

**THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL REFUSAL  
BEHAVIOUR AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL  
STUDENTS IN SELANGOR**

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## ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to identify the school related factors associated with School Refusal Behaviour (SRB) and the differences in demographic factors towards SRB. This study explored the perceptions of students and their parents regarding the main reinforcement involved in elevating the SRB. The research design used the survey quantitative method. A questionnaire which consisted of School Related Factors and The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised was used as the research instrument to collect data involving 915 year 4 and year 5 students, 915 parents and 131 class teachers across Selangor. The findings showed a high level of SRB ( $M = 3.93$ ) in primary school students in Selangor although there were no differences in the demographic factors towards SRB; gender [ $t(912) = -1.10, p = 0.27$ ], family type [ $t(912) = -0.438, p = 0.662$ ] and socioeconomic status [ $F(2, 911) = 0.773, p = 0.462$ ]. Results also indicated a weak but significant relationship between academic achievement ( $r = 0.082$ ) and school satisfaction ( $r = 0.082$ ) towards SRB. Ultimately, the negative reinforcement was found to be the main factor causing SRB as perceived by both the students ( $M = 4.45$ ) and their parents ( $M = 4.12$ ). Apart from that, the multiple regression analysis identified school satisfaction as a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.86, p < 0.05$ ) of the negative reinforcement of SRB; thus suggesting that the sample of students refuse to go to school mainly due to the negative factors of school which are avoidance of school-related stimuli and escape from aversive social or evaluative situations. Therefore, SRB is a serious matter that needs immediate attention from various organizations to combat it effectively. The study implicates that schools should conduct early intervention by providing physical and emotional support to the school refusing children so as to reduce their SRB.





## FAKTOR-FAKTOR YANG BERKAITAN DENGAN PERLAKUAN KEENGGANAN KE SEKOLAH DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH RENDAH DI SELANGOR

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti faktor-faktor sekolah yang berkaitan dengan perlakuan keengganan ke sekolah (SRB) serta perbezaan dalam faktor-faktor demografik terhadap SRB. Kajian ini telah meneroka persepsi pelajar dan ibu bapa mereka terhadap peneguhan utama yang meningkatkan perlakuan SRB. Reka bentuk kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif secara tinjauan. Satu soal selidik yang mengandungi faktor-faktor berkaitan dengan sekolah dan *The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised* telah digunakan sebagai instrument kajian bagi pengumpulan data yang melibatkan seramai 915 orang pelajar Tahun 4 dan Tahun 5, 915 orang ibu bapa dan 131 orang guru kelas merentas Selangor. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan tahap SRB yang tinggi ( $M = 3.93$ ) dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah rendah di Selangor walaupun tidak terdapat sebarang perbezaan dalam faktor demografik terhadap SRB; jantina [ $t(912) = -1.10, p = 0.27$ ], jenis keluarga [ $t(912) = -0.438, p = 0.662$ ] and status sosioekonomi [ $F(2, 911) = 0.773, p = 0.462$ ]. Keputusan kajian juga menunjukkan hubungan yang lemah tetapi signifikan di antara pencapaian akademik ( $r = 0.082$ ) dan kepuasan sekolah ( $r = 0.082$ ) terhadap SRB. Akhir sekali, peneguhan negatif didapati merupakan faktor utama yang menyebabkan SRB seperti ditanggap oleh kedua-dua pelajar ( $M = 4.45$ ) dan ibu bapa mereka ( $M = 4.12$ ). Selain itu, analisis regresi berganda mengenalpasti kepuasan sekolah sebagai peramal signifikan ( $\beta = 0.86, p < 0.05$ ) bagi peneguhan negatif SRB; justeru mencadangkan bahawa sebab utama sampel pelajar ini enggan ke sekolah adalah kerana faktor-faktor negatif sekolah yang mana adalah pengeluaran rangsangan berkaitan dengan sekolah dan melepaskan diri daripada situasi sosial atau penilaian yang kurang menyenangkan. Oleh itu, SRB merupakan satu perkara serius yang memerlukan perhatian segera daripada pelbagai organisasi untuk menanganinya secara efektif. Implikasi kajian menunjukkan bahawa pihak sekolah perlu menjalankan intervensi awal dengan memberikan sokongan fizikal dan emosi kepada pelajar yang enggan ke sekolah bagi mengurangkan SRB mereka.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KPI	Key Performance Indicators
SRAS-R-C	School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised - Child
SRAS-R-P	School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised - Parent
SRB	School Refusal Behaviour
T-CRS	Teacher-Child Rating Scale
UPSR	Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



This chapter explores the term school refusal behaviour in primary school students which is quite new in Malaysian scenario and the various factors associated with it. A detailed explanation about school refusal behaviour will be given in the background of the study and problem statement. Furthermore, this chapter also consists of research objectives, research questions, research hypothesis, significance and limitations of the study and operational definitions of the terms.





## 1.2 Background of Study

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.

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 be against this notion either on his own freewill or forced to do so, then it will become a problem to that society. The issue of school refusal did not become prevalent until after nineteenth century legislation mandated compulsory education for children in England and the United States (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). This compulsory education movement led to the conceptualization of school absenteeism as a serious social and behavioral problem that required study and resolution.

