

Original Paper

School Refusal Behaviour in Primary School Students: A Demographic Analysis

Rukmani Devi Balakrishnan^{1*} & Hari Krishnan Andi²

¹ Human Development Faculty, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

² Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Lincoln, University College, Selangor, Malaysia

* Rukmani Devi Balakrishnan, Human Development Faculty, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

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Abstract

School Refusal Behaviour (SRB) is an action, which is in another word a child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulty remaining in class for an entire day. The objective of this study was to identify whether there are any differences in the demographic factors regarding SRB in primary school students in Selangor. Quantitative survey method was adopted as the method of this study. The survey was conducted at the end of school term in 2016, and students were recruited from 20 primary schools in six districts in Selangor 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. Demographic measures were implemented and the study showed a high incidence rate of SRB in primary school students in Selangor (94.9%). The analysis showed there were no gender differences although the SRB in both categories were high ($M=3.9$). Similarly, the study also found there were no significant differences between single parent and two-parents; and low-class and middle-class family with SRB; although the occurrence of SRB in both categories were high.

Keywords

school refusal behaviour, school refuser, gender, single parent, two parents, lower class, middle class

1. Introduction

Schools have struggled for years distinguishing between truancy and school phobia for non-attending students. In fact, school phobia which is better known as school refusal is puzzling to many as this terminology is still new to our Malaysian teachers, parents and school administrators compared to the

western countries. Part of the confusion regarding the term “school phobia” is that the behaviours are not usually considered to be a true phobia as when the particular children are excused from school their behaviour reflects that of a very normal and cheerful child.

School refusal behaviour is a broad term that refers to a child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulty remaining in class for an entire day (Kearney, 2002; Kearney & Chapman, 2008). The behaviour includes children and adolescents completely absent from school for an extensive period of time, who skips classes or sections of a school day, who are chronically tardy to school, who have severe morning misbehaviours in attempt to miss school, and who attend school but with great difficulty. Repeated, unexcused absence from school represents a significant deviation from a society’s norm of behaviour and socialization (Lyon, 2007). Every child should go to school at an appropriate age is a notion globally accepted; and when a child is found to breach this notion either on his own freewill or forced to do so, then it will become a problem to that society.

Children and adolescents of all ages, and boys and girls alike, can exhibit school refusal behaviour. The most common age of onset, however, is 10 to 13 years. In addition, youths who are entering a school building for the first time, are at particular risk for school refusal behaviour (Kearney, 2006). Primary and secondary schools in Malaysia too, are stricken with the problem of unexcused absenteeism among their students. Studies carried out in Malaysia on various social problems involving teenagers have reported a truancy percentage among students around 30 percentage (Shah, Abdullah, & Aizuddin, 2012); which is considered very high. However, the number of students who are chronically absent nationwide without an excuse is unknown as there is not much information about the statistics revealed or published.

Skipping school is a discipline misconduct that has been occurring for a long time (Arsaythamby Veloo & Kim, 2014), as many primary and secondary school students are very well at playing truant (Azizi, Noordin, Shahrin, Jamaludin, & Vinothini, 2011). In Malaysian scenario, the truancy rate is quite alarming involving teenagers in the age category of 14-15 years old. Report from the Ministry of Education Malaysia had shown that from year 2006 to 2012, the discipline cases has reached 107,191 cases compared to 97 115 cases in 2005 (Arsaytham by Veloo & Kim, 2014); with truancy cases stood at 17343 cases (Arsaythambi Veloo & Kim, 2014; Zahari & Low, 2013). However, according to Harits Asyraf Hasnan (2018, March 21) the truancy cases rose dramatically in the year 2017 whereby it showed a whopping 67,053 cases.

In Malaysia, the term “school refusal” is not widely used and those children who were frequently absent from school are generally categorized as truants and the study about truancy almost always did not stress the emotional difficulties faced by the school refusers or the absence of significant antisocial or delinquent activity. The perpetrators are linked to deviant activities such as theft, loitering in shopping complexes, drugs, video games, accessing pornographic websites and so on.

