

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOUR IN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS****Rukmani Devi Balakrishnan**¹**Hari Krishnan Andi**²

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the factors associated with school refusal behavior in primary school students. Student's self-report and teacher's measures were implemented; and students were recruited from 20 primary schools in six districts in Selangor, Malaysia. The survey was conducted at the end of school term in 2016, with a total of 915 students from Year 4 and Year 5 participating. The sample of students had been absent from school for more than 15% of school days in the current year. Pearson correlation shows a significant relationship between academic achievement and school satisfaction toward school refusal behavior. The findings of this study suggest that academic difficulties and dissatisfaction towards school environment could be the important risk factors for school refusal behavior. The present study underscores the importance of early detection and intervention as measures to reduce school refusal. Finally, the findings imply that the role of school factors should always be taken into account in connection with school refusal behaviour.

Keywords: School refusal behavior, academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction, teacher support

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1.0 Introduction

For the past decades, the most feared school related problem that has become the center talk of education ministry, schools, educators, and scholars nationwide is truancy. Truancy is considered the mother of all problems related to schools and students. Almost all the discipline problems in students, doubled with juvenile delinquent and deviance act were enhanced by truancy. Frequent or prolonged non-attendance may lead to deteriorating school performance and create a negative cycle that is difficult to break (Musser, 2011; Sanchez, 2012)^{1,2}.

In recent years, various countries, school systems and government agencies increasingly perceive truancy as a major and salient problem for the education system. For example, in The USA, truancy laws may include a variety of sanctions for students and their families, including referral to court, fines ranging from \$50 to \$2,000, enrolment in a community truancy prevention program, and even jail time for students or parents, depending on the age of the student and local law (Conry, 2018)³. Attendance is empirically related to achievement and academic outcomes (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017)⁴. In accordance with this, in California, three-quarters of students who had been chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade did not meet state proficiency standards in math and reading in third grade (Harris, 2016)⁵.

The data in the Ministry of Education of Malaysia shows that in 2010, out of 111 484 discipline problem cases recorded nationwide, 19 545 cases involved truancy. In 2011, the truanting behavior shows 18 550 cases out of 108 650 discipline problem cases; while in 2012, this number rose to 23 004. Although the numbers seem to decline in recent years, 15 027 cases in 2013; 14 221 cases in 2014, and 14 496 cases in 2015, the volume is still high for a country which emphasizes on compulsory education.

Even though a few governing bodies, school districts, and researchers compile absenteeism information and sometimes they are published, they do not deliver the important messages such as how many of these students are having school refusal behaviour, and how many are playing truant. The definitions of truancy and school refusal are confusing to the head teachers as they try to single out those children who are absent from school on their own will without the knowledge of their parents or those who, are absenting themselves with the parent's consent. The category of truants who belong to the 'school refusal' group is almost always sidelined and thought of as same as the deviant truants.

The Discipline Unit (1990)⁶ in the School Division of the Ministry of Education has a clear guideline and specific codes to identify the truancy problems among students through the Students' Discipline Misconduct Record. However, there is no specific provision provided for the emotionally effected school refusers in this guideline. It is a norm in Malaysian culture to assume that when a student is found skipping school frequently then he will be definitely labeled as truant if there is no valid explanation behind his actions (the emotional distress, anxiety and depression are still not widely accepted as valid reasons for a student to skip school in our

culture). Our society and school personnel stress more on the outer part of a human being i.e., if a student looks healthy extrinsically, then without doubt, he should be at school; the inner part of him which might be heavily unstable or disturbed were never taken into account at most of the time as this area is very difficult to be detected unless the child is referred to a professional counselor.

Nevertheless, many students with emotional distress couldn't speak up for themselves or defend their absences as either they were too scared to reveal themselves or they feel defenseless when confronted by the discipline teachers. As a result, the harsh punishments imposed on the school refusers who were accustomed to fear of going to school will further alleviate the emotional upset which may take the form of explicit fearfulness, tantrums or complaints of feeling unwell. On the worst case scenario, some might even stop schooling completely at the thought of having to deal with harsh punishments and fury discipline teachers.