Authors of the earliest scientific articles on problematic school absenteeism, mostly from education and psychology, often combined legal and psychological definitions and relied on the term *truancy*. Truancy was typically referred to as an unlawful and willful absence from school without the knowledge and consent of the parents which is a definite opposite to school refusal behaviour. The problem was linked to delinquency, poor







parenting, deviant peer influence, problematic school environments, school maladjustment, lack of motivation, and lower intelligence (Kearney, 2003). Parents who are irresponsible and do not care much about the value of education and their children's academic progress influence the truanting behaviour.

Truancy refers to the failure of students to attend classes at school deliberately without any reasonable reasons (Norhasilah Mat Nor, Aspanizah Hamzah, & Nurul Farhana Junus, 2012). Azizi Yahya, Noordin Yahaya, Shahrin Hashim, Jamaludin Ramli, & Vinothini (2011) stressed truancy can be considered as a deviant behaviour as students absent themselves from school without any valid reason and without the knowledge of parents and teachers. 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 Yahaya et al., 2011).

In contrast, 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 dread. School refusal behaviour affects approximately 8.2% of children and adolescents (Kearney & Chapman, 2008). However, children who are absent from school as a result of chronic physical illnesses, school withdrawal which is motivated by parents or poverty conditions such as homelessness, or running away to avoid abuse should not be included in the above





definition of school refusal behaviour as these factors are not child-initiated (Setzer & Salzhauser, 2001).

School refusal behaviour is a term that encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and separation anxiety (Hansen, Sanders, Massaro, & Last, 1998). 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). 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 (Arsaythamby Veloo & Kim, 2014); with truancy cases stood at 17343 cases (Arsaythambi Veloo & Kim, 2014; Zahari & Low, 2013).

Students with school attendance problems appear likely to have emotional difficulties (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvag, 2015). 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 & Salzhauser, 2001). More specifically, children entering kindergarten, first grade, middle





school, and high school are at increased risk of school refusal behavior (Kearney, Lemos, & Silverman, 2004).

Children with school refusal behaviour differ in important ways from children who are truant, although their behaviours are not mutually exclusive. The difference between a school refuser and a truant as explained by Fremont (2003) is depicted below.

Criteria for Differential Diagnosis of School Refusal and Truancy (adapted from Fremont, 2003).

i) A school refuser will develop severe emotional distress about attending school; may include anxiety, temper tantrums, depression, or somatic symptoms; while a truant would

lack excessive anxiety or fear of attending school.

ii) The parents of the school refusers are aware of absence; the child often tries to persuade parents to allow him or her to stay home; while a truant child often attempts to conceal absence from his or her parents.

iii) In the school refusal case, there is an absence of significant antisocial behaviours such as juvenile delinquency, while in the truancy case, the child often portray frequent antisocial behaviour, including delinquent and disruptive acts (e.g., lying or stealing), often in the company of antisocial peers.

iv) During school hours, the school refusing child usually stays home because it is considered a safe and secure environment; as for the truant, he frequently does not stay home during school hours.

v) The school refusing child normally expresses willingness to do schoolwork and complies with completing work at home; as for the truant, there appears to be a lack of





interest in schoolwork and unwillingness to conform to academic and behaviour expectations.

The children with autonomic somatic symptoms will develop dizziness, diaphoresis, headaches, shakiness/ trembling, palpitations or chest pains. Those with gastrointestinal symptoms will develop abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea; while the muscular symptoms include back pain or joint pain (Bernstein et al., 1997).

School refusal is not a formal psychiatric diagnosis. However, children with school refusal may suffer from significant emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). These may include avoidance of specific fears provoked by the school environment (e.g., test-taking situations, bathrooms, cafeterias, and teachers), escape from aversive social situations (e.g., problems with classmates or teachers), separation anxiety, or attention-seeking behaviours (e.g., somatic complaints or crying spells) that worsen over time if the child is allowed to stay home (Fremont, 2003).

Some children fear school-related activities (e.g., bus ride, presentation, public speaking, school bell, assembly, or teachers) while some are anxious about missing home-related issues (e.g., relaxation, video games, or television) or about being separated from the caregiver. Separation anxiety is a norm in toddlers whereas they will cry, have temper tantrums and reluctant of separation when the parents have to leave for work. However, for most of the time, this problem will subside gradually when the toddler gets familiar with the baby sitter or the day care personnel. Problem arises when some older children of school-age continue to have difficulty separating from their caregivers. Children's repeated absences may result in the learning of maladaptive avoidance strategies, cause parents to





miss work or leave their children unsupervised, deny their school's adequate funding, and put communities at increased risk for adolescent delinquency (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

At times, some school-aged children who were accustomed to being separated from their caregivers will suddenly become anxious, fearful and eventually refuse to go to school. The reason could be of home related issues such as a recent crisis in the family (e.g., a death, move, or divorce) which may cause the children to be anxious or fearful that something bad might happen at home while they were away. At other times school refusal develops due to school related difficulties (e.g. being bullied, examination stress, or difficult and boring subjects) which foster them to avoid school and stay at home.

Fear of going to school was first termed school phobia in 1941 (Fremont, 2003). An alternative term, school refusal, was used in Great Britain to define similar problems in children who did not attend school because of emotional distress (Hersov, 1960). School refusal, school avoidance, or school phobia are terms used to describe children who have a pattern of avoiding or refusing to attend school. Historically called 'school phobia', many researchers now prefer to use the terms "school avoidance" or "school refusal".

