



School Refusal Behavior among Middle School Students in Pakistan: Exploring Psychological and Institutional Factors

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ABSTRACT

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The current study investigated the role of multidimensional factors including psychological, social and school related that promote refusal of school attitude in middle school students. Main objectives included exploring relationship between school refusal behaviors and bullying as an institutional factor and compare gender differences. Using quantitative approach, a correlational study design was used. A survey was carried out among a sample selected by convenient sampling comprising of 200 boys and girls (100 each) of middle school (aged 11-14 years) studying in grades 6-8 in four private and public school in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Structured questionnaires including SRAS-R, IBS and DASS were utilized to measure experience of bullying, school refusal and mental symptoms. It was hypothesized that i) the higher the experience of bullying and psychological distress, higher will be school refusal ii) boys will score higher on IBS, DASS and SRAS-R as compared to girls. Statistical analysis reveals that hypotheses were accepted and it was found that bullying is strongly associated with school refusal. Boys reported more bullying incidence as compared to girls. However, they did not vary in school refusal behavior. The information from this research can aid education and curriculum planners for managing SRB by formulating techniques of intervention based on evidence

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1.0 Introduction

School refusal has emerged as a serious problem which impacts children, societies and nations at large. It is not considered a diagnostic label, rather a symptom which manifests as a regular pattern of refusing to go to school. Pakistan is ranked second globally with 23 million children aged between 5-15 years who are out of school; which estimates to 44% of the total population within this stratum (DFID, 2016). Refusal or reluctance to attend school which is referred as school refusal behavior (SRB) is a major problem in the education sector across the globe. According to recent research, approximately two to five percent student population of children between ages 5-11 show this behavior (Kawsar et al., 2023). It is a complex issue which leaves a deep impact on multiple aspects of students' lives. Particularly important is the vulnerable age of adolescents which begins in middle school approximately around grades 4-8 when students are dealing with a lot of pressure due to their transitional stage of development. These changes are not only physical but psychological, emotional and social as well which researchers have highlighted well in literature on puberty. Terming it as the age of "storm and stress" by Stanley Hall (1904) many recent studies have explained the difficulties adolescents go through and the need for social support and understanding (Kar et al., 2015; Balázs et al., 2017). Many adolescents fall into maladaptive behaviors to cope with these burdens which may expose them to mental health issues and negative consequences on health (Özdemir et al., 2016; Bernaras et al., 2019). School refusal behavior is of special interest in this age group and should be investigated in depth to see how these students cope with academic pressures alongwith their developmental issues. A recent systemic review of studies highlighted that SRB in adolescents is as high as 32% and is mostly associated with negative experiences at school including cyberbullying, mocking, shame and others (Vincenzio et al., 2024).

Most of the research body of literature available focused on individual factors which may contribute to SRB. For example, initial work SRB such as Kearney and Albano (2004) centered on explaining the phenomena and identified the extent of this problem and reported that boys engage more in it. Most of the work followed has been limited to explore this problem as a separate phenomenon and discussed the individual variations in this behavior, the reasons and its consequences. Such as many studies discussed psychosocial factors as barriers are known to contribute to school refusal behavior among children. Researchers have found that chronic absenteeism can cause both short and long term impact on children including their education such as poor academic performance (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022); social issues including drug addiction or engaging in risky behaviors (Hallfors et al., 2002; Eaton et al., 2008); and adverse impact on psychological wellbeing (Kim, 2010).

It remains uncovered and under discussed what are the institutional factors involved in precipitating school refusal. While bullying has been identified as a major behavioral issue in schools, it has not been extensively studied in the context of SRB. For example, a study highlights that school environment and culture are also associated with attendance rate of students. One significant factor is bullying and victimization in schools which has been linked with school absenteeism. Many children who are victim of bullying exhibit avoidance behaviors

and are afraid to go to school. Research evidence suggests likewise such as Steiner and Rasberry (2015) indicated in their findings that 15.5% of bullying victims are absent minimum one day at school. Additionally, Jan and Husain (2015) in their study on a sample of 234 boys and girls discussed that avoidance was ranked the second highest strategy to cope with bullying. Juvonen et al. (2000) carried out their research on 243 students aged 12-15 reported strong link between absenteeism and harassment at school. These studies emphasize the need to explore the contribution of this factor in display of school refusal behavior in the context of Pakistan. The importance of this research lies in the fact that it aims to address the gap in research literature which has not established a clear link between institutional factor of bullying and SRB.

