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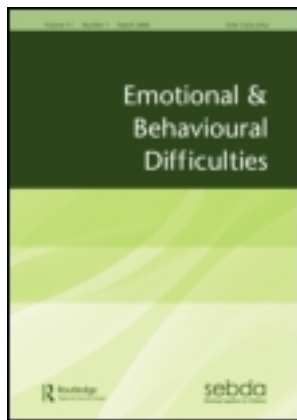
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Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rebd20>

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Published online: 17 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: Trude Havik, Edvin Bru & Sigrun K. Ertesvåg (2014) Parental perspectives of the role of school factors in school refusal, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 19:2, 131-153, DOI: [10.1080/13632752.2013.816199](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2013.816199)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2013.816199>

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Parental perspectives of the role of school factors in school refusal

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The aim of this study was to explore parents' perspectives on the role of school factors in school refusal (SR). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 parents who had experienced SR with their own child. They identified several school factors related to SR. Some of these findings suggest that students who are prone to SR need more predictability and more teachers' support than they sometimes get in school. Their need for predictability seems to occur particularly during less structured activities and during transitions in school. Findings also imply that disruptive behavior among classmates and harsh management from teachers affects perceived predictability and support for SR-prone students. All parents expressed concern about bullying, and roughly a third of them reported that their child had been a victim of bullying. Insufficient adaptation of schoolwork was also mentioned relatively frequently. Parents emphasized that adaptation of schoolwork needs to be done in close cooperation with the student and parents to avoid negative differentiation from classmates or stigma. Finally, several parents commented that teachers and schools need more knowledge about SR and felt that schools needed a more coordinated approach to supporting students who are at risk of SR.

Keywords: school refusal; parental perspectives; school-related factors; predictability; support; bullying

Introduction

School attendance problems may seriously hamper psychological, social and academic development (e.g. Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008; Kearney 2008a). Such problems might cause short and long-term consequences (e.g. Brandibas et al. 2004; Kearney 2007; Kearney and Bates 2005; King et al. 1998). There is a long history of research into school non-attendance (Broadwin 1932; Johnson et al. 1941; Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard 1969); however, this subject has received increased attention in recent years (e.g. Sewell 2008; Shilvock 2010; Silverman and Pina 2007; Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008). School refusal (SR) is considered as one form of school non-attendance related to the experience of strong negative emotions while at school. It has been defined in different ways and SR is in this study defined as 'child-motivated school non-attendance related to emotional distress experienced in connection with academic or social situations in school'. This definition is closely related to that of Berg et al. (1969) and to Kearney and Silverman's (1993) first two functions of school non-attendance: anxiety about school, which includes avoidance of school-related stimuli, and escaping from aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations.

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There is relatively little research-based knowledge about how school-related factors may contribute to SR (e.g. Lyon and Cotler 2007; Wilkins 2008). The aim of this study is thus to explore how parents with children suffering or having suffered school refusal problems have experienced the children's situation in school.

School refusal

Many concepts are used about illegal, unauthorized or unexcused school absence. The umbrella-term 'school refusal behaviour' (SRB) is used by a number of researchers to refer to a range of school attendance problems (e.g. Kearney and Beasley 1994; Kearney and Silverman 1993; 1996; Lee and Miltenberger 1996; Stickney and Miltenberger 1998; Kearney 2003, 2008a, 2008b). Others distinguish between SR and truancy because of the different characteristics of these phenomena (e.g. Berg 1997; Elliott 1999; Fremont 2003; Hersov 1990; McShane, Walter, and Rey 2001; Place, Taylor, and Davis 2000; Shilvock 2010; Smith 2011). The distinction is also due to different theoretical approaches, such as psychological or social/criminal justice (Kearney 2008a).

Because of the complexity of the terminology being used, the estimates of prevalence vary from 0.4 to 28% for SRB, but when using SR the prevalence rate is estimated to be 1–2% (e.g. King et al. 1998).

Several researchers claim that the school environment plays a significant role in school non-attendance (e.g. Fortin et al. 2006; Lauchlan 2003; Rayner and Riding 1996; King, Tonge, and Ollendick 1995; Pellegrini 2007; Pilkington and Piersel 1991; Teasley 2004). At school, young students face academic, social and emotional challenges and demands. Some students may find these demands overwhelming and consider avoidance the easiest or possibly the only way of dealing with them (Kearney, Cook, and Chapman 2007).

Since research focusing specifically on the role of school factors for SR is sparse, we draw on literature from other relevant research areas in order to establish a theoretical framework for this research. Two such areas are school non-attendance and the learning environment in general.

School-related factors that could play a role in school refusal

Academic, social and situational demands in school

Students at risk of SR are likely to be sensitive to different aspects of school that they find demanding. Perceived academic difficulties and fear of academic failure are related to school non-attendance (McShane, Walter, and Rey 2001; Klein 1945; Hersov 1960; Ollendick, King, and Frary 1989; Brand and O'Conner 2004). An emphasis on competition or testing in school is also found to be a contributing factor to non-attendance (Pilkington and Piersel 1991; Wimmer 2003).

In school, academic and social demands can occur together with social challenges and situations. The combination of academic and social challenges may be especially exigent for emotionally sensitive students. A study by Kearney and Beasley (1994) showed that psychologists reported half of the children they treated for SR stayed at home to avoid situations involving the combination of academic and social challenges. These included giving speeches, interacting socially with others in connection with schoolwork and social comparisons in connection with athletic performance (Gutiérrez-Maldonado et al. 2009).