As the controversy in the use of terms continues, concepts such as school phobia, school anxiety, or absenteeism have been used as synonyms, to support the emergence of discussions on the conceptual delimitation of this phenomenon (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). However, the term school refusal is recommended, as it takes into consideration the causal heterogeneity of the problem and is a broader and more inclusive concept, as noted by National Association of School Psychologists (Kearney, 2007).





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). School refusal happens when a child refuses to go to school, or is afraid to go to school. 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 high 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 child, and often, the parents are blamed for the refusal behaviour, thus, making them angry and at guilt as well.

Although school refusal has been associated with both separation anxiety disorder and social phobia, the easiest way to think about it is that school refusal is a difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression. Depression is a predictive variable of school refusal and it is accompanied by strong levels of anxiety (Tekin, Erden, Sirin Ayva, & Büyükoksüz, 2018). School refusal is common in children who are five to six years old, when they are just starting school and in their first year of kindergarten. It is also common in school-aged children who are about 10 to 11 years old, towards the end of the last years of elementary school (Iannelli, 2008).

In Malaysia, the term 'school refusal' is not widely used and those children who were frequently absent from school were 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. A thorough search through the Education Ministry's webpage, EPRD's webpage and even the state and district education department's webpage was futile as they do not show any statistics





released on the monthly and yearly percentage regarding school refusal cases either in a district, state, or nationwide. There is a plethora of articles about truancy in general, without any statistics about the school refusal rate or the overall percentage of school refusal of the nation. Basically, the articles were about the rising of truancy cases either in primary or secondary schools, the alarming of this situation and the findings in general which conclude that the rise in truancy cases affects the rise in juvenile crimes and delinquencies. The perpetrators were linked to deviant activities such as theft, loitering in shopping complexes, drugs, video games, accessing pornographic websites and so on.

There are many young children out there with school refusal behaviour who demonstrate anxiety-based behaviours to avoid aversive school-based stimuli. The stimuli, though often couldn't be identified accurately, but the most common ones are travelling in a school bus, thoughts of punishments awaiting for unfinished homework, or eating with a large group of pupils during recess. These children will often cry, showing somatic symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, and stomachaches, and will beg for an excuse from school whereas their truant counterparts whom are deviants almost never have any complaints about their health or well-being or ask to be relieved of school attendance.

Surprisingly, there is another group of children who avoid school for the reward of tangible reinforces outside of school. This group of children couldn't be identified as having separation-anxiety problem (difficulty to separate from the caregivers) nor do they have any anxiety towards school or school related issues. Instead, these children are drawn more to stimuli such as playing with friends, riding a bicycle, sleeping late, watching television, or participating in other activities during a school day (Kearney, Chapman, & Cook, 2005) and yet they do not get involved much in juvenile delinquencies.





Ironically, though the school refusers are at offence by being absent to school which is a mandatory since the implementation of compulsory education, yet their absence does not contribute much to the increase of the percentage of juvenile felony cases.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

For the past decades, the most feared school related problem that has become the main concern of education ministry, schools, educators, and scholars nationwide is truancy. Truancy is considered the mother of all problems related to schools and students; which has a wide spread of deep roots into the organization throughout the nation that has grown into a huge tree of multiple problems involving the youths. Almost all the discipline problems in students, doubled with juvenile delinquent and deviance act were enhanced by truancy. Zhang (2003) stressed that problematic attendance does not occur suddenly in teenagers but begin early in childhood and only worsen as the children grow older, potentially resulting in dropout if interventions are not applied.

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 United Kingdom, since the year 2002, a vigorous policy to reduce truancy and other forms of school absenteeism has been developed, and the most controversial element of the policy is the large-scale employment of “truancy sweeps”, with police and welfare officers effectively controlling the presence of minors on the streets during school hours (Halsey, Johnson, Kinder, & Fletcher-Morgan, 2003). Parents who fail to take appropriate







action in these truancy matters can be fined, forced to take parenting courses, and can even be prosecuted (Claes, Hooghe, & Reeskens, 2009).

Likewise, the Spanish government has expressed concern about rising truancy levels because illegal absence from school is strongly associated with various forms of risk behaviour like use of alcohol and illegal drugs, violence, and membership of gangs (Duarte & Escario, 2006). As in The USA, some school districts have resorted to a highly repressive approach, with the police picking up youngsters off the streets during school hours (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). Although all these examples expound that truancy has become a major topic of concern, most of the studies that are available currently (especially in Malaysia) are more focused on the truants who are behaving violently, prone to commit crimes or get involved in deviant acts.



According to the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, in line with the National Philosophy of Education (1995), every child in the age category of 7 and above should be provided with formal education and they must attend school every day without fail. The end results are focused towards creating Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being and able to contribute to the coherence and prosperity of the family, society, and the nation at large.

In our education system, the students' daily attendance to school is recorded in the Students' Attendance Book or better known as classroom register and the total attendance for the semester will be shown in their progressive report book. Apparently the school attendance register is the most important document in each and every school in Malaysia as





it keeps valuable information about a child which includes the child's attendances and absences (marked as 'S' for absent due to sickness, 'B' for absent with a valid reason, or 'P' for truancy). Thus, the students' attendance register will speak for itself on issues related to truancy and to identify students who were constantly absent from school for invalid reasons.