Students with school attendance problems appear likely to have emotional difficulties (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvag, 2015). Depression is a predictive variable of school refusal and it is accompanied by strong

levels of anxiety (Tekin, Erden, Sirin Ayva, & Büyüköksüz, 2018). Depression and anxiety are considered the most common emotional difficulties for students who do not attend school (Nayak, Sangoi, & Nachane, 2018). Many children with school refusal behaviour show a number of internalizing and externalizing problems. Internalizing problems include general and social anxiety, fear, fatigue, suicidality, and somatic complaints (e.g., stomachaches, nausea, tremors and headaches). Externalizing problems consist of noncompliance with parent and teacher commands, defiance and aggression, running away from school or home, temper tantrums (including crying and screaming) and clinging (Kearney, 2001; Setzer & Salzhauer, 2001).

School refusal is a problem that is stressful for children, families, and school personnel. It is a serious emotional problem that is associated with significant short- and long-term consequences (Fremont, 2003). It can happen at any age but mostly detected when there is a change in the normal routine such as starting to school or advancing to secondary school. The school refusers often feel sick in the mornings due to anxiety and this makes them very reluctant to leave their house and engage in other activities. This situation can be very distressing for both the parents and the children, and often, the parents are blamed for the refusal behaviour, thus, making them angry and at guilt as well. This problem should be treated seriously because if left untreated for some time, the refuser will find it very difficult to return to school after being absent for a long time.

1.1 Demographic Factors Contributing Towards School Refusal Behaviour

Various variables have been identified as the contributing factors that may influence or be associated with school refusal behavior. The demographic factors focused in this study are gender, family type (single parent/two parents) and socioeconomic status (lower class/middle class).

1.1.1 Gender

With respect to gender, few differences within samples of youth demonstrating patterns of problematic nonattendance have been recorded. However, at most of the time, cases of truancy petitioned by the courts show gender rates roughly equal to those found in the general population. Kearney, Eisen and Silverman (1995) also supported this view by stating that in terms of gender, school refusal behavior occurs fairly even across boys and girls.

According to Fremont (2003) approximately 1 to 5 percent of all school-aged children demonstrate school refusal, and the rate is similar between boys and girls (Heyne, King, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001; Kearney, 2001). These consistent findings have influenced some researchers to conclude that, gender is not highly predictive of cases of school absenteeism (Kearney, 2001). Similarly, Tekin et al. (2018) found gender did not yield any differences on school refusal behaviour.

However, Lee and Miltenberg (1996) referred to the typical student with school refusal as being male, higher socio-economic background, and experiencing school refusal post-puberty. In accordance to this, Reid (2014) found that research from the past ten years has remained consistent in demonstrating that a majority of school refusal and truant students are male and belong to a specific socio-economic status. This has been contested by some researchers who indicated that school refusal occurs evenly among

males and females, although it may appear that more females experience fear or anxiety based school refusal, whereas males are categorized as oppositional school refusers (Last & Strauss, 1990; Kearney, 2001).

Similarly, Maric, Heyne, and de Haus (2012), in their study with a sample of 231 adolescents between 11 and 17 years, found no significant sex differences but indicated that the older participants had a greater probability of suffering from school refusal. In contrast, Kearney and Spear (2014) stressed that subsequent studies have found that dropout levels are higher for boys (9.1%) than for girls (7.0%). Reid (2012) found that males are five to six times more prone to commit criminal offences than females. Thus, Lyons (2016) suggested the need to address school refusal students through interventions is necessary from the elementary through the high school levels.

1.1.2 Single Parent/Two Parents

Parents of students with school refusal generally feel overwhelmed with their children's situation, so they may find it easier to give in and let their child stay home. In addition, a screaming child who refuses to leave his or her parents' side in public can be extremely embarrassing, which explains why it is vital for school personnel to be trained to handle these situations. Kahn, Nursten, and Carroll (1996) found that many older children who display chronic school refusal behaviour often have broken homes, little discipline in their lives, and few warm relationships.

Studies have shown that single-parent homes maybe overrepresented in school refusing samples and that those families are more likely to demonstrate high levels of family problems as rated by the Family Assessment Measure-III; FAM (Bernstein & Borchardt, 1996). Sommer and Nagel (1991) found in their study that truant children were less likely to live with both parents and were more likely to have more siblings than a non-truant control group.