A major contribution of this study is that provides a gender analysis of these factors which can help educators and counselors to consider gender as an important factor while designing interventions and prevention strategies so that needs of both boys and girls can be addressed. Finally, the findings of this research can bring insight in the dynamic interaction of psychological, institutional and social factors such as gender which play a vital role in development of such issues in educational settings. Policy makers for education can benefit from it and develop inclusive and evidence-based policies to foster a supportive education system which promotes positive student behaviors.

2.0 Literature Review

A brief review of literature is provided to build a background context of the study variables.

2.1 Understanding Refusal behavior in Schools

It is a multidimensional concept which includes actions of students such as avoidance or hesitance on attending school and at emotional level, a pattern of distress and negative emotions is observed. Initially, the researchers who took interest in this phenomenon and set out to explore it as a psychological and research issue are Kearney and Silverman (1996). They began compiling their information on this problem by identifying what behavioral issues were emerging in the students. These included missing classes, bunking school, absentees from school and being consistently late. Their consistent efforts to contribute to this area of research helped them establish prevalence of this problem which they found to be up to six percent (Kearney 2002). Many researchers followed suit and a body of literature has been established on the occurrence of SRB and related factors with it. Majority have identified it as a global issue, occurring in late children and adolescents up to 5 percent and a major problem in education settings (Kawsar et al., 2023; Vinvenzio et al., 2024; Jan & Husain, 2015).

2.2 Psychosocial Contributors to SRB

Another dimension which is important to understand in the context of school refusal is the psychological and social underlying factors. Researchers in the field of psychology have emphasized the contributing factors which compel an individual student to avoid school. For example, research highlights negative emotional experiences in school as a key factor leading to avoidance. Many psychological and behavioral underlying issues also promote this behavior such as patients of autism, neurodevelopmental disorders, ADHD, depression and anxiety engage

in SRB more than others (Ochi et al., 2020; Vincenzo et al., 2024; Gonsalvez, 2023). Kearney (2008) also emphasized that parental conflict, psychological distress in parents and stressful family environment is a major predictor of SRB among students. According to Ek & Erickson (2013) 90% of students who avoid going to school are diagnosed with some kind of psychological disorder. Similarly, MD, Yilani & Marwaha (2021) while describing school refusal have emphasized that it is linked with other multiple psychopathologies including mood disorders, anxiety issues and phobias. Other studies have identified gender as a key indicator with boys avoiding school more than girls. These studies have not only discussed how these social and psychological factors contribute to refusal from school but also highlighted the negative impact on their wellbeing such as distress, low self-esteem and development of mental health disorders (Al Husni & Delvenne, 2021; Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022).

2.3 School as a contributing factor

It is imperative to highlight the institutional factor relevant to refusal of school behaviors. Many factors prevalent in the premises of school and interaction of the student occurring within its wall with staff, teachers and peers are significantly vital in understanding why students avoid school. Study suggests that if a student's perception about their school is negative such as viewing it as a threatening place, they are more likely to avoid going to school. Whereas, if students feel welcome and inclusive in their schools then it leads to more positive experiences and less avoidance (Berg, 2018). Bullying is a prevalent issue in schools. Many studies have highlighted as a major issue in education system and discussed the adverse impact as well (Steiner and Rasberry, 2015; Bitsika et al., 2021). When school administration fails to control this issue, the students who experience bullying become aversive to school experience and it leads them to avoidance. Since school is the medium where bullying takes place, it is important to see it as an institutional factor contributing to SRB and strategies to be developed at institutional level to manage both bullying and SRB.

2.4 Theoretical framework and Objectives

Kearney & Silverman (1996) are the pioneers who identified school refusal as a multidimensional concept and they proposed a functional model of school refusal to understand this behavior. Later on, based on further research they emphasized the need for collaborative approach to design interventions which involve school staff, administration, parents and health practitioners (Kearney & Bates, 2005). The current research utilizes their theoretical underpinnings and apply it to the measurement of school refusal behavior among middle school children. According to this model, it should be conceptualized in its functional capacity and avoiding school is considered in terms of the functions it serves or reinforcement it earns the child. They identified four main functions based on negative and positive reinforcement principles:

- i. Aversion of stimuli associated with school which trigger negative emotional responses such as anxiety or depression. This functional conditional is more common among children of younger age. They form negative associations with school and feel bad or scared to go to school.

