Ingul, Havik, and Heyne (2019) indicated that school refusal patterns often emerge during transitional academic stages, particularly during early adolescence. Similarly, Ulaş and Seçer (2024) conducted a systematic review and reported that school refusal has increased in recent years due to complex interactions between psychological vulnerabilities and environmental stressors.

In the Indian context, school refusal behaviour is now increasingly being viewed as an important issue in the mental

health of children. According to a clinical study conducted by Nayak, Sangoi, and Nachane (2018), the study found that children presenting with symptoms of school refusal also often experience psychiatric symptoms, including anxiety and depression. Another study conducted by Karthika and Devi (2020) also found that school refusal behaviour among Indian children is often linked with psychosocial problems, academic demands, and family issues. Overall, contemporary research suggests that school refusal behaviour needs to be viewed through an ecological model, whereby various individual factors contribute to the pattern of school attendance among students.

Psychological and Emotional Factors

Among the most important factors that contribute to SRB is the psychological aspect. Several studies have shown that anxiety disorders, depression, and difficulties in emotional regulation are strongly related to SRB. González et al. (2023) explained that it has been observed that students with SRB tend to report higher levels of psychological problems compared to those students who attend regular classes. Among the most common anxiety disorders that are related to SRB are separation anxiety, social anxiety, and generalized anxiety disorders (Benarous et al., 2022). Likewise, emotional maladjustment and psychological stress are also significant factors that increase the risk of school refusal behaviour in adolescents, as revealed by Seçer and Ulaş (2020). For instance, students with emotional instability tend to view the school environment as a threat, leading to avoidance behaviour. However, another psychological factor that is linked to school refusal behaviour is low academic self-efficacy and motivation. Filippello, Buzzai, and Costa (2020) revealed that students with low levels of psychological well-being and motivation are more likely to exhibit school refusal behaviour.

Furthermore, emotional regulation problems have been cited as one of the major causes of school refusal behavior. Grazia et al. (2024) noted that adolescents facing emotional regulation problems were more likely to experience school refusal behavior due to their inability to cope with academic and social demands. Indian studies also support the role of psychological distress in the causation of school refusal behavior. For example, Prabhuswamy (2018) noted that school refusal behavior in children is often linked to emotional problems, including depression and anxiety disorders. Another study conducted by Yadav et al. (2024) noted that psychological distress and emotional regulation problems played a major role in the causation of school refusal behavior in Indian adolescents. Psychological vulnerabilities, including anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation problems, continue to play a major role in the causation of school refusal behavior.

Family and Parenting Factors

Family factors, including parenting styles, have been identified as an important factor that affects students' attendance behaviour. Research indicates that family factors, including parents' attitudes, family conflicts, and parenting styles, have been shown to have an impact on the development of school refusal behaviour. According to Kearney & Albano (2018), family factors, including overprotective parenting, inconsistent disciplinary practices, and poor family communication, have been shown to maintain school refusal behaviour through the promotion of dependency and avoidance. Benarous et al. (2022) also established that family factors, including parents' psychopathology and poor family environment, are significant predictors of school refusal behaviour. Another important factor that affects the attendance behaviour of students is parents' mental health. According to Heyne (2022), children whose parents have high levels of anxiety or depression have an increased risk of developing school refusal behaviour due to their high emotional vulnerability. Family conflicts have also been established as an important factor that affects attendance behaviour. Kim & Gentle-Genitty (2020) established that students who have family conflicts have an increased risk of disengaging from school.

In the context of India, family-related factors have also been established as significant factors that influence school refusal behavior. Nayak et al. (2018) have stated that conflicts between parents, academic demands, and overprotective parenting have been established as significant factors that influence school refusal behavior in the context of Indian children. Mondal (2022) also emphasized that the evolution of family structure, along with increased parental pressure related to academic performance, can increase the levels of anxiety, which in turn increases school refusal behavior. Therefore, the family environment can have both positive and negative effects on the school-related behavior of children.

School Environment and Academic Factors

The school setting is also found to have a substantial influence on the attitudes of students towards school attendance. A number of studies have revealed that negative school experiences, including academic demands, lack of teacher support, and negative school climate, contribute to school refusal behaviors. For instance, Van Eck et al. (2018) found that negative school climate and lack of teacher-student support relationships were associated with increased levels of absenteeism and school refusal behavior. Students who experience a lack of support in the

school setting often tend to have negative perceptions of schooling. Academic demands and low academic achievement have also been found to be significant risk factors for school refusal behavior. Filippello et al. (2020) found that students who experience academic demands often tend to have anxiety and avoidance behaviors associated with school attendance.

Bullying and peer victimization are other determinants that are also associated with school refusal behavior. Bitsika, Sharpley, and Bell (2022) indicate that bullying victims are likely to develop emotional problems, leading to school refusal behavior. Ochi et al. (2020) also indicate a strong link between bullying victimization and school refusal behavior. Students who are frequently victimized by their peers usually tend to avoid school, especially when they feel that this is a way of escaping the bullying. There is also a strong indication that changes in school level, such as when a student moves from primary to secondary school, could also influence school refusal behavior, especially when a student feels that the level of learning has increased (Ingul et al., 2019). Therefore, school-related factors are also associated with school refusal behavior.