An unsafe school environment with discipline problems, school violence and class disruptions is likely to increase SR (Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Taylor and Adelman

1990; Kearney and Hugelshofer 2000; Kearney 2008b; Wilkins 2008). Such an environment could also increase the rate of problematic relationships between students, which may be a significant contributor to SR. Difficulty making friends, being left out, being isolated, peer conflicts and fear of fellow students have all been found to be related to SR (Soyama, Honma, and Yaguchi 2004; Carroll 2011; Place, Taylor, and Davis 2000; Klein 1945; Hersov 1960; de Aldaz Elena et al. 1987; Wilson et al. 2008; Kearney 2008b; Taylor and Adelman 1990; McShane, Walter, and Rey 2001). Moreover, research indicates that being a victim of bullying is an important reason for school absence (Lyon and Cotler 2007; Kumpulainen et al. 1998; Place, Taylor, and Davis 2000; Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008; Kearney and Haight 2011; Kearney 2008b). A study by Egger et al. (2003) indicates that a third of SR subjects are victims of bullying. However, many students who are bullied do not talk about it and may suffer in silence (Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008).

Starting school or making the transition to a new school might be hard to manage for students at risk of SR. Students entering kindergarten, first grade, middle school and high school are found to have an increased risk of non-attendance (e.g. Kearney, Lemos, and Silverman 2004; Elliott 1999; King and Bernstein 2001; Kearney and Bates 2005). One explanation for this increased risk of non-attendance is that when arriving at a new school, students are more vulnerable and sensitive to the judgments of others and being left alone (Evdsten 2007). Transitions may also reduce the perceived predictability of the school situation. However, transitions and other school-related demands can be facilitated by supportive relationships with teachers (Myers and Pianta 2008; Wentzel 1998; Hamre and Pianta 2005). Poor teacher–student interactions are also generally found to be a risk factor for school non-attendance (e.g. Fortin et al. 2006; Lauchlan 2003; Lyon and Cotler 2007; Malcolm, Davidson, and Kirk 2003; Attwood and Croll 2006; Kearney 2008b).

Teacher support as a protective factor

There is strong evidence that a supportive teacher–student relationship is important for healthy development in children/adolescents (e.g. Birch and Ladd 1998; Hamre and Pianta 2001, 2005; Pianta 1999; Greenberg, Domitrovich, and Bumbarger 2001; Myers and Pianta 2008). This relationship can affect a student's sense of belonging in school, in addition to behavior and academic performance (Silver et al. 2005; Myers and Pianta 2008; Stipek and Miles 2008). Our view is that a good teacher–student relationship may protect against SR since there is much research evidence suggesting that school attendance is affected by the quality of teacher–student and student–student relations (e.g. Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Elliott 1999; Fortin et al. 2006; Kearney and Hugelshofer 2000; Pellegrini 2007; Perdue, Manseske, and Estell 2009; Pilkington and Piersel 1991; Stickney and Miltenberger 1998; Archer, Filmer-Sankey, and Fletcher-Campbell 2003; Malcolm, Davidson, and Kirk 2003; Elliott and Place 1998). Wilkins (2008) found that good relationships with teachers were one of four main factors which motivated students' school attendance.

Teacher support can be differentiated into three main domains: emotional, instructional and organizational support (e.g. Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre 2007; Hamre and Pianta 2006). Teachers who care for students beyond the academic domain and invest in creating a positive climate of communication and positive relationships between students can stimulate both academic functioning and emotional well-being among students (e.g. Fraser and Fisher 1982; Hamre and Pianta 2005; Hughes 2002; Roland and Galloway 2002; Hallinan 2008; Hattie 2009; Pianta and Hamre 2009). Such *emotional support* could be especially

helpful for students at risk of SR and those recovering from SR. Efforts to prevent bullying and victimization are likely to be of particular importance for students who suffer or have suffered from SR.

A key responsibility for the teacher is to provide *instructional support*, including individual guidance, individually adapted study plans and supporting lesson content. Several studies show that good instructional support is related to improvement in students' enjoyment of learning and their perceived academic competence, and it also reduces frustration and emotional problems (e.g. Rutter, Giller, and Hagell 1998; Bru et al. 1998; Ryan and Deci 2000; Hamre and Pianta 2005; Thuen and Bru 2000; Girolametto and Weitzman 2002; Pianta and Hamre 2009; Wilkins 2008). High quality instructional support may be especially important because students at risk of SR tend to worry excessively about academic achievement and evaluation (Kearney 2008b). Good relationships with students at risk of SR provide teachers with opportunities to gain knowledge about the characteristics of the student, which may allow them to identify SR at an early stage and enable them to support the reintegration of these students.

Organizational support from teachers helps students to structure their schoolwork and academic and social relationships between students. Students at risk of SR may find it difficult to build relationships with fellow students and feel uncertain about how to approach schoolwork. Organizational support may therefore be particularly important for these emotionally sensitive students. This support could include making short-term modifications to the student's timetable and reducing unsupportive situations during breaks and lunchtimes (Elliott and Place 1998). In addition, the management of students' behavior is a central aspect of organizational support (Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman 2003). Orderly, well-structured learning environments are likely to enhance students' perceptions of predictability, which in turn can reduce the experience of stress and negative emotions in the school context. To achieve an orderly, well-structured learning environment, teachers need to establish rules and routines and ensure that students behave in accordance with them (Ertesvag 2009). Teachers' ability and efforts to organize and monitor students' behavior in class and during recess could also be a significant factor in reducing SR.