Bernstein and Borchardt (1996) assessed 134 families from a school outpatient clinic in The United States of America using the Family Assessment Measure (Skinner, Steinhauer, & Santa-Barbara, 1983). This scale comprises of fifty statements about general family relationships and interactions. Single parent families were overrepresented amongst the sample, compared to the general population. Mothers of school refusers in single-parent families reported significantly more family problems compared to mothers living with fathers, particularly in factors related to communication and role performance. Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, and Taylor (2000) also found that in one third of the families with school refusers, there was no father figure. Submissive communication from mothers could lead to dominant communications from children. Single mothers frequently spend their time working and on child care and have less time to work on relationships (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Packer Rosenthal, 2013). Thus, inappropriate child leadership roles which were established in single family communication, could lead to role reversals.

Place et al. (2000) conducted a research on 17 families with the children ranging in age from 12 to 15 years and all of them met the criteria for a diagnosis of school refusal, and they have been out of school for at least 6 months. They found the families tended to live in deprived areas and were materially poor.

An over involvement between mother and child was significant, but the families were often distorted in their patterns of functioning, especially in terms of warmth and genuine regard. The marital difficulties have been an ongoing process, and in over one third there was no father figure in the household.

Parents are guilty of allowing their children to arrive late to school. Furthermore, they will also dismiss their children from school at the whim of the children's request, which is called as parental condoned truancy (Farrar, 2010). According to Reid (2000) parental approval of absences is the largest cause of non-attendance, with often one or both of the parents condone the behavior. Parents believe by allowing their children to stay at home, their anxiety towards school will reduce and this will ease their children's effort to get back to school. Unfortunately, when the parental condoned truancy is often practiced, the parents will eventually become reluctant or do not make any effort to send their children to school. Some parents are forced to adapt to this action in an effort to be liked or to gain approval from their children.

1.1.3 Middle Class/Lower Class

Hansen, Sanders, Massaro, and Last (1998) found no relationship between socioeconomic status and severity of nonattendance, contrary to their expectations that increased financial strain would lead to increased absenteeism. Berg (1992) has done a comparison between truancy behavior and school refusal, and found that socioeconomic status (SES) was not a predictor for either cohort.

In contrast, Reid (2014) found that many school refusal students come from families at the lower end of the social scale, families on low incomes or those who depends on state support such as income support or housing benefit and families with children who get free school meals. Similarly, Tekin et al. (2018) stressed that children from lower SES are more likely to experience school refusal behaviour. This category of students was often forced to work during school hours to ease the financial burden of their families.

Ahmad Faizuddin (2018) stressed that schools are facing great challenges to improve students' low academic performances. This is mainly because most of the students in this category are from low income families. Some of them have to work after school hours to make ends meet. These students often feel tired the following day at school thus, couldn't focus on their studies. Parents were viewed as a cause, an enabling factor, or an influence on student's school refusal behaviour (Foy, 2018).

Due to family circumstances, education and learning may become less of a priority when compared to financial or housing needs (Anyanwu, 2016). Truant students indicated that household obligations affected their school performance and attendance whereas they perceive those duties as priority before school attendance (Postiglione, Jiao, & Gyatso, 2006; Anyanwu, 2016). Thus, lower class families which can't afford for a day care or nanny to look after the young children tend to stop the older children from going to school to care for their younger siblings. According to Lyons (2016), many of these parents do not encourage their children to attend school consistently and may send a message that education is not important. Similarly, Foy (2018) insisted that parents of students from a low income family devalued education.

In addition, late enrolment and irregular class attendance due to poor family SES, ethnic identity and school factors, all affect school attainment (Uddin, 2016), and in long run will develop into hatred towards school and refusal to come to school. It is often argued that students originating from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a higher tendency not to complete school, to have low educational aspirations and not to complete higher education (Nand, 2017). However, more recent research has argued that low SES is only moderately associated with educational outcomes and achievement. Student performance is more related to ability and persistence than to socioeconomic background (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2016; Jimmerson, Patterson, Stein, & Babcock, 2016; Kim, S., Kim, E., Wagaman, & Fong, 2017).

Low SES increases anxiety and withdrawal from school as a lack of family resources for schooling and high costs leads to school dropout (Berger & Archer, 2015; Minello & Blossfeld, 2016; Obonyo, Janeth, & Richard, 2015). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed with individual persistence in supportive learning environment with teachers, parents, and community support including their own will in educational decision-making (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Krauss, Kombluh, & Zeldin, 2017; Lovett, 2016).

Thus disciplinary policies that focus on excluding, suspending and expelling students who are identified as truants; are in fact ignoring the underlying issues that influenced the students to refuse school. Students from low income, inner city school districts may have issues in their lives that prevent them from attending school, and it is very important for schools to address these issues rather than expelling them from schools.

