



**EFFECTIVENESS OF BEHAVIORAL
INTERVENTIONS TO SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR
AMONG PUPILS IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KEIYO
NORTH SUB-COUNTY, ELGEYO MARAKWET COUNTY, KENYA**

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Abstract:

There is ample evidence to suggest that the issue of school refusal behavior has continued for ages despite the numerous attempts made by parents, educators, and counselors to curb it. The objective of the current study was to evaluate the effectiveness of behavioural intervention strategy on school refusal among pupils in public primary schools in Keiyo North sub-county, Elgeyo Marakwet county, Kenya. The research design employed was descriptive, and the survey was employed. The targeted population was grade 7 and 8 pupils in public primary schools who were absent from school or class for at least 10% or more days in their previous academic year. They were identified with the assistance of their class teachers. Keiyo North Sub-county has a total of 5806 pupils in both classes. Purposive sampling was used to select the public primary schools participating in the research. Gill *et al.* (2010) used a sample size determination table to calculate the sample size, and a sample of 357 learners was derived. Two schools were used for piloting and did not participate in the actual research. Document analysis was used to gather information from discipline books, guidance and counseling department records, attendance registers, and pupil questionnaires. Piloting, correlation analysis, and expert supervisor consultation were conducted to ascertain the validity of the research instrument. Cronbach alpha was used to ascertain the reliability of the instruments, which resulted in an alpha value of 0.7. This was accepted and used since it was deemed high enough. Data from questionnaires was validated, coded, tabulated, and then analyzed with the help of the SPSS computer package of social science version 23. Descriptive statistics were charts and percentages to present demographic data, and inferential statistics (chi-square) was used to determine the relationship between dependent and independent variables. From the findings of this

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study, it was concluded that there is a relationship between behavioral interventions and school refusal behavior and that the behavioral interventions given to school refusers are insufficient, thus making the problem of school refusal persist. The study suggested that immediate action should be taken to address the problem of school refusal behaviour in order to secure the future of pupils. Additionally, all parties involved should work together to identify the underlying causes of school refusal, implement intervention strategies that are most effective for their pupils, and establish a welcoming environment for both the school and the student's family. Further studies should be carried out on other intervention strategies and family intervention to curb school refusal behavior.

Keywords: school refusal, behavior, intervention strategy, pupil, risk factors

1. Introduction

School refusal behavior is a broad term that includes situations in which children who are enrolled in school consciously decide not to attend or struggle to stay in school for the entire day (Kearney, 2002; Kearney & Chapman, 2008). The behavior includes learners who are completely absent or skip classes or sections of the school day.

Such children might have a lot of trouble going to school and experience somatic symptoms in the morning, like a headache or stomachache, which go away as the day goes on. Repeated, unexcused absence from school represents a significant deviation from society's norm of behavior and socialization (Ekstrand, 2015). Many children with school refusal behavior show several internalizing and externalizing problems. Problems that are encountered by school refusers are internalizing and include general and social anxiety, fatigue, fear, somatic complaints, and also suicidal tendencies, among others. Externalizing problems that may be encountered include noncompliance with teachers' and parents' commands, defiance, clinging and aggression, running away from home or school, and throwing temper tantrums (Kearney, 2001).

Parents of school refusers are aware of their children's presence at home and spend the day with them, and some may make much effort to convince them to go to school in vain. Such children, in most cases, have emotional problems that arise from within themselves, at school, or even at home (Raising Children Network, 2022). School refusal is not highly prevalent, but it can be highly problematic. Youths with school refusal experience problems, if not assisted, will experience psychological and psychosocial problems. Approximately 50% of youth referred for treatment for school refusal meet diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, or both (Ingul, Havik, & Heyne, 2019). School refusal often persists when untreated. There is a risk for psychosocial problems in adulthood. Early intervention is, therefore, essential in order to curb the problem before it takes root in the lives of the youth, as it is still easier to deal with it.