The data in the Ministry of Education shows that in 2010, out of 111 484 discipline problem cases recorded nationwide, 19 545 cases involved truancy. In 2011, the truancy behavior shows 18 550 cases out of 108 650 discipline problem cases (Zahari Ishak & Low, 2015); while in 2012, this number rose to 23 004 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). 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. However, according to Harits Asyraf Hasnan (2018, March 21) the truancy cases rose dramatically in the year 2017 whereby it shows a whopping 67,053 cases.

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. Even though a few governing bodies, school districts, and researchers compile such information and sometimes they are published, however 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.

In addition to this, the question of how many absences is considered as too many absences stays ambiguous as each country has their own format of calculation as the answer. However various studies on school refusal behaviour have stressed that as much as 20 percentage to as low as 15 percentage of school days missed should be considered as too many absences and according to Lyon (2007), a student who misses 20 percentage of school days should be identified as chronic absentee and he or she is eligible for intervention programme. Mazwin Nik Aziz (2009) reported that truancy tops the list of disciplinary problems among primary school students in Malaysia followed by rude behaviours and the consumption of alcoholic drink. According to Mazwin, the Education Ministry's record showed that 0.79% of the primary school students were involved in disciplinary problems between January and June 2009, and the ministry was looking at ways to tackle these problems as the number of errant students has increased intensely.

Unexcused absences violate both school policy and compulsory education laws. Apparently, nearly every child has 'skipped' school at least once in their schooling period which is considered as very normal. However, trouble starts to surface when the normalcy turns into habit (frequent unexcused absences) that becomes disruptive enough to the education attainment of the student. At this point, the student should be warranted to some kind of rehabilitation. 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 and those who, are absenting themselves





with the parent's consent. The category of truants who belong to the 'school refusal behaviour' group is almost always sidelined and thought of as same as the deviant truants.

Even though the school personnel are very worried about this unhealthy practice among students, still not much is being done to reduce it apart from stern discipline action such as corporal punishments, memos to parents (which, at most of the time did not reach them or deliberately lost halfway), issuance of demerit, suspension from school or a final verdict of being expelled from school. All these actions, are only giving a temporary relief to the truancy problem and after sometime, the perpetrator gets used to the system which enables him to become immune to all kind of punishments and at the end continues his unhealthy practice of truancy.



In this scenario, schools alone cannot be accounted for as responsible for the outburst of the truancy problem as they were pressured with government and education ministry's numerous policies to produce good results and best students in the national examinations. Furthermore, the school heads had to abide by the State Education Department's order by putting the pressure on teachers to achieve the Key Performance Index (KPI) and National Key Result Area (NKRA) which need them to push hard the good students to achieve excellent results and at the same time carelessly ignoring the truants whom appear to be the bad apples.

The punishments imposed by schools in Malaysia on the truant students are deemed as not appropriate as all the truants are viewed along a spectrum of unexcused absenteeism, deviants, delinquent juvenile and problematic. The Discipline Unit (1990) 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 as listed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

*The Students' Discipline Misconduct Record*

---

8.0	Truancy
8.8.1	Truant Class
8.8.2	Truant School
8.8.3	Truant Assembly
8.8.4	Truant Co-Curriculum
8.8.5	Truant Test
8.8.6	Truant Examinations
8.8.7	Truant Private Study Lessons
8.8.8	Truant Boarding

---

Source: The Discipline Unit, Ministry of Education (1990).



The punishments to suit these misbehaviours as implemented by The Discipline Unit (1990) and to be followed by the school authorities to curb truancy are listed in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

*The List of Punishments to Curb Truancy*

---

0.1	Counseling
0.2	Warning
0.3	Corporal Punishment (Caning Once)
0.4	Corporal Punishment (Caning Twice)
0.5	Corporal Punishment (Caning Thrice)
0.6	Caning Exceeding Three Times
0.7	Suspension From School
0.8	Expulsion From School
0.9	Police Supervision

---

Source: The Discipline Unit, Ministry of Education (1990).





Thus, these guidelines fairly suggest that there is no specific provision provided for the emotionally effected school refusers in our system. The school refusers whom are absent from school due to emotional reasons (e.g., separation anxiety, and attention-seeking behaviours) are not taken into consideration. It is a norm in our 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 visible health of a student; 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 it is not visible, thus 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 aggravate 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 refuse to go to school completely at the thought of having to deal with harsh punishments and fury discipline teachers. In order to avoid this pathetic situation from becoming chronic and further do much more damages to the school refusers, there should be a proper way of identifying and filtering the school refusers from the truants before imposing any type of actions against them.





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 behaviour 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 western countries and part of countries in the Asia continent. 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.

Some schools tend to keep mum that is by brushing aside the truancy problem of many students whom are normally the low achievers. As these students are deemed as trouble makers as well, the school personnel in return would be able to decrease their workload by not making any effort to identify and intervene with these at-risk children. Eventually, the teachers are to benefit most out of this as now they could conduct teaching without any disturbances (by keeping the problematic students at bay) to help the highly motivated students (those who come to school without fail) to succeed; and the end result is assumed to benefit the school; a higher passing percentage in general examinations and better ranks in overall performance nationwide. This unhealthy practice should be dropped immediately as schools have a bigger role to play apart from producing good students; they have the social responsibility of producing good youths who will be the backbone of our nation.