Parent-school cooperation is also found to be related to SR (Lyon and Cotler 2007). One reason might be that good communication between parents and teachers helps the teacher understand the student and how the learning environment should be adapted to his/her needs. Moreover, when the ties between school and home function well, SR might be addressed earlier. In addition, good cooperation and communication with parents makes it easier to build an integrated supportive environment around the student.

School-level factors

Different school factors outside the classroom, such as school structure, staffing, resources, support from the principal and common goals among teachers, are found to influence the quality of the learning environment, including teacher-student and student-student relationships, as well as school attendance (e.g. Knollmann et al. 2010; Kearney 2008b; Blagg 1987). Kearney argues that positive and constructive communication between school faculty and administrators, in addition to a common preventive approach for school safety, may promote students' well-being (Kearney 2008a, 2008b). Another school-level factor related to non-attendance is the frequency of teacher or staff absence (Blagg 1987; Hersov 1985; Kearney 2001; Kearney and Hugelshofer 2000; King, Tonge, and Ollendick 1995).

Findings concerning the size of schools and classes are somewhat equivocal. However, recent studies have shown large school and class sizes to be related to higher absence rates

(Knollmann et al. 2010; Rumberger and Thomas 2000; Jimerson et al. 2002). In contrast, earlier studies found no correspondence (Galloway 1981), or even a tendency for more non-attendance in smaller schools (Reynolds et al. 1980).

Aim of the study

Research-based knowledge about the role of school factors in school refusal is sparse. The purpose of this study is thus to gain more understanding and insight into the issue by exploring how parents with children suffering or having suffered school refusal problems have experienced the children's situation in school.

Method

Recruitment and participants

A convenience sample of parents with children displaying or having displayed SR was invited to participate. Parents as informants can provide information about school-related factors based on both their children's experiences and home-school collaboration. The parents were recruited by staff in the educational and psychological counseling services, from special schools and from an organization for parents of students who are refusing school. The final sample included 17 parents ranging from 41 to 56 years (mean age 48), from seven communities in different parts of Norway, with the majority from the southwest part of the country. Participation was voluntary. The majority of the participants were married to or had long-term live-in relationships with the child's father/mother. More than half of the participants said they had higher education. Their children, eight girls and nine boys, were aged from 10 to 18 (mean age 14.7) at the time of the interview (see Table 1).

The study was approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and they were informed about their right to withdraw at any time. To reduce the risk of identification, pseudonyms are used for the children.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed on the basis of central components identified in the literature about SR and non-attendance as well as in literature about learning environments that affect all students, since there is little evidence about SR and school factors. The interview guide contained the elements needed to elicit parents' relevant experiences of their child's previous or current situation in school.

The interview guide had a fairly open framework consisting of open-ended questions. An in-depth interview is an interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee: a 'conversation' or a dialogue with a purpose (Kvale 1996). The interviewer has some areas she wants to cover, but is also flexible about covering other and new areas, thoughts and feelings about the theme. An introductory open question was used: 'Could you please tell your

Table 1. Demographics.

	Age	Sex
Parents	41–56 (mean age 48.1)	2 fathers, 15 mothers
Children	10–18 (mean age 14.7)	9 boys, 8 girls

story about your child in order to try to throw some light on some of the possible reasons for school refusal?'. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a flexible method that offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data (Aronson 1994; Braun and Clarke 2012; 2006; Lambert and O'Halloran 2008). This is a useful method when searching for themes or patterns. The analysis is more descriptive than interpretive, and is inspired by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology. This type of phenomenology focuses less on interpretation by the researcher and more on the description of the informants' experiences (Creswell 2007). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), six steps are followed: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and, finally, producing the report or article.

To assist the data analysis, the computer program QSR NVivo9 was used. Quality and trustworthiness are important in all research (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann 2010). Member checks were applied to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This was done by mailing the results to the participants for them to give comments, and to check if their quotations represented the information they had provided during the interview. Only a few made comments, and they were confirming the findings. The quotations were subsequently translated from Norwegian into English.

Results

Some main themes were identified among the in-school factors from the parents' descriptions of their perceptions of their child's situation in school: demanding factors in school, teacher support, support from fellow students and other supportive factors at school level. Quotations from parent interviews are used to illustrate themes and subthemes. The identified themes are listed in Table 2 and described in detail in the following section.

Table 2. Emergent major themes and subthemes.

Major themes	Subthemes
<i>Demanding factors in school</i>	Noisy, disorganized classrooms Frightening teacher behaviour <i>Social demands related to fellow students</i> Academic demands
<i>Teacher support</i>	Emotional support from teachers Instructional support, organizational support and predictability Home-school communication
Support from fellow students	Being valued and having friends
<i>Other supportive factors at the school level</i>	<i>Communication between teachers</i> <i>Resources</i> <i>Size of school or class</i> General school support

Demanding factors in school*Noisy, disorganized classrooms*

The majority of the parents described *noisy, disorganized classrooms* as a challenge in their children's views. They described how such classrooms contributed to a perception of unpredictability and made the child feel unsafe and insecure. In addition, in a noisy classroom, it may be difficult for a vulnerable student to be noticed by teachers.