Thus, the aim of this study is to assess the demographic factors that cause school refusal behavior in primary school students.

2. 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 from 4th January till 21st October 2016 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 from seven districts in Selangor. One hundred percent of the students participated in this study had a documented history of frequent unexcused absences and/or difficulty getting to school on time during the school year. The resulting sample was restricted to those children who were able to obtain their parents' written permission for participation.

The data was collected utilizing three instruments: The demographic form, the academic and absence data form, and The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R-C) child version. The overall reliability score for the SRAS-R-C was .88. All recruitment and data collection procedure were approved by the Educational Planning and Research Division and the Selangor Education Department.

3. Result

T-test and ANOVA analysis were performed to determine the differences between demographic factors and school refusal behaviour.

T-test was used to analyse the differences between boys ($n=493$) and girls ($n=422$) regarding school refusal behaviour.

Table 1. Differences in Gender Regarding School Refusal Behaviour

	Male	Female		
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean Diff.	t
SRB	3.92 (0.25)	3.94 (0.27)	-0.02	-1.1

$p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

The results show there is no significant difference between male ($M=3.92$, $S.D.=0.25$) and female ($M=3.94$, $S.D.=0.27$) conditions: $t(912)=-1.10$, $p=0.27$ ($p < 0.05$), regarding school refusal behavior, as shown in Table 1, the boys and girls are equally involved in school refusal behavior and the occurrence of school refusal behavior is high ($M=3.9$).

T-test was used to analyze the differences between school refusers from single parent family ($n=498$) and two parents family ($n=417$) regarding school refusal behaviour.

Table 2. Differences between Single-Parent and Two-Parents Regarding SRB

	Single Parent	Two-Parent		
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean Diff.	t
SRB	3.93 (0.25)	3.93 (0.27)	-0.0076	-0.438

$p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

The t-test results show that there is no significant difference between single parent ($M=3.93$, $S.D.=0.25$) and two parents ($M=3.93$, $S.D.=0.27$); conditions: $t(912)=-0.438$, $p=0.662$ ($p < 0.05$), regarding school refusal behaviour, as shown in Table 2. The students from single parent and two-parents family are equally involved in school refusal behaviour and the occurrence of SRB is equally high ($M=3.93$).

The socioeconomic status showed that out of 915 respondents, 604 (66.0%) were from lower class family, 307 respondents (33.6%) were from middle class family while 4 respondents (0.4%) were from

upper middle class family. The ANOVA test was employed to find the differences between these classes and school refusal behaviour.

Table 3. Differences between Middle-Class and Lower-Class Household

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square F	Sig.	
Between Groups	0.105	2	0.052	0.773	0.462
Within Groups	61.861	911	0.068		
Total	61.966	913			

$p < 0.05$.

The one way ANOVA results show that there is no significant difference between middle-class and lower-class household, $F(2, 911) = 0.773$, $p = 0.462$ ($p < 0.05$), regarding school refusal behaviour as shown in Table 3. Hence, the students from lower-class household and middle-class household are equally involved in school refusal behaviour and the occurrence of SRB is equally high among these households, middle-class ($M = 3.9$, $S.D. = 0.27$) and lower-class ($M = 3.9$, $S.D. = 0.26$).

4. Discussion

Specifically the study was aimed to measure demographic variables which consist of gender, single parent/two parents, and low class and middle class family and their differences with school refusal behaviour among the students.

The sample of school refusers consisted of 493 males and 422 females. The results revealed no significant differences in school refusal behaviour between the male and female students in the sample. These results are consistent with prior research findings that suggest there is a comparatively equal representation of gender among children who refuse school (Kearney & Bates, 2005; Kearney & Albano, 2000). As mentioned earlier, previous research done by Kearney (2006) found that school refusal behaviour is at peak at the age level of 10 and 13 years old, regardless of gender. Thus, as the age category of the students in this research is 10 and 11 years old, the high rate of school refusal behaviour could be understood.

This finding is congruent with previous research which suggests that school refusal behaviour is most prevalent during transition years in school (Heyne, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001); and in this case from level 1 (lower primary) to level 2 (upper primary) which is compacted with more subjects thus more weightage is given to the academic achievement as the teachers are more concerned in getting the students all geared up towards the upcoming Year 6 *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR) examinations. Tension runs high in both gender as the students couldn't make themselves familiar with this complex new academic situation compared to level 1 which was more relaxed with less subjects, teachers were nice and friendlier, and no loads of homework or formal weekly written work (such as

essays) to do. These changes may be over whelming to some students and could lead to an increase in students' school-refusing behaviour.