Azizi Yahya, Jamaludin Ramli, Shahrin Hashim, Mohd. Ali Ibrahim, Hamdan Abd. Kadir, Yusof Boon, and Raja Roslan (2010) stressed, efforts should be made to ensure schools become enjoyable places for their students. When the studying session becomes interesting and enjoyable, students will look forward to go to school every day. Students' desire to learn becomes greater when they have more control of the learning environment, enjoy the activities they do and make judgments on their learning (Cowie & Moreland, 2015; Goyal, 2016; Guvenc, 2015; Manreka, 2015; Xu, 2015). In addition, the warm teacher-student relationship coupled with facilities that encourage their attendance to school and concerns from parents and community could well be the factors that may solve the school refusal problem.

Thus, teachers should play a greater role in ensuring their students' attendance by being warm and approachable, kind and understanding as well as creating a conducive environment in their classrooms for studying.

## 1.4 Research Objectives

Specifically, this study was poised to:

- 1.4.1 determine the incidence level of school refusal behaviour among students in primary schools in Selangor.
- 1.4.2 identify whether there is any significant difference in gender regarding school refusal behaviour in primary schools students in Selangor.







1.4.3 determine whether there are any significant differences between specific demographic variables (i, e., single parent, 2-parent; middle-class, lower-class household) and school refusal behaviour in primary school students in Selangor.

1.4.4 determine whether there is a significant relationship between these specific school-related factors and school refusal behaviour.

a. academic achievement

b. peer social skills

c. school satisfaction

d. teacher support

1.4.5 determine what do students' perceive as the primary reinforcement (negative and positive reinforcements) contributing significantly towards their school refusal behaviour.



1.4.6 determine what do parents' perceive as the primary reinforcement (negative and positive reinforcements) contributing significantly towards their children's school refusal behaviour.

1.4.7 determine the major school-related factor (academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction and teacher support) that influences significantly school refusal behaviour in terms of:

a. negative reinforcement

b. positive reinforcement





## 1.5 Research Questions

The primary purpose of the investigator was to identify the factors most often associated with school refusal behaviour. The perception of the students and parents about the positively and negatively reinforced school refusal behaviour were examined to find out the main reinforcement influencing these factors. The teachers' view about the school refuser's ability to socialize with their peers was even taken into account. Previous studies on school refusal behaviour have produced various answers to explain the reasons behind a student's school refusal behaviour. However, these outcomes mostly portray the situation in the western countries. In order to find some answers regarding the issues mentioned in the statement of the problem, which are related to the Malaysian context, this study addresses the following research questions:



- 1.5.1 What is the incidence level of school refusal behaviour among students in primary schools in Selangor?
- 1.5.2 Is there any significant difference in gender regarding school refusal behaviour in primary schools in Selangor?
- 1.5.3 Are there any significant differences between specific demographic variables (i.e., single parent, 2-parent; middle-class, lower-class household) and school refusal behaviour in primary school students in Selangor?
- 1.5.4 Is there a significant relationship between these specific school-related factors and school refusal behaviour?
  - a. academic achievement
  - b. peer social skills
  - c. school satisfaction





d. teacher support

1.5.5 What do students' perceive as the primary reinforcement (positive and negative reinforcements) that contributes significantly towards their school refusal behaviour?

1.5.6 What do parents' perceive as the primary reinforcement (positive and negative reinforcements) that contributes significantly towards their children's school refusal behaviour?

1.5.7 What is the major school-related factor (academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction, teacher support) that influences significantly these reinforcements of school refusal behaviour?

a. negative reinforcement

b. positive reinforcement



## 1.6 Research Hypothesis

The present study was conducted according to these hypotheses.

- i. Ho(1): There is no significant level of school refusal behaviour among students in primary schools in Selangor.
- ii. Ho(2): There is no significant difference between gender and school refusal behaviour in primary schools in Selangor.
- iii. Ho(3a): There is no significant difference between single-parent and 2-parent and school refusal behaviour in primary school students in Selangor.





- iv. Ho(3b): There is no significant difference between low-class and middle-class household, and school refusal behaviour in primary school students in Selangor.
- v. Ho(4a): There is no significant relationship between academic achievement and school refusal behaviour.
- vi. Ho(4b): There is no significant relationship between peer social skills and school refusal behaviour.
- vii. Ho(4c): There is no significant relationship between school satisfaction and school refusal behaviour.
- viii. Ho(4d): There is no significant relationship between teacher support and school refusal behaviour.
- ix. Ho(5): The students' perceived there is no primary reinforcement (positive and negative reinforcements) contributing significantly towards their school refusal behaviour.
- x. Ho(6): The parents' perceived there is no primary reinforcement (positive and negative reinforcements) contributing significantly towards their children's school refusal behaviour.
- xi. Ho(7a): There is no school related factor (academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction, teacher support) that influences significantly the negative reinforcement of school refusal behaviour.
- xii. Ho(7b): There is no school related factor (academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction, teacher support) that influences significantly the positive reinforcement of school refusal behaviour.