- ii. Avoidance of social situations in school which are evaluative or aversive. These are common among children of older age and adolescents and often include situations which they find difficult or anxiety provoking such as examination, social conversations, bullying, participating in events or sports etc.
- iii. Gain attention of significant individuals in their life. This is more common among children of primary schools who refuse to go to school to get attention from their caregivers. Separation anxiety may be present in them.
- iv. Achievement of tangible rewards from external sources other than school

This is also common among older children and adolescent who want to go out of school for pleasurable activities such as hanging out with friends, staying at home to watch T.V or engage in risk behaviors such as drug abuse etc. Based on the existing evidence of literature cited above and theory proposed by Kearney, the following research objectives were formulated in the light of literature review:

- To investigate the association of school refusal behavior, psychosocial factors and institutional factor (bullying) among students of middle school.
- To explore the association of school refusal behavior To assess the gender differences in school refusal behavior, psychosocial and institutional factors among students of middle school.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Higher the scores on IBS and DASS, higher is score on SRAS-R.

Boys score high on IBS, DASS and SRAS-R as compared to girls

3.0 Methodology

The study was designed using quantitative approach, employing survey as a tool for data collection. The survey consisted of consent form, demographic sheet and three structured and well-established psychometric scales. The demographic sheet was self-constructed to elicit basic information about the sample including age, gender, birth order, family structure, education & occupation of parents, number of friends and siblings. To assess school refusal behavior, “School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R)” developed by Christopher Kearney and Wendy Silverman (Kearney & Silverman, 1996) was used. It consists of 24 items with 7-point Likert scale response. This scale focuses on measuring four functional variables or conditions which lead to school refusal behavior which include i) averting school-based stimuli which trigger negative emotions ii) avoidance of school-based situations which they dislike iii) attention seeking iv) gain rewards from external sources.

The psychosocial factors to be investigated were measured using a widely used screening tool to measure symptoms of psychological distress (Lovibond, & Lovibond, 1995). “Depression, Anxiety Stress Scale” or DASS is a self-report 42 item scale with four-point Likert response options. It has three sub-sets namely Depression scale, Anxiety scale and Stress scale. Each is further divided into subscales measuring different aspects or symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Higher scores indicate more distress.

To measure the institutional factor which was bullying, “Illinois Bully Scale” (IBS) was

used. It is also a self-report tool with 5-point Likert response options with total 15 items and measures different types of bullying. Higher scores indicate higher prevalence of bullying (Espelage & Holt, 2013).

This survey protocol was administered in four schools selected using convenient sampling situated in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Islamabad is the capital city of Pakistan and Rawalpindi is the twin city which is considered an industrial hub. Formal permission was taken from school authorities by the researcher after briefing them about the purpose of research. Moreover, informed consent from parents/guardians was obtained in Parents Teacher Meeting of the school prior to data collection. Boys and girls studying in 6-8 grades were approached in their classrooms after informed consent was taken and guideline to fill the protocol was provided. All ethical considerations were followed rigorously. It took 30-40 minutes approximate for the participants to fill the survey. Data gathered was then cleaned, entered and analyzed using SPSS and the results are illustrated in the following section.

4.0 Findings and Results

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the sample profile (N=200)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Male students	100	50.0
Female students	100	50.0
Father work status		
Professional	149	74.5
Government employee	51	25.5
Mother work status		
Employed	104	52.0
Home maker	96	48.0
Type of family		
Nuclear family	127	63.5
Joint family	73	36.5
Order of birth		
Eldest	64	32.0
Mid born	67	33.5
Youngest	69	34.5
Living arrangements		
Living with Parents	200	100.0
Other	0	0.0

The table above provides descriptive information about the demographic characteristics of the sample. According to the data shown, gender was equally represented in the sample of 200. Majority of students' fathers were professionals (74.5%) and mothers were also employed (52%). Most of them belonged to nuclear family system (63.5%) and all of them were living with their parents. Proportions of birth order were almost equally distributed (32% -34.5%).

Table 2 Pearson Product Correlation among school refusal behavior, psychosocial and

institutional factors (N=200)

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3
School Refusal Behavior	200	41.1	13.5	-		
Psychosocial Factors (Depression, Anxiety, Stress)	200	38.6	25.5	.41**	-	
Institutional Factors (Bullying)	200	46.7	27.3	.22**	.14*	-

N** indicates significance of $p < 0.01$; *indicates $p < 0.05$.