Class teachers are deemed to be the most suitable and reliable person to identify the school refusers from the truants. A proper education is needed to explain and define the meaning of truancy and school refusal to the teachers, school personnel, school heads and even counselors as most of them were not familiar with the term "school refusal" and many have never heard of the term before although it's very common in the West. Comprehensive information about the school refusal behaviour which explains the anxiety and the attention-seeking behaviour should be developed and published in booklet form and kept within the reach of everyone so that the teachers and the school administrator could identify these students accordingly before implying suitable actions on them to decrease their absence from school.

1.1 School Related Factors Associated with School Refusal Behaviour

The institutional factors play a major role in alleviating the school refusal problem in school going children. Reid (2005)⁷ stressed that student-teacher relationships, the content and delivery method of the curriculum and bullying are some of the main causes of truancy. Similarly, McCluskey, Bynum, and Patchin (2004)⁸ identified unsafe school environment, lack of effective school policies related to attendance, and teachers with low expectations for student achievement as some of the contributing factors towards truancy. The present study will focus on four main school related factors that are associated with school refusal behaviour.

1.1.1 Academic Achievement

The world is changing fast and so is our education system. Today, there's a lot of pressure for children to learn more and more at a very tender age than in the past generations. For example, a few decades ago, kindergarten used to be a place where children spent their time to play and have fun, sing nursery rhymes, make new friends, learn alphabets and numbers; but now in the fast growing world, they are required to study various subjects and do mathematics calculation.

Eventually this task becomes more complicated when they step into school life with test scores (or grades and now the newer version of assessment; the band system) being heavily assessed and made publicly known (especially the general examinations results); schools and teachers are under great pressure to produce high test scores and thus the pressure is transferred on the students.

Research has found that students, who are chronically absent, generally defined as missing out 10% or more of the school year, tend to exhibit worse academic outcomes than their peers with regular attendance (Conry, 2018)³. Academic difficulties have been linked to truant behavior (Henry, 2007)⁹ and many researchers pinpoint feelings of isolation and alienation that students experience in the school setting are due to poor academic attainment.

1.1.2 Peer Social Skills

Peer social skill is a vital skill that should be developed by each and every student during his schooling days. This is to ensure that no one is left alone during his good times and bad times and there is someone he can turn to when problem arises. While most students would say that friends are one of their favourite aspects of school, they can also be a source of stress. Teasley (2004)¹⁰ claimed that poor social interactions¹⁰ and poor student relations have led to student school refusal.

The thought of not having enough friends, not being in the same class as friends, not being able to keep up with friends in one particular area or another, inter personal conflicts, and peer pressure are a few of the very common ways children can be stressed by their social lives at school. Dealing with these issues alone can cause anxiety in even the most secured child. In Malaysia, a case report done by Siti Rohana, Aida, Ek Zakuan and Wan Salwina (2014)¹¹ found that a 9 year old boy, Mak, who had difficulty making friends and had only one friend in school, started refusing school after his only friend moved to another school. However, according to Siti Rohana et al., the boy's mother managed to get him back to school after many failed attempts by transferring him to the school where his friend had moved to. Fremont (2003)¹² believed that students who are ridiculed and bullied are at an increased risk for developing school refusal, as well as various adjustment problems. The population of students involved in this dilemma will develop fear and eventually become depressed at the thought of having to go to school and deal with a very unwelcoming environment created by these unfriendly peers.

1.1.3 School Satisfaction

Research shows that compared to large schools, it is much easier for students to become involved in clubs and activities in small schools, and such involvement is central to students' sense of belonging (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004)¹³. Establishing a positive school climate and

promoting respectful, supportive relationships within the school can be sufficient to motivate students to come to school without fail.

According to the Manitoba Department of Education, Training and Youth (2001)¹⁴, a positive school climate exists when students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secured in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust. Reid (2014)¹⁵ stressed that necessary changes need to occur at several levels which include ensuring all students enjoy school and achieve success, improve students' self-esteem, prevent bullying in school, make curriculum more relevant to students, and create more effective uses of the law for punitive measures. The schools which enforce petty rules and apply blanket punishments to all students when one student erred will cause hatred towards the school.

1.1.4 Teacher Support

A quality experience with a caring and loving teacher creates a string of good memories in a child's life. While most teachers do their best to provide students with a positive educational experience, some students are better suited for certain teaching styles and classroom environment than others. Teachers who do not respect students, ignore the variety of needs of students and cannot manage the class have greater absenteeism cases among their students (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2015)¹⁶. It's unfortunate when a mismatch between student and teacher occurs, as this will influence the child to generate negative feelings about school and issues related to it as well as his own abilities.