Social and Peer-Related Factors

The role of social relationships and peer interaction is also essential for the development of school refusal behavior. School refusal is also related to the need for acceptance and a sense of belongingness among peers, as is common among adolescents. Empirical research also supports the idea that when students are under social isolation, loneliness, or peer rejection, they are more likely to show tendencies of school refusal (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Similarly, a deficit in positive peer relationships may also lead to a sense of belongingness, resulting in school refusal behavior. Additionally, research by Zhao et al. (2023) also supported the idea that bullying and peer victimization play a crucial role in the development of psychological issues and school refusal among adolescents. The second emergent factor related to school refusal is cyberbullying and online harassment. The increasing number of digital interactions among adolescents may lead to cyberbullying and online harassment, resulting in anxiety and avoidance behaviors related to schools (Ulaş et al., 2024). Deficiencies in social skills and communication may also lead to a deficit in positive peer relationships, resulting in insecurity and detachment from the school environment.

School Refusal Behaviour in the Indian Context

While the phenomenon of school refusal has been extensively researched in the context of the West, the body of research on the Indian scenario is relatively limited. Studies conducted in the Indian context revealed that the phenomenon of school refusal is significantly related to psychological disorders, academic stress, and family-related issues. For instance, a clinical study conducted by Nayak et al. (2018) revealed that approximately 77.8% of children with school refusal showed a co-occurring psychiatric disorder, with the most common disorders being depression and anxiety. In addition, the study revealed that academic problems, difficulties in adjusting to school, behavioral problems, and family issues are some of the most significant factors contributing to the phenomenon of school refusal in the Indian context.

A study conducted by Yadav et al. (2024) on the functional profile of the phenomenon of school refusal in the context of Indian adolescents revealed that anxiety related to social evaluation, academic stress, and family issues are some of the most significant factors contributing to the phenomenon of school refusal in the Indian context. The study also revealed that the phenomenon of school refusal in the Indian context is largely caused by a combination of psychological and sociocultural factors, such as family issues and academic stress.

In addition, a study conducted by G. Karthika and M. Gowri Devi in 2020 revealed that a significant number of children with symptoms of school refusal had underlying psychiatric conditions, such as depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and behavioral problems. According to the study, it is not appropriate to view school refusal as a disciplinary issue; instead, it is a symptom of underlying mental health problems that needs to be addressed.

Overall, the existing body of Indian research on the topic has revealed that the phenomenon of school refusal is a complex and multifaceted issue, and it is influenced by a number of factors, including academic stress, family factors, and mental health factors. However, the majority of the studies on the topic have been conducted in clinical settings with a small sample size. Hence, there is a need to conduct studies with a large sample size in a school setting to assess the phenomenon of school refusal in different student populations in different regions of India.

Even though several factors that influence school refusal behavior have been established in the past, the literature reveals considerable variability in the findings, which can be attributed to the differences in the research design, culture, and measurement tools used in the studies. For instance, several studies carried out in the West have revealed that psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression are the primary factors that influence school refusal behavior. In other studies carried out in Asian culture, it is evident that school competition, academic pressure, and parental pressure could be the primary factors that influence school refusal behavior. In addition, the

majority of the studies are based on clinical samples, which could have overestimated the prevalence of psychological disorders among school refusal students. This reveals that school refusal behavior should not be viewed as a psychological disorder but as a complex phenomenon that is influenced by several factors. In addition, it is evident that the majority of the studies have not considered the school-level and family-level factors in the study design, although it is evident that these factors are interrelated in their influence on school refusal behavior. This reveals that in the future, it is imperative to use a multilevel analytical approach to establish the complex interrelations among the factors that influence school refusal behavior.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite the growing body of research on school refusal behaviour, several important gaps remain in the literature. Firstly, the body of knowledge is largely based on studies conducted in the West and developed countries, with a dearth of empirical studies on school refusal behaviors in developing countries like India. Though a few studies on the topic have been conducted in India (Nayak et al., 2018; Karthika & Devi, 2020), there is a scarcity of studies on the prevalence and factors associated with school refusal behaviors in Indian students on a large scale. Secondly, there are a number of studies that have focused on the role of psychological factors, whereas there is a scarcity of studies that have examined the role of psychological, familial, school, and social factors in the context of a comprehensive analytical model. Exploring the interplay between these factors could help us achieve a better understanding of the aetiologies of school refusal behaviors.

Third, the bulk of the existing literature was grounded in clinical samples, which may not be representative of the general student population. Hence, more community-based and school-based studies are necessary to better understand the school refusal behavior in the general student population. Fourth, the literature has failed to address the contribution of contemporary contextual factors, such as digital stress, social media effects, and cyberbullying, in the manifestation of school refusal behavior. Finally, longitudinal studies are necessary to follow the students over time and determine the contribution of early risk factors in the manifestation of school refusal behavior across different developmental stages. These issues are necessary in the formulation of effective prevention strategies and interventions for the reduction of school refusal behavior in the student population.