Lene sits at school, not seeking help from teachers. She hides her work and when the classroom is noisy, the teachers don't come to her. They go to others. This is typical. She's the one they don't notice, and when they do notice her, they leave her alone because she hides her work.

Frightening teacher behavior

Some parents reported that their child had experienced harsh reprimands or management by their teachers, unfair collective punishments and aggressive reactions from teachers who were domineering and even cruel. Even though the reprimands were not meant for these students, who usually were very emotionally vulnerable, quiet and introverted, some of them felt unsafe, insecure and anxious about if and when the teacher's anger would turn on them.

Magnus was afraid of the teacher because he would run down to the desks and then bang on them. He had a loud voice (. . .) Magnus did not feel safe.

The teacher in lower secondary school made the situation for Ingrid even worse because of his behavior and the way he treated her (. . .) because he was scary and he shouted.

Gradually he became afraid of the teacher because he could not read her face or know when she was angry (. . .) she was unpredictable. The children who were noisy were used to being yelled at, but for Jon. . . the anxiety gradually increased.

Dealing with classroom management and setting behavioral standards might work well for most students, but might be frightening for others, such as Mona, who was very scared after the following incident:

Mona and her friend were late for class. The teacher had been frustrated by students coming late; she placed the two girls at the front of the class and told them she had been really worried. She had been about to make a phone call to the girls' homes to enquire about them. . . The teacher made a huge thing out of this (. . .) because she wanted to set an example for the whole class.

Social demands related to fellow students

Roughly half of the parents said their child experienced social demands related to fellow students. Examples they presented concerned challenges related to *turbulent students/classes, conflicts between girls and being ignored or excluded*. The situations they described could reflect that their children were exposed to social exclusion or bullying, even though they do not explicitly mention victimization or bullying. Most parents were worried about bullying and had asked both the child and the school whether this occurred. About a third of the parents actually described bullying or teasing as a reason for or factor contributing to SR. A few of the parents called the teasing 'devastating'.

Lene was in a non-including class (. . .) there was a group of girls and she was not included (. . .) She felt no affiliation with the other students. Early on she said: ‘Mum, I’m invisible. They don’t see me. . . they see through me’.

Bjørn told me that ‘This is not a school without bullying Mum’. . . He was called ‘fatso’ and this was humiliating and awful for him.

Academic demands

Some parents described their child’s worries about the academic demands of school. A few parents described their child’s anxiety regarding the pressure to achieve and situations in which they had to perform in front of their classmates, such as reading aloud in class or presenting one’s individual work in front of the class.

Jostein is clever at school, but he no longer has any self-esteem. He suffers from performance anxiety. . . He can’t do tests. . . He is afraid to fail.

Lene was very afraid to fail. She wanted everything to be correct always. Performance anxiety made it hard to work with her.

June stayed away from school if she didn’t know whether she would have to read aloud in class or not.

He (Morten) is anxious about the unfamiliar and about coping in school, which is the main reason for his school refusal.

Some parents mentioned poor adaptation of schoolwork or getting necessary support too late for their child. The educational situation had not been adequately adapted to their children’s needs until after the attendance problems had begun.

It took too a long time until June got help, but you can’t fault the school over the last few years [they were pleased with the help, but their daughter received it too late].

Teacher support

Emotional support from teachers

The majority of the parents talked about emotional support from the teacher and the importance of knowing that a teacher or another person in school appreciated their children, cared about them and supported them emotionally. Statements about the supportive teacher emphasized respect, appreciation, personal chemistry and trustworthiness. For some parents, getting a teacher who provided the necessary emotional support had dramatically changed their child’s perception of school.

Anna’s teachers were wonderful. . . I cannot praise them enough. . . (. . .) The teachers notice all the students. . . both when in the classroom and outside the classroom.

Knut [the teacher] came and he did something that turned everything around. He [Per] enjoyed school even more, and. . . I think Per felt taken care of; he was appreciated, taken seriously and he felt safe with Knut . . . Our experience is that one specific teacher matters a lot.

It is really great to have someone [the teacher] that makes a phone call every Friday (. . .) and tells us what Kåre did last week and tells us how things are going and how the week has been. (. . .) He sees Kåre and he listens to him and they discuss how they could do things (. . .) This has been related very personally to Kåre.

Changing teachers was good for Svein and he had a good relationship with the new teacher, who followed him up.

We all now agree that June needs predictability; she cannot have different teachers or not know who the teacher will be.

Other parents described teachers who did not understand the child's needs and teachers who said one thing but did something different. More than half of the parents mentioned teachers' lack of understanding of SR or characteristics of emotionally vulnerable students. They also voiced how teachers' insecurity made it difficult for them to act appropriately upon the first signs of school refusal.

The teacher told us that he felt insecure. . . He did not make contact to build a good relationship with Magnus that would make him feel safe.

As far as I know, Kåre did not have a bad relationship with his teachers. . . They simply did not know how to handle him or the situation.