## 1.7 The Research Framework

Based on the conceptual framework, the objectives of this research were: a) to assess the relationship between the school-related factors and school refusal behaviour (SRB), b) to identify the students' and parents' perception regarding the primary reinforcement that contributes towards SRB, and c) to identify the main Function that lures students towards SRB.

As portrayed in Figure 1.1, the framework of this research is constituted of two domains; namely the specific school-related factors which consisted of four factors and the SRB domain which is dominated by the reinforcers of SRB. The reinforcers of SRB are divided into two reinforcements; namely the negative and the positive reinforcements. The negative reinforcement is mainly made up of functions related to school that pushes students away from school. The Functions under this reinforcement are avoidance and escape. The positive reinforcement, on the other hand is the external factor that pulls students towards it (e.g., home and entertainment). It consisted of two Functions as well which are attention and reward.

The specific school-related factors consisted of academic achievement, peer social skills, school satisfaction and teacher support because these factors are considered as the frequently occurring issues related to school that influence the SRB in primary school students; as shown in the past studies (Kearney & Albano, 2000). The negative and positive reinforcements are the reinforcers of SRB which elevate the SRB in students thus influencing them to skip school frequently. The Functions under these reinforcements explain in detail in which domain a student belongs to in terms of his/her school refusing



action. Function 1 which works as a negative reinforcement is related to the avoidance of school related objects or situations that causes general distress or negative emotions while Function 2 is related to escaping the aversive or evaluative situations (e.g., tests) at school.

Function 3 which is under the positive reinforcement is related to receiving attention from significant others outside of school (e.g., parents and caregivers) while Function 4 is related to pursuing tangible reinforcement outside of school (e.g., playing with friends or staying at home). By looking deeply into these Functions, the research could provide some insights on reinforcements that keep the students away from school.



The research framework for this study is shown in Figure 1.1.

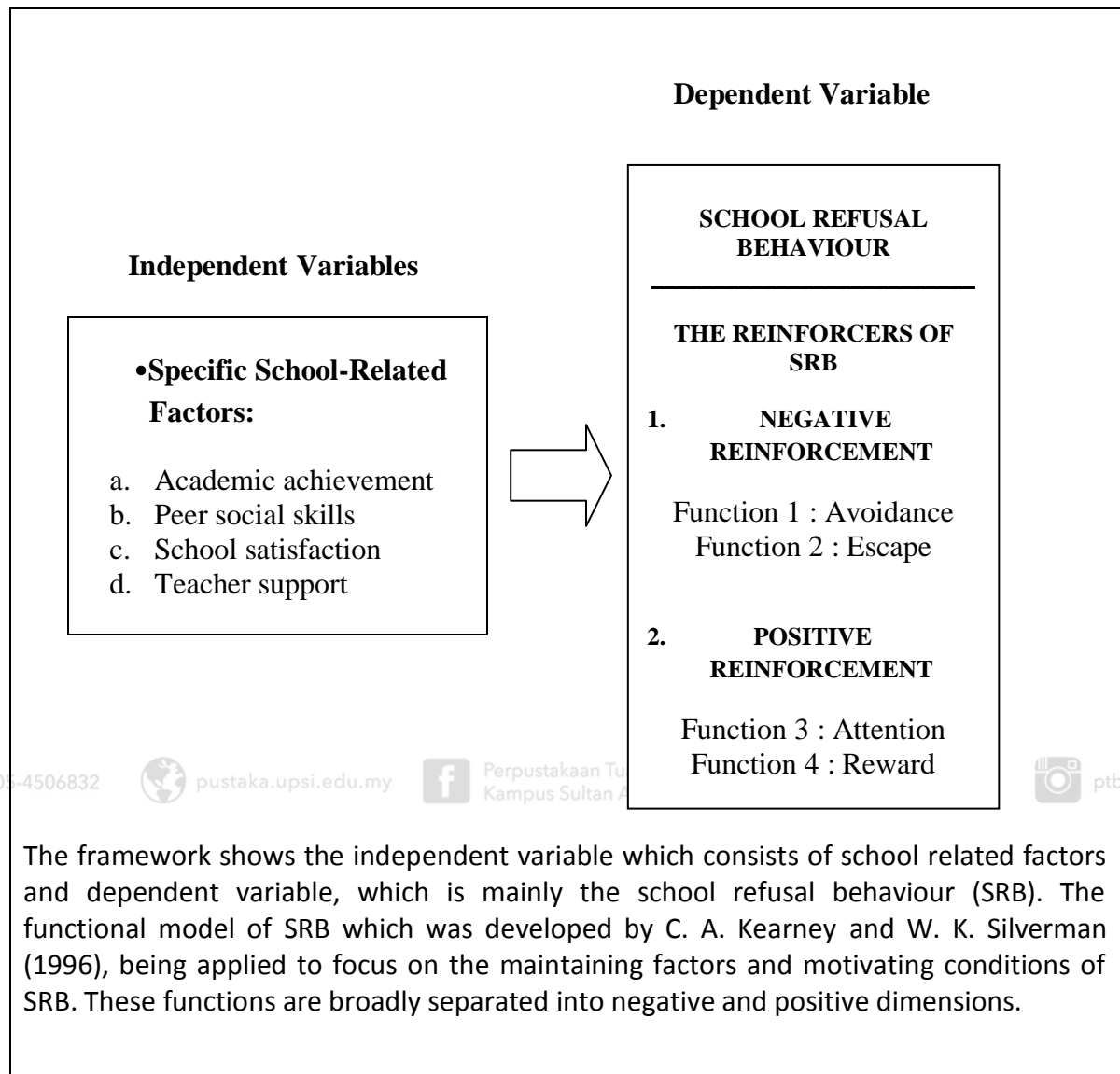


Figure 1.1. School Related Factors Associated With School Refusal Behaviour

## 1.8 Significance of the Study

Refusal to attend school can have a variety of short-term and long-term consequences for the school refuser and his or her family. As mentioned earlier, some of the negative short-term consequences include severe emotional distress, difficulty with homework, and