DISCUSSION

The results of the review suggest that school refusal behavior is a complex issue that is affected by several factors. Psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, continues to remain one of the most established predictors of school refusal behavior. Research studies have shown that students who have high levels of anxiety, social fear, or depression have an increased risk of engaging in school refusal behavior (Benarous et al., 2022; González et al., 2023; Ingul et al., 2019). In addition, the studies suggest that psychological factors often interact with family factors, school factors, and peer factors to predict school refusal behavior in students (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2016). Family-related factors such as overprotective parenting, family conflict, or inconsistent parenting practices have been found to maintain school avoidance behaviors. Research findings suggest that when overprotective or overindulgent parenting practices are used to deal with school avoidance behaviors, the child may develop school avoidance behaviors unknowingly (Kearney & Albano, 2018; Nayak et al., 2018). In addition, dysfunctional family environments, parental anxiety, or unrealistic expectations of the child's school performance have been found to influence school refusal behaviors (Benarous et al., 2022; Kim & Gentle-Genitty, 2020). School-related experiences are also an essential factor that affects students' attitudes towards school attendance. Research findings suggest that when students are exposed to high school pressure, bullying victimization, or teacher-student support, it may increase their avoidance behaviors towards school attendance (Filippello et al., 2020; Ochi et al., 2020; Van Eck et al., 2018). If students perceive the school environment as threatening or unsupportive, they may develop avoidance behaviors to cope with their school-related stress or social problems.

The review reveals that the sense of belonging and acceptance by peers is essential for the maintenance of school engagement. Teenagers who experience social connectedness and acceptance by their peers are likely to display regular attendance and high levels of academic motivation (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). On the other hand, teenagers who experience bullying, rejection, and social isolation are more likely to display heightened risk of emotional problems and disengagement in school settings (Bitsika et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). The findings suggest that for effective intervention in the problem of school refusal, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary, involving collaboration and cooperation among educators, psychologists, parents, and school administrators. Thus, effective intervention for the problem of school refusal should include psychological intervention and other approaches, such as those

involving schools and families, as indicated by research findings (Heyne & King, 2021; Kearney, 2016).

IMPLICATIONS

Research Implications

The utilization of an adaptive trial design for chronic school refusal, with diverse populations, is also significant, as it may shed light on the personal, lived experience of the behavior and guide the development of individualized intervention approaches. Beyond intervention, preventive measures should be implemented in schools as well. For instance, schools should incorporate an early warning system to monitor increasing rates of absenteeism and, for those who display signs of emotional distress, offer easily accessible psychological assistance. Providing teachers with targeted training may also aid in identifying early warning signs of school refusal. Policy initiatives to improve mental health services in schools may also help alleviate the effects of school refusal behavior.

Practical and Policy Implications

The review also provides some practical and policy solutions to deal with school refusal behaviors in students. Schools need to establish early warning systems to identify school refusal behaviors, such as anxiety, excessive complaints of illnesses, or reduced involvement in school activities. Schools can provide better services to deal with mental health issues, such as the availability of counselors or programs like CBT, to help students overcome their emotional problems and gradually return to school. Parents also need to be educated about the psychological aspects of school refusal, so they can provide appropriate guidance to their children rather than inadvertently reinforcing school refusal behaviors. Schools can also work to create a positive school culture, foster teacher-student relationships, and implement anti-bullying programs to create a sense of belonging in the school, thus reducing school refusal behaviors. From a policy perspective, it is suggested that educational authorities need to put more emphasis on the provision of services to deal with mental health issues within schools, particularly in developing countries. This could be done by providing funds to train teachers, provide counseling services, and create awareness about mental health issues to deal with school refusal behaviors, which could otherwise affect the educational outcomes of these students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Even though this review provides a wide overview of school refusal behavior, it is, however, limited by a few factors, which, on the other hand, provide an indication of where further research should be directed. To begin with, though this review is based on research findings published in English, it is possible that other research findings published in other languages have been left out, which would have resulted in an even less global view of all that has been established by other researchers. In the future, it is important that research is conducted on studies published in multiple languages, accessing even more global research findings to provide an even wider view of what has been established regarding school refusal behavior. Another limitation is that multiple methodologies were used in all the studies, which made it difficult to have a quantitative view of all that had been established by conducting a meta-analysis. Third, research on developing regions such as South Asia and Africa is still limited. There is a need to have more research conducted in these regions, especially in countries such as India, to gain deeper insight into how culture, family, and academic factors contribute to school refusal behavior. Most of the existing literature has employed cross-sectional designs. Future research should try to employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs, especially to examine how effective intervention strategies and family-school collaboration strategies are, to deal with school refusal behavior among students.

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