Instructional support, organizational support and predictability

Although instructional and organizational support and predictability might be seen as separate constructs, parents presented the two as a single theme. Instructional and organizational support are integral parts of adapted education, and can reduce worry and enhance predictability for students. Examples of adaptation mentioned by parents were not having to read aloud, not having to stand in front of the class (to minimize comparisons between students), having an individual agreement about not having to ask the teacher for permission to leave the classroom, having lessons in a small group, being flexible and having the locker room to themselves. Having well-described, achievable goals and a relatively detailed working plan were also mentioned as important for an adequately adapted learning situation. Some parents said that making this plan and preparing the week individually on a particular day together with the student made school more predictable for their children. While the need for adaptation was more important for some students, the need for predictability was vital for most of them, especially in less structured subjects such as physical education, art and craft, home economics and other unstructured activities and lessons.

It has to be very adapted and predictable for Morten, and every minute he has to know what is happening and where.

We all now agree that June needs predictability, that she cannot have different teachers. She cannot cope without knowing who the teacher will be.

Svein did not have to ask the teacher when he had to leave the classroom. There was an agreement that he could leave the classroom whenever he needed to.

I think the school felt that they did everything. . . but that nothing was good enough. . . That was truly their experience, while ours was that they did a lot, but they forgot all the important and essential things, such as having a predictable day and all the different things happening in secondary school that Magnus had to be prepared for. They were going through the plan with one of the class teachers to prepare him for the week, but the plan came to nothing. . . They sometimes followed it, while other times they did not.

Teacher changes, substitute teachers and having many different teachers are a part of school life, but some experienced this more often. Most parents described this phenomenon

as difficult for their child because of the lack of continuity and stability, as threats to the predictability and safety in class and breaks, which might cause a sense of insecurity. More than half of the parents talked about frequent teacher changes. In addition, fewer than half of the parents considered transitions as critical for school refusal; those that did mainly referred to low predictability regarding new teachers and classmates.

Per's class had no permanent teachers. I am sure they had 20 different teachers in the first four years.

In October, the teacher told me that she was wondering about her. She didn't know anything about Tone's needs. . . and I was shocked because I thought the information about every student was given to the new teacher.

The secondary school promised us that they would take good care of Kenneth and his well-being in class and school. The school is supposed to evaluate the composition of the class if they noticed anything worrying about his well-being. . . but they did not.

More than half of the parents emphasized as the challenging nature of changes in non-daily routines and activities. Situations related to physical education lessons, such as the changing room or showering after class, swimming lessons or other changes were chaotic and stressful because of anxiety about the unknown and the child's need for predictability, control, stability and safety. In addition, there was too much noise.

Lene's class got a new teacher who used a working plan in which the students had to take more responsibility for their own learning. . . which was the worst thing for Lene because she needs very systematic follow-up.

Per did not know what to do (. . .) The school did not inform him about anything (. . .) The school has to be more structured and give more information.

Magnus was insecure, particularly about physical education lessons, which are disorganized, for instance in the changing room. He said it was very noisy.

Tone was insecure. She needs to know what is happening. . . We noticed this on days that were irregular and then she did not want to go to school (. . .) Things have to be exactly as she expects, to be planned, explained for her and not leave her in situations that make her confused and uncertain, as she then might refuse.

Another issue mentioned by some of the parents was the tension between being given alternative teaching/tasks and the students' wish to be 'normal', invisible and 'like the others'. Some explained that adapted education was a failure because it made the children stand out from their classmates in way they perceived as negative. Examples described by parents were:

Svein was offered the chance to go for an outdoor walk during physical education classes, but he did not want to be different, so he did not attend these physical education classes.

My theory is that Anna had reading/writing difficulties; the refusal started when she felt different because she was taught outside the classroom [in a group room with other students]. . . She wanted to be with the others.

All children want to attend school and to be normal (. . .) He cried because he did not manage to attend school because he so much wanted to do so.

About half of the parents described the importance of the learning environment in general for their child's functioning in school. Most parents emphasized the teacher's

management of student behavior as important, their child's need for predictability in all situations at school and that the school or teachers did not understand the importance of predictability.

It was completely unbelievable for me when they did not understand what predictability was – when you can't understand what is important and what is predictable for Magnus when he goes to school.

Home-school communication

Another related topic concerned the cooperation and communication between the school and the parents, which was considered as important for the teachers' ability to provide individually adapted emotional support for the children. All the parents described this as an important but challenging issue; most parents felt this cooperation was only taken seriously after the school refusal had started.

It is actually about creating a dialogue, about what is mine [Jon's parent] and what is yours, and the school has to be the 'grown-up' in this relationship.

We [Mia's parents] never felt these parent-school meetings were constructive (. . .) They are schematic (. . .) not personal, and when you reach the point where you can talk about important things, the time and 'framework' is over.

Support from fellow students

Being valued and having friends

The importance of being valued by fellow students and having friends were mentioned by most of the parents in the study. According to the parents, most of the children only had one or a few friends, but hardly any of them reported that their child was left completely alone.

Jon did not want to sit in that room [by himself]. Being with friends was the most important thing for him, which is the most important thing for all nine-year-olds; it is not school itself that is his interest, but being with friends.

Other supportive factors at the school level

Parents mentioned different structural conditions that affect the learning environment, such as communication between teachers, resources and size of school or class. One parent experienced two schools dealing with her child's problems; one took action immediately, while the other did not.

Communication between teachers

Approximately one third of the parents questioned how teachers communicate, having experienced a lack of continuity and consistency in their child's schooling, which might relate to structural conditions.