2. Risk Factors that are Associated with the Problem of School Refusal Behavior

The first risk factor for school refusal is the school environment, which is a key risk factor that causes school refusal. It is also a factor that plays a significant role in alleviating the school refusal problem in school-going children. Adubea (2020) stressed that the content and delivery method of the curriculum, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, and bullying are some of the key causes of truancy. Similarly, McCluskey, Bynum, and Patchin (2004) claim that lack of effective school policies related to attendance, teachers with low expectations for student achievement, and unsafe school environments are some of the contributing factors to school absence. Establishing supportive relationships within the school and promoting a positive school climate and respect among all school members is sufficient to encourage school attendance among learners without fail. The school environment should be made enjoyable for learners to achieve success and high self-esteem, and this can be achieved by making the curriculum more relevant to learners, preventing bullying, and even creating more practical uses of the law for punitive measures (Reid, 2014).

Academic achievement, which refers to children being under pressure to study more and more at a younger age, is the second risk factor associated with school refusal behavior. This causes children to lose energy earlier as the work gets harder, which lowers their academic performance. Research has found that chronically absent learners, 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 & Richards, 2018). School absenteeism behavior has also been connected to academic difficulties of learners (Henry, Knight & Thornbery, 2017), and numerous researchers have identified the sense of isolation and estrangement of learners in the classroom as a result of their poor academic performance. Teachers and parents should not, therefore, hold excessively high expectations of the learners but should consider individual differences among them.

The third factor is peer social skills, which every student should develop during schooling. This is to ensure that no one is left alone during his good times and bad times and that there is someone he can turn to when a problem arises. While most students would say that friends are one of their favorite aspects of school, they can also be a source of stress. Teasley (2004) claimed poor social interactions and student relations led to school refusal. The thought of not having enough friends, not being in the same class as friends, inability to keep up with friends in one particular area, interpersonal conflicts, and peer pressure can stress a child and may cause school refusal behavior.

The fourth factor is teacher support, which refers to a situation whereby caring and loving teachers create a string of good memories in a child's life. 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 & Karabeyoglu, 2015). Marvul (2012) 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, they will likely engage, connect, and bond with the school.

The fifth factor is the home environment where the children are brought up. Chockalingam *et al.* (2023) claim that there is a relationship between dysfunctional homes and the phenomenon of school refusal among children and adolescents since the children do not receive psychological, social, and academic needs as they should. Children, as such, are exposed to neglect, abuse, conflicts, and poor communication, which may lead to mental health, behavioral, and social challenges.

The sixth factor that can cause school refusal is individual child factors. Research has demonstrated a correlation between school attendance, age, and gender among students. This pertains to the individual facets that constitute the characteristics of a learner. Research has shown that students who have challenges in their physical and emotional well-being are more prone to encountering difficulties in maintaining regular school attendance, although this varies with individuals (Kearney, Graczyk, & Brock 2019).

3. Development of School Refusal

According to Kearney (2006), the problem of school refusal behaviour is an ongoing process with varying forms and experiences that occur at various points in time. This means that school refusal might be expressed in ways visible only to parents, such as episodes before the child attends school, like pleas for absenteeism and misbehavior or tardiness in the morning to avoid school. Other expressions, such as absenteeism from school, are visible to teachers whereby learners exhibit periodic repeated absenteeism or skipping of classes. The expressions visible only to parents are related to school-reluctant youths, who may want to avoid school but do attend.

School reluctance is linked to the emergence of school refusal behavior and may be the initial indication of school refusal development. These young people experience challenges associated with loneliness, negative affect, and more severe anxiety symptoms regardless of whether they attend school or not (Jones & Suveg, 2015). The problem usually develops along a continuum of different expressions and episodes, indicating that school refusal might begin to develop before a youth is absent from school, and teachers and other school personnel may not be aware of the problem until the youth is absent from school (Kearney, 2008).