Data presented in the table above indicates the relationship between school refusal behavior, psychosocial and institutional factors which is computed through Pearson product correlation. Psychosocial ($r(200) = .41$, $p < 0.01$) and institutional factors ($r(200) = .22$, $p < 0.01$) both have strong positive association with school refusal behavior. The institutional factor i.e. bullying also is positively associated with psychosocial distress ($r(200) = .14^*$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3 Gender differences in school refusal behavior psychosocial and institutional factors (N= 200)

V	Boys n = 100		Girls n = 100		T.	p.	95% of C.I	
	M.	S.D	M.	S.D			L.L.	U.L.
School Refusal Behavior	26.84	8.14	27.55	6.43	.83	.40	-2.37	.96
Psychosocial Factors	42.82	27.80	34.09	25.34	2.321	.021	1.31	16.16
Institutional Factors	54.23	28.84	39.35	23.68	3.98	.000	7.51	22.24

Note: V= Variables

Above table presents the gender differences calculated by T-test in the variables of the study i.e. school refusal behavior, psychosocial and institutional factors. Data shows that boys (M = 26.8 SD= 8.14, $p = .40$) and girls (M = 27.5 SD= 6.43, $p = .40$) don't significantly vary in showing school refusal behavior. Boys score significantly higher on psychosocial (M = 42.8 SD= 27.8, $p = .02$) and institutional factors (M = 54.2 SD= 28.8, $p = .00$) than girls

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate the contribution of psychosocial and institutional factors in school refusal behavior among students of middle school. Findings presented indicate that school refusal behavior has strong, positive association with psychosocial factors. As indicated by the correlation values given in Table 2, the higher score on DASS scale, higher was rate of school refusal as well. The results of the current study are in congruence with the previous literature. Studies such as Kearney & Silverman (2002) found a strong relationship between anxiety and school refusal. Many others have reported that school refusal is often associated with diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health conditions. The earliest term used for this behavior

where children show fear or anxiety going to school and then avoid it was called school phobia in 1941 and later on it has been discussed as a symptom or way of coping with fear rather than a diagnostic label from which 2-5% of school going children experience (Sewell, 2008; Kearney, 2008; MD et al., 2021). If we consider the functional model of school refusal behavior, which is also manifested in the results indicated by the study in Table 3. Majority of the sample has scored higher on items such as “It would be easier to go to school if I had less bad feelings” or “I feel bad when going to school such as nervous, scared etc”. This indicates that school refusal is used as the function of avoiding aversive feelings associated with school. Similar findings have been reported in a study by Lingenfelter & Hartung (2015) reported that children exhibit such intense fear that they don’t even go outside to avoid school and often develop physical complaints as well.

Another major finding of the current study is that school refusal is strongly associated with institutional factor i.e. bullying as indicated by the correlation values. It is also supported by other findings such as majority scoring high on the item “I would go to school if my parents with me” indicating a need for support. Bullying scores are quite high which is quite common in schools in Pakistan as reported in previous literature. Naveed et al (2020) reported approximate 26.6% bullying in five districts of Pakistan whereas national survey in 2009 estimated it to be 41% (Shaikh, 2013; Owusu, 2022; Reijntjes et al 2011). Studies report that bullying impacts children’s mental, social and academic condition. Similar trend is observed in the results of the current study as a strong association of bullying with anxiety and depression is observed. Gender is a significant factor associated with bullying and research literature highlights gendered experiences of bullying. It is discussed that gender roles play a vital role and boys are observed to be more involved in perpetrating bullying behavior. A study conducted on 1752 children found that both boys and girls show absenteeism as a coping mechanism for bullying. Additionally, avoiding school is commonly associated with violence, bullying and hunger (Karmaliani et al., 2017; Saeed et al., 2017). In the current study, similar trend is observed and boys report more bullying than girls. Considering the patriarchal society of Pakistan, externalizing behaviors and aggression is commonly associated with male gender and thus this display of violence is accepted gender norm in the society (Aslam, 2014). Hellstrom & Beckman (2020) in their study discussed that bullying is culturally displayed and guided by gender norms. The second hypothesis is accepted but with the exception of behavior regarding school attendance. Gender did not vary the behaviors of SRB. The current study concluded that school refusal behavior is a complex issue which is associated with psychosocial and institutional factors. A multidimensional approach is proposed for intervention design and gender should be considered a vital variable while formulating this framework. It has both theoretical and practical implications for parents, educators and counselors.

5.1 Recommendations

This study has provided insight into the complex issue of school refusal behavior among middle school children in Pakistan. Its ramifications are far reaching and span over educational, clinical and social dimensions. The study recommends a multi-sectorial approach in the planning,

design and implementation of intervention. All the stakeholders should be consulted including parents, teachers, counselors and administration in the process. Gender experts should be kept on board to help identify gender inclusive needs to address this crucial problem.

Ruhma Shahid: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Nadia Bukhtawer: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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