Thus, to avoid this unpleasant situation, the only way is by making up health excuses at home (e.g., stomach ache, headaches, and nausea) in the early morning before school and the school refusers often get their way with the parents who will grant permission to stay at home. This explains why the rate of school refusal behaviour is very high during the transition year of schooling. School personnel should take serious action in combating the habit of refusing school among these children at the early stage by making soft landing in Year 4, that is by reducing too much concentration on grades and marks and increasing the concentration towards learning and knowing the subject matter in a lighter manner. Parents of school refusers too should be called in frequently to schools to observe their children's activity in classrooms so that they could understand the importance of education and to realize what their children could miss if they were absent frequently.

The findings from this study also showed that there is no significant difference in school refusal behaviour between students from single parent home and two-parents home. Although more students in the sample were from single parent home, the difference was not statistically significant. However, the occurrence of school refusal behaviour in these students is equally high. This shows that inharmonious family with busy parents who do not emphasize on academic achievement could contribute towards school absenteeism (Zahari & Low, 2015), regardless of what type of family the child comes from; whether it's an intact family or a broken one. When the adults in the family keep shrugging off their responsibilities of taking care of the child's well-being and education due to workload and hectic life style, the children will take advantage of this situation by not doing homework or skipping school frequently.

Parents who fail to supervise their children's activity at school and at home open up a whole new world for them to deviate and become useless. Ingul, Klockner, Silverman, and Nordahl's (2012) findings are consistent with this. They found that inefficient parental supervision pose as risk factors for truancy and absenteeism. This notion is further supported by other researchers; Henry (2007) and Baker, Sigmont, and Nugent (2001) found that lack of guidance or parental supervision and lack of awareness of attendance laws as causes of student's non-attendance. Families of children with school refusal behaviour may have an unclear picture about the importance of education. These parents are normally under educated and work as hard labourer or general workers with a meager salary. Thus, the parents do not adopt the appropriate role of encouraging a child to return to school after a prolonged absence or a long holiday break. Lack of cohesion and understanding between parents or a family separation further exacerbate the school refusal problem.

However, single parents tend to have lower expectations for educational attainment and are less encouraging than dual-parents due to the burden of single handedly raising their children and being the sole bread winner; thus there is almost no spare time to spend at home observing the children's education activities. In addition, single mothers spend more hours working outside to bring food to the

table and the time spent at home is only enough to do house chores and running errands thus, they fail to supervise their children's attendance to school. The findings show that if the parents are negligence and lack of supervision on their children, as well as having very low expectations on education attainment, the children will not value school and eventually will refuse to go to school after getting used taking leave frequently.

Students from lower-class and middle-class families were not represented equally in this sample. Majority of the students were from lower-class families. However, the findings show that there is no significant difference between school refusal behaviour and socioeconomic status among these groups. In addition, the occurrence of school refusal behaviour among these groups is equally high. These results are congruent with past research findings regarding the etiology of school refusal behaviour. Kearney (2001) found that school refusal behaviour in children present equally across gender, racial and income groups. Similarly, Kearney and Albano (2000) and Mattison (2004) also found that school refusal behaviour is equally distributed across gender and socioeconomic status.

However, this finding is totally adverse to other findings; according to Rothstein (2004), low socio-economic status children are more likely to experience serious health problems. As a result, they are three times more prone to chronically absent from school due to illness or injury (Bloom, Dey, & Freeman, 2006). Children living in poverty suffer much higher rates of asthma, heart and kidney disease, epilepsy, dental, and heart disorders (Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2006). The diseases which are particularly related to respiratory disorders are often exacerbated by parental ill activities, such as extreme use of tobacco and smoking, environmental factors associated with poverty and substandard housing area (Currie, Hanushek, Kahn, Neidell, & Rivkin, 2007). In Malaysia, children living in flats are exposed to severe diseases such as dengue, asthma, cholera and skin diseases due to poor hygiene condition. These children frequently fall sick and had to excuse themselves from school. Frequent absenteeism makes them more comfortable staying at home which will eventually become a habit to skip school with parents' permission; thus making way for school refusal.