When young people fail to show up for class or exhibit other symptoms of poor attendance, school staff are the first professionals to identify the issue. Nonetheless, before any apparent signs at school come to pass, the young person and his or her parents might have suffered greatly at home. As a result, parents and educators must be knowledgeable about the origins and progression of school refusal behavior. Parents should observe episodes and expressions that could indicate developing school refusal difficulties and other school-related issues or changes at home. In that case, they should get in touch with the school staff and discuss the issue or seek help from counselors or

professionals who can assist in solving the problem at its onset. By providing appropriate and customized interventions, school staff can identify stressful and challenging events in the classroom early on and stop the emergence of established school refusal.

4. The Current Study

The current study aims to determine the effectiveness of behavioral intervention strategies in solving the problem of school refusal behavior among pupils in public primary schools in Keiyo North Sub-County, Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. It should be noted that the absence of a child from school is a significant problem, irrespective of whether the absence is authorized or unauthorized (Ricking & Schulze, 2019). This behavior is also an infringement of the fundamental rights of children.

According to Wotherspoon (2020), the problem of school refusal has reached high levels and is a global threat to the educational system. In light of this, the purpose of the current study was to ascertain how effectively behavioral intervention techniques influenced school refusal behavior. There is currently no research on behavioral intervention techniques for school refusal behavior that is known to have been done in the current area of study.

5. Methodology

The study was conducted in the Keiyo North sub-county public primary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The study employed a quantitative research approach, which includes a variety of techniques aimed at methodically utilizing statistical or numerical data to investigate social phenomena (Watson, 2015). Additionally, the study employed a cross-sectional survey, which is typically used to characterize a group of individuals at a specific moment in time (Turner *et al.*, 2021). The target population, the entire population or group that a researcher is interested in researching and analyzing, was grade seven and eight pupils considered school-refusers since they had missed 10% or more of the school days in the previous academic year. There are 73 primary schools in the sub-county, which has a total of 5806 pupils. The sub-county has a total of four zones, namely Bugar and Kamariny in the highlands, Kessup in the hanging valley, and Kaptum at the bottom of the valley.

A sample size of 357 respondents was obtained by randomly selecting ten schools from each zone using Gill *et al.* (2010) sample size determination table. With the help of the class teachers, document analysis comprising class attendance registers, records from guidance and counseling departments, and discipline books were used to obtain information on the number of days and behavior of the learners. The information obtained was for grade seven and eight pupils during their previous academic year. Questionnaires were employed to collect data regarding pupils' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that are otherwise challenging to measure. In addition, questionnaires can help collect information about behaviors that are not directly observable (Bielick, 2017), like

school refusal behavior, and are the primary tools used to obtain information from respondents. A return rate obtained from questionnaires in the current study was 76%, which is acceptable and, thus, considered reliable.

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and a chi-square test for association was carried out to determine whether or not there was a connection between two categorical variables. In this test, Pearson chi-square and linear-by-linear associations were obtained. The software utilized in this study was Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23, which involved converting quantitative data into mathematical codes, after which replies from questionnaires were encoded, and appropriate commands were given. Data analysis for descriptive statistics was summarized and presented as charts and percentages.

6. Findings

The research objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of behavioral intervention strategies used to treat school refusal behavior in primary school pupils. To attain this objective, grade seven and eight pupils identified as school refusers were given a questionnaire, which was a Likert scale to fill, and the findings were tabulated as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Responses on the Effectiveness of Behavioural Intervention Strategies to School Refusal Behaviour

Statement	SD		D		U		A		SA		Total	
	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	F	%
My teachers expose me to what I fear most	99	43.4	71	31.1	10	4.4	30	13.2	18	7.9	228	100.0
Whenever I miss school, I am sent home to bring my parents/guardian	5	2.2	35	15.4	1	0.4	68	29.8	119	52.2	228	100.0
I have been suspended for missing classes and sometimes school	96	42.1	90	39.5	2	0.9	19	8.3	21	9.2	228	100.0
Whenever I miss school, am denied what I like most	36	15.8	66	28.9	19	8.3	50	21.9	57	25.0	228	100.0
I have been trained on how to respond to difficult social situations	79	34.6	67	29.9	3	1.3	31	13.6	48	21.1	228	100.0
I am rewarded whenever I don't miss school	118	51.8	57	25.0	10	4.4	23	10.1	22	9.6	228	100.0
I avoid missing school because I fear punishment from teachers	2	0.9	5	2.2	3	1.3	65	28.5	156	68.4	228	100.0

My teachers setting targets for the % of pupils present on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis	115	50.4	79	34.6	1	0.4	17	7.5	20	8.8	228	100.0
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Source: Field Data, 2022.