Marvul (2012)¹⁷ suggested that most research has indicated that connecting with school starts with student-teacher relationships. If young people perceive that adults at school care about them personally and as students; chances are that they will engage, connect and bond to the school. Teachers whom are easy to approach, friendly, very caring and could start a conversation about any topics such as hobbies and pets during break time deemed to be the teacher quality that students normally consider to be very important. Light-hearted and jovial teachers are most needed during the pressuring moments at school. A study conducted by Zahari Ishak and Low (2013)¹⁸ on 472 students consisting of 322 males and 150 females from public schools with a high rate of truancy verified by The Ministry of Education in Malaysia found that more than two-third of the truants feel that their teachers do not understand their feelings. Most of the truants in this study feel that their teachers are too serious when they deliver their teaching in classrooms therefore making learning process very boring. Teachers who tend to expose students' weaknesses and confidential details publicly in classroom further damage the students' trust in the school system. Thus these students will retaliate and refuse to go to school due to embarrassment and humiliation.

The characteristics of school refusal behaviour in Malaysia have not been studied till now. The aim of this study is to assess the school related factors that cause school refusal in primary school students.

2.0 Methodology

The population for this study involved primary school students in Year 4 and 5 of twenty schools in Selangor state with the highest rate of truancy cases as revealed by the respective District Education Departments. The selection of the participants came from information derived from a careful examination of student attendance record from the classroom register book. All students who have a documented history of 15% or more of unexcused absences during the 2016 school year were asked to participate in this study. The participants comprised of Malay and Indian youths from the urban and rural areas of Selangor. The population of the study was 6481 and a total of 915 participants in Year 4 and 5 were recruited from twenty different primary schools.

The data collected in all the twenty schools in Selangor utilized seven instruments: The demographic form, the academic and absence data form, The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R-C) child version, The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R-P) parent version, Peer Social Skills survey form, School Satisfaction survey form and Teacher Support survey form. All recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the Selangor Education Department prior to project initiation.

3.0 Results

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationships between schools related factors and school refusal behaviour.

Table 1

Correlation Between School Related Factors and School Refusal Behaviour

| Variables | N | Pearson Correlation (r) | Significant (p) |
|----------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Academic Achievement | 915 | 0.082* | 0.013 |
| Peer Social Skills | 915 | -0.017* | 0.601 |
| School Satisfaction | 915 | 0.082* | 0.014 |
| Teacher Support | 915 | 0.058* | 0.078 |

* $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

The results show that only two of the school related factors are significantly related to school refusal behavior (SRB); the academic achievement and school satisfaction while peer social skills and teacher support are insignificant with a weak correlation towards SRB as shown in Table 3.1. This shows that out of 915 students with school refusal behavior in this sample, 94.2% of them acquired low academic achievement ($M = 1.06$, $S.D = 0.23$); their mark range from 0 and 39 out of 100, which is considered as low achievers or weak students.

There is no significant relationship between peer social skills and school refusal behavior although there is a negative and weak correlation value ($r = -0.017$, $p < 0.05$). The negative correlation value shows that peer social skills moves in opposite direction to school refusal behavior; thus the less the peer social skills, the higher the school refusal behavior. The Teacher Child Rating Scale - Peer Social Skills survey shows that 55.6% of teachers agree that the students have many friends ($M = 2.63$), 73.9% agree that the students are friendly towards peers ($M = 2.89$), 66.6% agree that the students could make friends easily ($M = 2.73$), 74.2% agree that the classmates wish to sit near the child ($M = 2.86$) and 74.2% agreed that the students are well-liked by classmates ($M = 2.89$). This findings show that overall, the students in this sample acquire moderate peer social skills ($M = 2.79$, $S.D = 0.65$) as endorsed by the teachers.