Our [Kenneth's parents'] main concern is to make a system, which is not dependent on only the class teacher, because they [school's leadership] said she [class teacher] had too much to

do, and they [school] did not send information. Because she was sick, it was dependent on one person [the teacher].

Resources

Less than half of the parents mentioned a lack of resources as a problem. This was often the school's explanation for a failure to adapt when faced with problems, or when a student had refused school. A few parents mentioned lack of resources:

What changed was that no one met Magnus when he came to school and the reason they [the school] gave was, of course, lack of resources.

A few parents, however, praised the school for having enough resources and how the principal organized and recruited the staff. Other parents were disappointed about the use and organization of personnel for their child or for the whole class. One third of the parents mentioned the use of substitute teachers in relation to unpredictability.

Mona did not know them . . . She did not know what was happening (. . .) and when the teacher had maternity leave, they choose another pregnant teacher who leaves in February, and the same thing happens over again. This teacher is also absent frequently . . . There is a lot of disruption and the use of substitute teachers.

Size of school or class

A few of the parents also emphasized small schools and classes, small buildings and rooms, as beneficial for their vulnerable child, providing predictability and fewer disruptive factors in the classroom.

Having less information around her in class, less noise and less shouting has been Mia's main concern (. . .) the architectural factors matter.

General school support

Some parents referred to the importance of the schools in more general utterances, both negative and positive, but all of which indicate the importance of school-related supportive factors for SR.

I remember telling the principal in second grade that we try very hard at home, asking for someone to meet Mona at school. . . But we did not get anything from the school side (. . .). You can motivate your child to attend school, but you cannot do anything on the other side [implies a parent cannot change the school].

At the new school [after moving] they told me that this is not a problem at all, that this was their job, which they regarded as a challenge (. . .). When Karin was attending the other school, I had to work more (. . .). But at that time I did not know what the school could do and I feel they had less competence and fewer resources than the new school.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain more understanding and insight into the role of school-related factors connected to SR, which is understood as students' coping with

school-related demands and distress by the use of school avoidance. Parents' perceptions of their child's school situations were used as the source of information. These perceptions are probably based on a combination of what their child reported at home and their own communication with the school. Previous research in this field has a primarily psychological, therapeutic or family-focused approach (e.g. Broadwin 1932; Fortin et al. 2006; Archer, Filmer-Sankey, and Fletcher-Campbell 2003). Although school-related factors are believed to play a role in SR, research about such factors has been sparse (e.g. Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Lyon and Cotler 2007; Pellegrini 2007; Pilkington and Piersel 1991). However, many of these students are likely to be emotionally vulnerable because of low self-confidence, lacking faith in their ability to cope with stress, anxiety and depression. It is possible that this vulnerability is the main reason for SR and that it is difficult to adapt the learning environment in a way that could prevent it (Brand and O'Conner 2004; King et al. 1998, 2000; Kearney and Albano 2004; McShane, Walter, and Rey 2001; Kearney 2001, 2003, 2008a; Snoek 2002; Grøholt, Sommerschild, and Garløv 2008). However, parents in this study felt that prevention of SR relied on close home-school cooperation and adaptation of the learning environment. They also identified several aspects of school that could constitute both risk and protective factors for SR, or factors for its presence or absence. These are discussed below.

School-related reasons explaining school refusal

School-related demands

The majority of parents in this study described noisy, disruptive and unpredictable classrooms as a challenge for their child. These findings are in accordance with previous research, which indicates that an unsafe school environment increases SR (e.g. Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Wilkins 2008).

The quality of learning environments in schools has been a major focus in school debates recently; disruptive behavior in school has been a source of concern for years in many western countries (Oliver, Wehby, and Reschly 2011). Earlier studies show that Norwegian students report *noisy and disruptive classrooms* and that many students want less disruptive classrooms (Kjærnsli and Lie 2004; Lie et al. 2001; Klette et al. 2003; Bru 2009). This might suggest that a noisy learning environment is a source of stress for many students, and noisy, unpredictable learning environments are likely to reduce students' feelings of control. For students who already have little faith in their ability to cope with different challenges or threats and who tend to react with anxiety, such learning environments may be very difficult to deal with. Consequently, school avoidance is the only available coping strategy (King et al. 2000; Lazarus 2006). Noisy, unpredictable classrooms might thereby be a risk factor for SR. Moreover, in noisy classrooms teachers have to spend more time calming things down and controlling disruptive behavior (Oliver, Wehby, and Reschly 2011). The result is less time to give attention and support to vulnerable students, which may further increase the risk of SR.

Many parents also talked about teachers' difficulties with controlling classroom behavior. In the view of some parents, certain teachers used *harsh management* methods. In a noisy classroom with challenging students, teachers might overreact by being hot-tempered or angry. Such teacher behavior might be anxiety-provoking for vulnerable students. Some parents in this study talked about their vulnerable child feeling unsafe and afraid because of their teacher's use of harsh management methods, and because they were unsure if and when the teacher would get upset. Such teacher behavior is incompatible with the needs of vulnerable students, who need a friendly teacher to serve as a 'secure base' (Bowlby

1990; Pianta and Steinberg 1992; Hughes et al. 2010). In this way, harsh management and frightening teacher behavior may constitute a risk factor for SR.