Compared to more wealthy students, children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more days of school per month (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006a). In accord to this, Ready (2010) found that children born to a demographic group which is strongly associated with childhood poverty, are more prone to be chronically absent from early elementary school. This suggests that children from poor family go to school sporadically due to hardship.

The current finding is also opposed by Jacob and Lovett (2017) who found that chronic absenteeism is more common among economically disadvantaged students. According to Melissa Chi (2014), as the cost of living continues to rise and salaries struggle to catch up, Malaysia's middle class is falling off into poverty; with salaries unable to defeat inflation; being middle class no longer means living a comfortable living as compared to 20 years ago. The middle class has to get prepared for harder times nowadays (almost equally to lower class) especially when the subsidies on essential goods, petrol, cooking oil, electricity and other necessities of daily consumption are reduced. Thus it is understood

that the middle class families mentioned in this research is living a life no better than the lower class families. The hardship prevents them to send their children to school on daily basis. This explains the reason for the non-differences in school refusal behavior in children from lower class and middle class families and the contradiction to many other researches.

The lack of value for education is compounded by poverty. Hardship and poverty make parents to work harder to earn a living and provide food for their children. Thus, to increase the family income and make ends meet, some of them have no other choice than sending their children to work during school days. These children would probably make some income by selling *nasi lemak* or *kuih* on the streets or at housing areas. This finding is supported by Cook and Ezenne (2010), who found recurring evidence of parents keeping their children at home twice a week on schooling days to work on their subsistence farms and to sell the products in the market. Some recurrent indicators of financial difficulties are inadequate sets of uniforms, not being able to buy note books and stationaries; and the bitter fact that parents on some days do not have enough money to fund their children to school.

Similarly, BERNAMA (2016, January 20) has reported that ex-education minister Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid had said recently that due to high cost of living, poor students in the urban areas were forced to work to supplement their families' income, thus contributing to low attendance in some schools. The minister further lamented that attendance in primary schools in Kuala Lumpur was only 87% or 88%, compared with 98% or 99% in rural schools. A random survey carried out by BERNAMA (2016, January 20) among poor urban families showed that most parents wished that their children could receive a decent education. To them, the income that their children could earn is nothing compared to getting expelled from school and facing a bleak future. This shows that children from financially deprived families come to school sporadically to avoid being expelled from school. Authorities should take serious action regarding this matter as no children should be denied of education due to poverty in our country.

In all, schools should play a greater role in combating school refusal behaviour in students by providing physical and emotional support so as to ease their distress and anxiety towards school. Early detection is highly crucial as a prevention mechanism because several studies have suggested that the progressive development of school refusal could be chronic school absenteeism or dropout (Kearney, 2008a). This is definitely important as truancy is recorded as one of the highest discipline cases in Malaysian schools every year. Being able to identify school refusal behaviour during early stages of education such as the primary school level would enable an early intervention and develop actions to overcome difficulties later in secondary schools.

The findings of this study confirm that school refusal behaviour has a major impact on schools although there is not much written on this topic in Malaysian schools. School refusal may interrupt the development of positive self-perception and healthy social relations of the refusers thus, causing withdrawal from friends, rejection by peers, and academic failure (Tekin et al., 2018). 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.

Parents, educators, and health care professionals might overlook the actual emotional cause of the problem and respond with anger, forcing the child to return to school (Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014); which will further elevate the school refusal behaviour in them. 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 next. Students should be both motivated and understood in order to strengthen their self-esteem, school belonging and confidence level.

Another step is by developing good parental partnership with schools which at the moment is quite poor. Parents should be taught to employ contingency plans and behaviour management strategies, such as ignoring inappropriate behaviour and positively reinforcing appropriate behaviours (Sarah Nguyen, 2017). Schools need to take charge in educating the students while parental partnership will be the key factor in getting students the help that they need. Parents should avoid providing the home based comfort such as watching television, playing games or sleepover to their children on the days they skip school. Instead, the children should be made to do school activities and learning according to school time. This will likely reduce the school refusal behaviour as there are no positive reinforcements gained at home. Complaints of somatic symptoms should be treated tentatively, and unless the child is clearly unwell, they should be kept at school (Sarah Nguyen, 2017). Thus, the excuses and fake somatic symptoms that students come up with will eventually reduce when they realize that their parents are working closely with the school.

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