declining grades (Goldstein, Little, & Akin Little, 2003; Kearney, 2001). Kearney also suggests that these children risk social alienation as the results of not attending school with their peers.

As a child's problems exist as part of a family system, therefore family conflict may become severe with frequent disruptions to the family's daily routine (e.g., arguments between the working parents of whom to take turn to look after the school refusing child) potentially leading to child-abuse and decreased levels of supervision (e.g., this will occur when the working parents have no choice but to leave the child stay alone at home). Previous research in the area of school refusal behaviour indicated that there are a number of negative consequences that can have both, immediate and long-standing effects on the child and his or her family (Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2008). This research is in line with the view and supported that interventions to overcome school refusal behaviour should be implemented as soon as possible to boost the child's school attendance and to curb the potential negative outcomes that may result in adulthood.

Research for over a quarter of a century has suggested that individuals displaying school refusal behaviour may suffer consequences reaching beyond childhood (Berg, 1970; Flakierska, Linstrom, & Gillberg, 1988). Therefore, early identification and treatment of school refusal behaviour improves the long-term educational and familial outcome. School counselors should play an important role in the identification and intervention within the school setting. Greater intervention success can be achieved if parents, teachers, and other individuals from multiple systems (be it government organizations or non-governmental organizations) work together to identify the root of the problem and its solution. Parents involvement in school-based activities (e.g., Parent-Teacher Association and parent-child







discussions) are crucial and should be encouraged by teachers to create a positive impact on the child's attendance behaviour.

Non-attendance in elementary schools has a significant negative impact on individual, family, school and community functioning. The longer this situation is left unattended by the caregivers, schools and the community, the more severe it becomes and any attempt to later rectify this problem will be almost impossible as the perpetrator will get used to refusing school and it will become a norm in his or her life. Thus, parents and teachers should play their role in boosting the students' motivation to attend school daily. In this context, the parents could play their role effectively if they are aware of their role and obligations in the education development of their children.



The researcher hopes that this study will serve school headmasters, senior assistants, counselors, and teachers to identify the school refusal behaviour in their students that leads to many other problems faced by teachers in their classrooms. Furthermore, this study will enable all these parties to play their role effectively to reduce the school refusal problem in their schools as the perpetrators and their parents share their view in the self-report (SRAS-R) of what influencing the school refusal behaviour.

The researcher sought to understand students' thinking processes in their actions to skip school. Further, this study developed strategies and suggestions that headmasters and professionals could utilize to assist students in need of support and assistance to come to school without fail. These strategies were developed through carefully studying the students' and parents' opinion about what causes the school refusers to refuse school and as well as literature on the topic of student intervention plans. Finally, this study has





significance for schools, educators and The Ministry of Education's personnel whom are interested in decreasing absenteeism as well as reducing school refusal behaviour and enhancing healthy social and emotional conditions of these students.

## 1.9 Limitations of the Study

The present study has several limitations that need to be addressed as the ability of the researcher to further draw conclusion has been limited. For instance, this study focuses on primary schools students in Selangor state. At such, the sample which was obtained from a single state limits the extent to which generalizations can be made to the overall student population in Malaysia. Thus, the conclusions are not to be generalized to other situations in Malaysia. Therefore a thorough research should be conducted in future comprising of the rural and urban samples from various districts and states to see if the results of school refusal behaviour would differ from the current investigation.

The student demographics such as race were disproportionately represented in the sample. The number of Malay students in the sample was substantially higher than any other ethnic groups. Furthermore, only self-report measures were used to measure key variables that may have been prone to response bias as the results of this study are based solely on the participants' perceptions. For instance, a certain part of this study has access only to self-report data pertaining to parents' perception regarding their children's school refusal behaviour. Parents may have answered questions regarding their children's school refusal behaviour in a way they thought was the "right answer" versus the answer that was





true. Schools that were selected to participate in self-report for this study maybe different from those that were not selected.

Another limitation to this study is that it looked only at data of the children, parents and school personnel who agreed to participate in the school refusal behaviour data collection process. These willing participants may differ from their unwilling counterparts. Also, when assessing parents' and children's perceptions of school refusal behaviour, a perplexed situation arises of whose perceptions should be taken into a greater heights and how discrepancies, should they exist, be taken into account.

Thus, the results of the study may not be generalized to other schools or their personnel. In future studies, researchers may want to use a more representative sample of school refusers comprising of urban and rural areas as well as a better proportionate of the races. The school-based interventions and home-based interventions discussed in this research were merely suggestions which were deemed appropriate for Malaysian students based on various research which have been done previously on the other part of the world.