In a disruptive classroom environment, stressful *relations between students* are more likely to occur, which is usually a strain for students as school is an important social arena (Wentzel 1998). Bullying has serious negative consequences for relationships and a disruptive classroom is found to increase the risk of bullying (Roland and Galloway 2002; Bru, Stephens and Torsheim 2002). Being a victim of bullying is likely to result in a severe strain for most students and can even lead to post-traumatic stress syndrome (Idsoe, Dyregrov, and Idsoe 2012). It is therefore not surprising that bullying is found to be a risk factor for SR and school dropout (Cornell et al. 2012; Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Kearney and Haight 2011). The findings in our study are in accordance with this trend. Parents mentioned problems with fellow students, such as being excluded or isolated, which some of the children experienced as devastating. Moreover, almost all of the parents claimed they were worried about bullying, while about one third of them described bullying or teasing as a contributory factor for their child's SR.

On the other hand, the majority of parents in this study said their children had friends in school. Student–student relations and support are important and having supportive friends in school can protect against stress (Ystgaard, Thamb, and Steffen Dalgard 1999; Ystgaard 1997; Murberg and Bru 2004; Pianta 1999; Lazarus 2006). Supportive friendships might help prevent SR. However, parents usually mentioned only a few or only one friend, which supports the findings of previous research (Carroll 2011). The peer networks of school refusal-prone students are arguably often fragile and need to be watched closely, especially if, for instance, a student's only friend changes school.

Teacher support

Parents described *supportive teachers* as essential for their child's perceived safety, control and feeling of predictability. Parents illustrated this by telling about increased stress levels and anxiety among their children when their teachers were absent and replaced by substitute teachers. The use of *substitute teachers* was mentioned as a stress factor by about one third of the parents in the study, thus supporting previous research on teacher absence and student non-attendance (e.g. Kearney 2002). Many parents emphasized the need for their child to be made aware in advance about substitute teachers taking classes, thus suggesting that schools do not normally have a system for notifying about such staff changes.

Earlier research suggests that the quality of the relationship between the student and the teacher is related to non-attendance (e.g. Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Pellegrini 2007; Perdue, Manseske, and Estell 2009; Wilkins 2008). Results from our study support this finding and suggest that a good relationship with teachers can be crucial for school refusal-prone students. Norwegian teachers often teach the same students for several consecutive years, e.g. from grades 1–4, 5–7 or 8–10. Given that the relationship is supportive, this continuity may benefit a school refusal-prone student. On the other hand, non-supportive student–teacher relationships could be especially difficult for these students. Some parents reported that their quiet and introvert child was ignored by teachers, for example by being left alone in the hallway or hiding behind the bookshelves.

Teacher's *knowledge* about school refusal-prone students could be a prerequisite for establishing a good relationship with such students. More than half of the parents did not believe that teachers had enough knowledge or understanding about the topic and the findings could indicate that teachers do not have enough competence concerning SR and school refusal-prone students. Consequently, teachers may find it difficult to identify students at risk of SR. Early identification is important to prevent SR (Thambirajah, Granduson, and

De-Hayes 2008). Poor knowledge of SR may make it difficult for teachers to cater for students at risk of SR in a way that would allow them to function well in the school setting. Teachers need to be aware of situations in school that can provoke anxiety. These situations might vary significantly according to the students' age. It has been suggested that younger students have more fear of teachers, of being picked on by older children, of using the school toilets or of taking the bus. Older students, on the other hand, might worry more about academic performance, making friends, changing clothes for physical education classes or being called on in class (Kearney and Haight 2011).

Instructional and organizational support to deal with academic demands is an important issue for vulnerable students and students with social, performance or test anxiety. While some parents talked about support and adapted education as ways to reduce anxiety, most said their children were deprived of these facilities. One concern mentioned by many parents was that if their children did get adapted education, it normally came too late in the process. Parents felt that adapted education should be introduced earlier to prevent SR. This early intervention is important because older children with SR have a poorer prognosis and early interventions are linked to a better prognosis (Atkinson, Quarrington, and Cyr 1985; Kearney and Beasley 1994; Paige 1993, 1997). Examples of helpful adaptations mentioned by parents were not reading aloud in class and not being asked questions, challenged or asked to give oral presentations in front of the whole class. However some parents mentioned a possible conflict between the wish for adapted education and the child's desire to be like other students. There is a danger that some adaptations may too strongly signal that the student is different in a way that is not valued by other students, which might lead to social exclusion. Parents indicated that the unwanted effects of adaptation could be avoided if changes were made in close cooperation with students and parents. One should also be aware that adapting education in a way that exempts students from certain activities or tasks may deprive them of learning opportunities and exposure to situations that, with time, could reduce their fears or worries. One suggestion is to use collaborative learning in order to decrease children's anxiety for learning and testing situations (Ioannou and Artino 2010). Other strategies that might help students with academic anxiety are breaking up bigger tasks into small units, which would allow the child to feel successful and promote future encouragement (Sze 2006).

The need for teacher support in creating predictable goals and preparing working plans for the week was also emphasized by parents. It can be especially challenging to create a predictable learning environment in subjects such as physical education and home economics – this was mentioned by parents and is supported by earlier research (Rudjord 2009; Oestevik 2009). This may be related to a fear of social situations and feeling embarrassed in front of fellow students and teachers, which is in accordance with first and second functions of SRB as described by Kearney (Kearney and Silverman 1993). Parents in our study described such subjects as having less structure and claimed that their children perceived them as less predictable. Good organizational support from teachers is likely to be especially important in such subjects.