It was found that most pupils, or 74.6% (170), agreed that they missed school because they believed their friends were not concerned about or did not love them, while 21.1% (48) disagreed. This could have negatively affected them, leading to undesirable behavior like school refusal. Quarmley *et al.* (2022), in their study on testing the effects of social rejection on aggressive and prosocial behavior, found that social rejection robustly elicits aggression and inhibits prosocial behavior.

Most school refusers, comprising 185 pupils (81%), claim that their peers had not assisted them in coming out of the problem of school refusal. This could be because they do not have sufficient skills for counselling their peers or because of the problem of difficulty identifying those who miss genuinely. Positive peer pressure can help students develop coping skills that will be useful in adulthood. As seen in this study, negative peer pressure could have influenced the pupils to skip school.

Findings on using reinforcement as an intervention strategy for school refusal revealed that most teachers utilize negative reinforcement. A total of 64.5% (147) agreed with the assertion that they are denied what they like by their teachers whenever they miss school, whereas 34.6% (79) rejected it. According to Orji, Alslaity, and Chan (2024), reinforcement and punishment can be used to either increase or decrease a behavior's frequency, as behaviorists assert. Findings from the study demonstrated that punishment is the most commonly employed approach by teachers to address misbehavior. When asked if their teachers punished them for missing school, 96.9% (221) agreed, with only 3% (7) disagreeing; these results resoundingly validate the work of Alampay (2017), who argued that too many school employees view punishment as the sole tool available when dealing with a student's misconduct instead of using other techniques.

Also, the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the effectiveness of intervention strategies and school refusal behavior was tested using a chi-square test, and the findings are represented in the table below

Table 2: Chi-square Table for the Effectiveness of Behavioural Intervention Strategies and School Refusal Behaviour

Chi square test	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	75.186	50	.012
Likelihood Ratio	29.695	50	.990
Linear-by-Linear Association	.668	1	.414
N of Valid Cases	228		

As presented in Table 2, a chi-square value of 75.186, degrees of freedom of 50, and p-value of 0.012 was obtained. Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies

that there was a significant relationship between the effectiveness of behavioral intervention strategies and school refusal behavior among pupils in public primary schools in the Keiyo North sub-county.

The findings on intervention techniques used were represented in a chart shown below.