The results about the relationship between school satisfaction and school refusal behavior shows that there is a weak but significant relationship ($r = 0.082$; $p < 0.05$) between school satisfaction and school refusal behavior. The overall results show that school satisfaction among the samples in this study is generally low ($M = 1.99$, $S.D = 0.57$). The participants endorsed four out of eight items as low in the School Satisfaction Questionnaire, i.e., 'I enjoy going to this school' ($M = 1.78$), 'I'm getting a good education at this school' ($M = 1.82$), 'Teachers at this school seem to like young people' ($M = 1.81$) and 'teachers at this school can be trusted' ($M = 1.82$). The remaining four items in the questionnaire were endorsed as moderate. This shows that the samples are moderately satisfied regarding these four criteria in schools; 'I like the classes that I'm taking' ($M = 2.05$), 'Student needs come first at this school' ($M = 2.06$), 'I get along well with other students at this school' ($M = 2.58$), and 'every student is important at this school' ($M = 2.04$). Overall, a very high percentage of students (89.3%) disapprove that they enjoy going to this school; this is followed by 86.6% of students disapproving the item 'teachers at this school can be trusted.'

The results about the relationship between teacher support and school refusal behavior shows that there is a weak but insignificant correlation ($r = 0.058$; $p < 0.05$) between teacher support and school refusal behavior. This shows that teacher support does not play a significant role in students' school refusal behavior. The overall results show that teacher support among the samples in this study is generally low ($M = 1.94$, $S.D = 0.49$). The participants endorsed six out of eleven items as low in the Teacher Support Questionnaire, i.e., 'My teachers really care about me' ($M = 1.72$), 'I get along well with my teachers' ($M = 1.82$), 'My teachers listen to what I have to say' ($M = 1.61$), 'My teachers are willing to work with me after school' ($M = 1.61$), 'I receive a lot of encouragement from my teachers' ($M = 1.92$), 'I am respected and appreciated by

my teachers' (M = 1.72). The remaining five items in the questionnaire were endorsed as moderate. This shows that the samples are moderately satisfied regarding these five criteria about their teachers; 'My teachers care whether or not I come to school' (M = 2.29), 'My teachers encourage me to do extra work when I do not understand something' (M = 2.07), 'My teachers praise my efforts when I work hard' (M = 2.34), 'My teachers care about the grades I make' (M = 2.16), 'My teachers expect me to do my best all the time' (M = 2.15).

Overall, a very high percentage of students (92.6%) disapprove that their teachers are willing to work with them after school hours; this is followed by 91.6% of students disagree that their teachers listen to what they have to say, 90.7% disagree that they are respected and appreciated by their teachers, followed by 89.8% disagree that their teachers really care about them, 88.9% disagree that they could get along well with their teachers, and 83.6% disagree that they receive a lot of encouragement from their teachers.

4.0 Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to identify the factors associated with school refusal behavior in primary school students in Selangor, Malaysia. The findings on academic achievement is similar to Jacob and Lovett (2017)¹⁹ who found that absenteeism lowers students' educational achievement and chronic absenteeism is associated with a host of negative academic outcomes such as dropping out and getting used to drug abuse in the future. Jacob and Lovett further stressed that it is not chronic absenteeism that directly causes students to have bad academic outcomes; rather it could be the other way round; poor academic performance causes a student to choose to miss school.

These findings are also supported by Kearney (2008)²⁰ who pointed out that short-term effect of school refusal behavior include poor academic performance, school drop-out and worsening peer relationships while long-term consequences can include academic underachievement, employment difficulties and social problems in adulthood. When students absent themselves from school frequently, they couldn't catch up with the missed lessons. The accumulation of missed lessons will deteriorate their overall academic achievement.

These students would get back their momentum in studies if given some time and motivation to strive. Parents should play a great role in school refusers' life by motivating them and getting them back to school. The academic achievement of school refusers could be increased by increasing their non-absence from school. According to Sebro and Goshu (2017)²¹ absence from class and high work time at home activities are negatively related with a student's achievement, while study time has positive effect. Thus, parents should provide more study time at home by supervising their homework and lowering the demand to do house chores. Apart from that, parents and teachers alike should always talk to the school refusers; by giving them academic motivation and increasing their self-concept and self-efficacy.

The results show peer social skills do not influence school refusal behavior among the school refusers. Surprisingly, the findings from this study are a total contrary to many other researches done previously. This could have happened because the peer social skills scale was rated by the class teachers and they could have been greatly influenced by the children's social skills in the classroom settings.

Ejrnaes, Holm and Le Maire (2014)²² found evidence that peer influence in absenteeism are partly driven by the fact that students enjoy being absent more if they are jointly absent with their classmates. Students who struggle with too many absences year after year doubt their ability to prepare themselves to enter secondary school, due to the feelings of left behind in social skills and academic achievement.