## 1.10 Operational Definitions of the Terms

This research study utilized the following terms, definitions, and concepts within the study.

### 1.10.1 School Refusal

School refusal can be defined as any refusal by a child to attend school or to have difficulty attending classes for an entire day (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). School refusal often is associated with disorders such as anxiety and depression. King and Bernstein (2001) defined school refusal as difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression. Although school refusal occurs at all ages, it is more common in



children five, six, ten and eleven years of age (Fremont, 2003). In this study, school refusal behaviour refers to the action of not going to school on their own freewill due to emotional difficulties.

### 1.10.2 School Refusers

Primary school students in the age category of 10 - 11 years old who display school refusal behaviour and missed 15 percentage or more of the entire school days in the 2016 academic year. School refusers often refuse to attend school in order to remain at home during school hours which eventually lead to prolonged absences.





### 1.10.3 School Refusal Behavior

School refusal behaviour refers to youth aged 5-17 years who exhibit one or a combination of the following characteristics:

- a. Is completely absent from school
- b. Attend but then leave school at some time during the day (e.g., skip classes)
- c. Attend school following severe misbehaviors in the morning (e.g., tantrums, clinging, aggression, running away, or refusal to move)
- d. Attend school under great duress that may precipitate pleas for future nonattendance to parents or others (Kearney, 2001).



### 1.10.4 School Phobia

Specific phobia is described as a marked and persistent fear that is excessive or unreasonable, cued by the presence or anticipation of a specific object or situation (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Therefore school phobia is described as fear related to object or situation in school.

### 1.10.5 Truancy

Truancy is defined as unexcused, illegal, surreptitious absences, non-anxiety based absenteeism, absenteeism linked to lack of parental knowledge about the behaviour or absenteeism linked to delinquency or academic problems (Kearney, 2008b). Truancy takes





place when a child is tardy to school in a systematic manner or another who does not present to school at all in order to break away from the school system and indulge in his/her own comfort zone of loitering outside of the school compound to meet up friends or get involved in non-beneficial activities.

### **1.10.6 Independent Variables**

In this study, the independent variables are as follow:

#### **1.10.6.1 Academic Achievement**



Academic achievement refers to the overall academic progress of the Year 4 and Year 5 students in the 2016 academic year. The data is collected in the form of total marks to determine the overall percentage and grades.

#### **1.10.6.2 Peer Social Skills**

Peer social skills assess the degree to which the 10 and 11 year old students display age-appropriate social skills with peers and demonstrate the ability to make friends.





### 1.10.6.3 School Satisfaction

School satisfaction refers to a good feeling in children about themselves and the institution in which they function. School satisfaction will occur when the school is caring and supporting, thus the children will value and enjoy being in the school setting.

### 1.10.6.4 Teacher Support

Teacher support is defined as a teacher giving informational, instrumental (e.g., money or time), emotional (e.g., love, trust or empathy), or appraisal support (e.g., giving evaluative feedback to each student), in any environment (Kerres, Malecki, & Kilpatrick Demary,



### 1.10.7 The Reinforcements of School Refusal Behaviour (SRB)

This study utilized the SRB functional model which was developed by Kearney (2006). It comprises of two reinforcements; namely the negative reinforcement and the positive reinforcement. These reinforcements were further maintained by two functions each.





### 1.10.7.1 The Negative Reinforcement

The negative reinforcement comprises of two functional profiles which are avoidance (Function 1) and escape (Function 2). A youth under the influence of negative reinforcement is considered to refuse school for one or more of the following reasons;

a) to avoid school-based stimuli that provoke a general sense of negative affectivity (anxiety and depression), or b) to escape aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations.

### 1.10.7.2 The Positive Reinforcement



The positive reinforcement comprises of two functional profiles which are attention (Function 3) and reward (Function 4). A youth under the influence of this reinforcement is prone to refuse school for one or more of the following reasons; a) to get attention or sympathy from parents or significant others in order to stay home from school (often consists of younger children who engage in various misbehaviours in the morning), or b) to refuse school in order to pursue tangible rewards outside of the school.







### 1.10.8 The Functional Profiles of School Refusal Behaviour

In this study, four types of Functional Profiles were included; which are:

#### 1.10.8.1 Function 1: Avoidance

It portrays a child who refuses school to avoid school related objects and situations. This profile is most congruent with a child who has a specific fear, such as a fear of the school bus, teachers, peers, classroom, or the canteen.



#### 1.10.8.2



#### Function 2: Escape



This profile depicts a child who stays home to escape aversive social and evaluative situations, such as presentations, group works, examinations, or public speaking at school.

#### 1.10.8.3 Function 3: Attention

This profile represents a child who refuses school to receive attention from a primary caregiver. It includes children with separation anxiety, and by refusing school these children often remain at home with their major attachment figure.





#### 1.10.8.4 Function 4: Reward

This fourth profile describes a child who receives tangible rewards while refusing school. These rewards vary based on the individuals, but they frequently include access to computer games and television, treats at home, sleep over, meeting up friends, or delinquent behaviour.

### 1.11 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has discussed in detail the term school refusal behavior and the internalizing and externalizing problems related to it. In addition, a comprehensive coverage has been done on background of study, problem statement and research objectives which pave way for the construction of research questions, research hypothesis, and the framework of the study.