Transitions and changes of routine during school might be stressful for vulnerable students. More than half the parents emphasized changes, such as starting a new school year and transitions from one class or activity to another, as problematic for their child. These changes may also be related to lack of perceived predictability (Kearney 2001; Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008). Support from teachers is crucial during transitions or other changes (e.g. Myers and Pianta 2008). Because such phases often involve several teachers, communication and coordination between teachers is of great importance. Unfortunately, several parents suggested that communication between teachers was inadequate.

School-level factors

Communication between teachers was mentioned by about one third of the parents, and this could be due to the students' need for continuity and predictability. If the communication system in school is good, it is easier for teachers to share important information about different students. Lack of communication between teachers can mean that important information about students is not shared, which is what some parents experienced. Teasley (2004) claims the importance of collaborative efforts as non-attendance prevention.

The *size* of school and class was mentioned by a few parents, which is also reflected in previous research (e.g. Archer et al. 2003). However, the research is inconclusive about the relationship between school non-attendance and the size of the school (Knollmann et al. 2010; Galloway 1981; Reynolds et al. 1980). Parents in our study mentioned that size of school or class might be related to fewer disturbances because of fewer students, a calmer learning environment, more predictability, better student–teacher relationships and smaller buildings. Whether these factors are related to size or to other factors is uncertain. However, factors related to size might be important for school refusal-prone students, and were mentioned during the interviews by several parents.

Literature on school non-attendance points to the need for a more flexible curriculum that considers the individual differences of students (Galloway 1985; Reid 1985). Reid argues that every student who refuses school requires a 'tailor made approach' (1985, 50). Lack of *resources and time* were typical explanations given by teachers or other school personnel when parents in the study requested adapted education for their child. Lack of resources might be part of the problem, but it is possible that this could simply be an excuse caused by insecurity and lack of knowledge (Fullan 1982; Skogen 2006). However, some of the adaptations that could help school refusal-prone students to feel supported and to have predictability do not always need extra resources, such as academic support being given to the whole class when learning a new task or giving better information about the goal and work for the upcoming lesson. Examples include using short instructions and educational visual materials instead of verbal instructions to provide structure and predictability in the classroom (Idsoe and Idsoe 2011).

Methodological considerations and future directions

This study has some methodological considerations which need to be taken into account. Parents may have limited knowledge about what is actually going on in classrooms and at school, and their experiences are mainly indirect ones, conveyed through interactions with their children and the teachers. Information from parents could be biased by systematic attribution tendencies. Malcolm et al. (2003) showed that parents perceived the main causes for their children's truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers and pressure from fellow students, while teachers believed that parental attitudes and home environments were the main reasons. Therefore, one cannot rule out the possibility that information collected from parents may be biased by a tendency for parents to relieve stress connected to their child's SR by blaming the school. Furthermore, if the children are the main source of information for parents, their understanding of the school's role may also be biased by attribution tendencies among school refusal-prone children. Other relevant informants for the aim of the study are teachers and students. Collecting information from students with school refusal might be difficult as their negative experiences with school may make them reluctant to participate in a study about school.

A limitation is that the student group is heterogeneous; age differences varied from 10 to 18 and the students were in different phases of SR when the interviews were

conducted. For example, the retrospective view might affect parents' recall of the actual situation. However, the analysis showed no differences in their answers.

Another limitation of the study is the overrepresentation of mothers among participants. However, this overrepresentation is probably a reflection of who the main caregiver is and who follows up the children's schoolwork. Mothers might therefore be best placed to give opinions in an interview.

As with most qualitative studies, information was gathered from a relatively small number of informants and findings cannot therefore be generalized. Further research needs to use other sources of information, such as professionals who work with SR closely or from a distance, or students who have experienced SR. However, the findings from our study will inform future research by highlighting some of the school factors which may contribute to SR.

Conclusions

Non-attending students have previously been approached mainly as a 'within-child' problem (e.g. Pellegrini 2007; Carroll 2011). There has been little consideration of potential environmental risks at school. In addition, school personnel also have a central role in identifying SR, frequently being the first to identify the problem (Kearney and Bates 2005; Elliott and Place 1998). SR is often detected later than truancy, and often too late (Thambirajah, Granduson, and De-Hayes 2008).

These parents' stories reflect their children's situation at school and suggest that school factors play a central role for SR. Information from parents suggests that these students have a crucial need for predictability and the feeling of being valued, and that they sometimes lack predictability and support in school. However, these two factors are interconnected, as good social support might help create a more predictable learning situation. These problems are most likely to occur during less structured activities or transitions in school.

The findings also imply that disruptive behavior among classmates and harsh management from teachers makes it difficult to achieve predictability and support for school refusal-prone students, thus emphasizing the need for teachers to manage student behavior and to provide emotional support to promote student well-being (Oliver, Wehby, and Reschly 2011; Ertesvag 2011). Good management of student behavior may also reduce bullying. About a third of the parents claimed that being a victim of bullying was a serious school-related strain for their child. This finding supports earlier research; efforts to reduce bullying are important for preventing SR. Insufficient adaptation of schoolwork was frequently mentioned as a challenge. Parents emphasized that schoolwork should be adapted in close cooperation with the student and parents in order to avoid negative attention. Finally, several parents commented that teachers and schools need more knowledge about school refusal and that schools need to have a more coordinated approach to support students at risk of it.

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