This study indicated that school satisfaction is an important criterion for students to come to school. It shows that when the school environment is good it creates a sense of belonging towards it; thus encouraging students to come to school without fail. A good environment creates happy mood and make the students feel secured and safe. These are the qualities that every student looks for in a school which make them feel satisfied with the school. Students will develop a sense of belonging to school and have less attitude problems if they feel the school environment is caring and supportive. When students feel safe and secure, they are more comfortable in their schools and are better to learn and succeed, as well as have better opportunities to grow academically, emotionally, and socially while the reverse when they feel insecure (Grogger, 1997; Alice et al., 2016)^{23, 24}.

A good school climate leads to school satisfactory among students. This notion is further supported by Manitoba Department of Education, Training and Youth (2001)¹⁴ which stressed that a positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust. Previous research on school climate indicates that several factors are associated with absenteeism, including poor curriculum leading to student boredom, rigid discipline for non-attendance, conflict between students and teachers, and disregard for cultural and diversity issues between families and teachers (Conroy, Conroy, & Newman, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006a)^{25, 26}. Davies and Lee (2006)²⁷ found that primary concerns for parents regarding absenteeism are focused on poor communication between the home and school environment and mistreatment of parents and students by school officials. In addition, communication break down between the parents and the school officials regarding absences coupled with poor parental involvement in school activities pave way for absenteeism.

This study shows that the participants in this sample do not have a good relationship with their teachers and in general they regard their teachers as someone who doesn't care about the students. In all, the results show that there is no significant relationship between teacher support and students' school refusing behavior. It is surprising to find that teacher support is not significant in school refusal behavior. Most of the research done on school refusal behavior and

teacher support does not support these findings. However, this finding is congruent with the research done by Asmawati, Abdul Rahman and Norliana (2012)²⁸ who found that teachers are relatively not very strong in causing students to be absent from school.

When the teachers are not supportive, the students will feel uneasy and anxiety accumulates at the thought of going to school. For instance, a student will become fearful of entering his classroom after being absent the previous days, knowing the teacher would not listen to his problems. Worst still, some teachers would direct frustration and anger towards the students without making any attempt to understand their situations and encourage improving the behaviour. Thus, feeling embarrassed and humiliated, they will form hatred towards school and start to avoid school in order to get away from these teachers. Chhuon and Wallace (2014)²⁹ posited that teachers who know their students are better able to respond to students' individual needs, and this contributes to feelings of caring. Thus, teacher behavior has important implications for students' emotional well-being.

Teachers should always try to motivate their students by praising them whenever necessary; so that they would not get distracted during lesson time. The praising should be sincere and natural and accompanied with appropriate actions and gestures. This will create the bond and trust in their teacher-student relationship. The problem with many teachers nowadays is that they do not praise enough when students anticipate with appropriate behavior. Many teachers too are too quick to judge the students and do not spare time to listen to what they have to say. School refusers find this very hard as the teachers do not care and punish them for their absences without knowing the reason. To be respectful towards the children is very important, thus teachers should treat the students in good manners and avoid calling names based on their background, race, ethnic and socioeconomic status. Students like it when the teachers use their names with respect. Similarly, children love to go to school when their classroom climate is positive. Teachers that structure classroom activities well could promote a feeling of predictability or perceived control in students regarding the classroom environment (Havik et al. 2015)³⁰. Good teachers normally care deeply about their students, always are supportive and don't give up on them. Marvul (2012)¹⁷ suggested that connecting with students starts with student-teacher relationships. If the relationship goes well, the probabilities are that they will connect and bond towards the school more.

The implication of this study is that it confirms that school refusal behaviour has a major impact on schools although there is not much written on this topic in Malaysian schools. Thus, it is advisable for schools to take measures to mitigate the behaviour at an early stage. As each school has its own complexities, thus it should develop a plan that is suitable in supporting the students and the families in need in that particular school. The first step is to identify students who are in trouble early on, before this behaviour becomes chronic. Next, members of the school community need to assist the student by building trust and meaningful relationship through one to one session. It is very important to take into account that punishments or disciplinary actions do not become the first option to carry out on students' identified as having habitual school

refusal behaviour. Adults who work with these students should develop positive and open relationships with them in order to render meaningful insights about what actions they should take to overcome this problem.

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