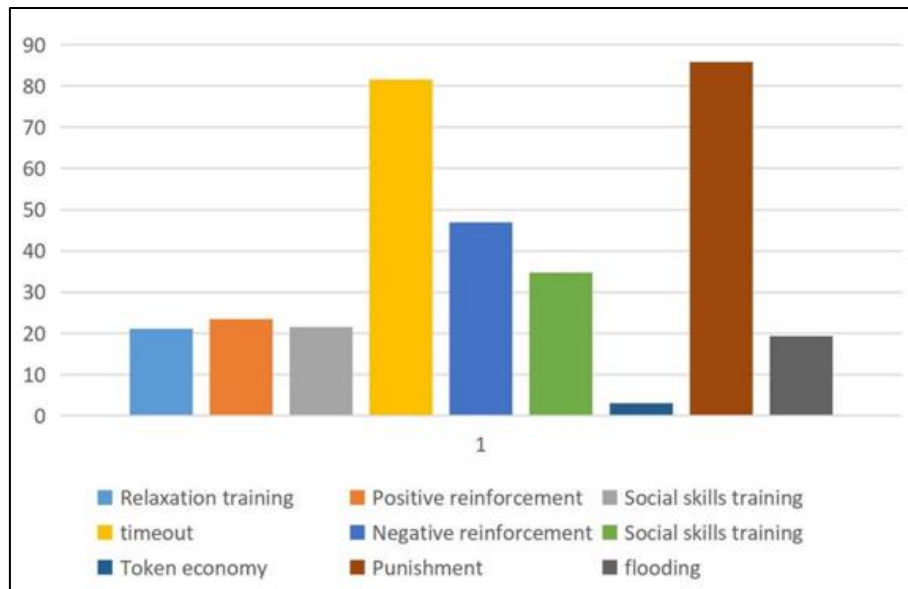


Figure 1: Behaviour Intervention Techniques

7. Discussions

Each statement in the Likert scale was aligned to behavioral techniques employed in behavioral interventions for treating maladjusted behavior. The techniques included in reducing school refusal behavior include relaxation training, positive reinforcement, social skills training, parental involvement, timeout, negative reinforcement, token economy, punishment, and flooding.

The core concept of behavior modification is that all behaviors may be observed, measured, and utilized as targets for change. An individual can acquire, shape, or eliminate specific habits as a direct consequence of the outcomes, regardless of whether those outcomes are favorable or unfavorable. The intervention techniques that were used work in a variety of ways to reduce school refusal behavior. In the current study, teachers are the ones who applied behavioral modification in school refusers in order to modify their maladjusted behavior. The techniques that were applied under behavior modification are discussed below;

Firstly, relaxation training involves teaching children to employ strategies that relax or calm them when presented with stressful or anxiety-provoking situations. In the case of school refusal behavior, relaxation training is employed as a means of reducing feelings of psychological and physiological arousal and somatic symptoms associated with school or separation from a parent (King, Heyne, & Ollendick, 2005). This is because

some children experience somatic symptoms like exhaustion, lightheadedness, nausea, vomiting, stomachache, and anxiety, among others, with the thought of going to school.

Secondly, exposure-based interventions, such as systematic desensitization and flooding, have also been utilized to treat school refusal behavior. The exposure-based interventions are designed to expose children to stressful events like returning to school in order to help them to help them overcome their avoidance of school. This could be done slowly and systematically, such as in systematic desensitization, or the forced, rapid return to school, such as in the flooding technique.

Thirdly, reinforcement, which draws from operant conditioning principles by B.F Skinner, is another technique utilized in behavioral modification to treat school refusal behavior (Elliott, 1999). It involves anything that increases the likelihood that a response will occur. Four types of reinforcement include positive reinforcement, where token economies and rewards are used, and negative reinforcement, where punishment and timeouts techniques are utilized to treat school refusal behavior. Reinforcement motivates learners to attend school and increases the amount of time spent in school. Alampay (2017) argued that too many school employees view punishment as the sole tool for dealing with a student's misconduct instead of using other techniques.

Fourthly, social skills training is a commonly utilized behavioral intervention for children who exhibit school-refusal behavior due to poor peer relationships or social anxiety (King *et al.*, 1998). Social skills training frequently focuses on teaching assertiveness and other social skills through modeling and rehearsing strategies; such skills should help children better prepare for and cope with social interactions with peers or teachers and reduce social anxiety. Behavioral interventions are employed directly with students and their parents. Family interventions using behavioral strategies typically train the parents in behavioral management and contingency contracting techniques, which parents can implement in the home. Skills training to enhance parenting and problem-solving skills is often included (Elliot, 1999; Fremont, 2003; Kearney & Bates, 2005).

8. Conclusion

The current study concluded that the behavioral intervention strategy has yet to be effectively used by teachers, particularly in primary schools, who mostly resort to punitive strategies like punishment to correct maladjusted behavior such as school refusal.

9. Recommendations

The study recommends that trained school counselors be posted to primary schools, and those in schools should be given in-service training to get refreshed on behavior modification techniques. Schools should also ensure that school counseling programs are functional. Since school refusal behavior is a very delicate behavior with far-reaching

consequences, there is a need to take swift action to check loopholes in psychosocial intervention strategies in which behavior intervention strategy is included. This will ensure that behavioral techniques work effectively and the problem of school refusal will be eliminated in learning institutions.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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