

## Is Fostering School Connectedness and School Belonging an Answer to the Growing Number of Children Displaying School Refusal Behaviour?

**Kathleen Tait and Mervyn Hyde**

School attendance is a normal routine for most students. However, it is estimated that up to 28% of students reveal a level of school refusal behaviour at some point in their academic career (Pina, Zerr, Gonzales, & Ortiz, 2009). This topic is of special significance for educators in regular and special schools. A student's academic and social-emotional development may be jeopardized with mounting absence from school. However, over the past two years, children in most states of Australia have been required to stay at home for long periods of time due to the COVID pandemic and many students may develop a level of reluctance to attend once restrictions are lifted.

School refusal is an attendance problem that, once established, can be difficult to manage. To prevent establishment of school refusal, indicators of emerging school refusal and risk for school refusal should be effectively identified and acted upon. Risk factors are often discussed in relation to school attendance problems generally rather than considering risk for specific types of attendance problems. School refusal can be complex and highly problematic with adverse short- and long-term consequences. School refusal may be viewed as the inverse of school connectedness. School connectedness is defined as students' connection with supportive adults; a sense of belonging; positive peer relationships; engagement with learning and the experience of a safe and encouraging climate (Cumming, Marsh, & Higgins, 2018; García Moya, 2019). Cumming, Marsh, and Higgins (2018) suggest that school connectedness may explain feelings of isolation, disconnect and subsequent school refusal demonstrated by some students.

Depression and anxiety during COVID-19 were reported by students who do not face the challenges of having special education needs (Page, 2020). Yet, the impact and disconnectedness for students with disabilities may be even more pronounced as these students constitute a population that is at greater risk developmentally and socially (Berg et al., 1993). Students with special educational needs are further at risk as educational provision increasingly trends towards online and distance education. This adds additional challenges for students with special education learning needs that extend beyond the standard curriculum itself. School connectedness and associated personal and social development may be especially reduced without access to specialist educators and supports (Soudien, 2020). For most students with disability, the development of positive relationships and school connectedness involves feeling part of the school community. Feeling part of the school community and feeling a sense of belonging are factors that directly impact their health, social, emotional and academic outcomes (Cumming, Marsh, & Higgins, 2018).

School refusal behaviour and its comorbidity with different anxiety disorders have been the objects of study of numerous investigations (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Ingal & Nordahl, 2013; Kearney & Albano, 2004). Recently Gonzalez (2020) identified that dimensions of school refusal behaviour can be assessed from three dimensions of anxiety: Anticipatory Anxiety, School-Based Performance Anxiety and Generalised Anxiety.

Anticipatory anxiety fits the profile of a child who refuses to attend school to avoid school situations that cause fear or anxiety. School-Based Performance Anxiety describes the profile of a student who displays their school refusal to escape from school situations that generate social aversion. Third, Generalised Anxiety, depicts the profile of students who base their refusal on the desire to receive individual care from parents or other significant persons. Generalised Anxiety may also correspond to students who refuse to attend school to sustain known reinforcements outside of school, such as watching TV or playing games.

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Ma (2003) has suggested that school climate and context play an important role in students' school belonging; nonetheless, there is very little research on how such contexts and climate influence students' belongingness. Pesonen, Kontu, Saarinen, and Pirttimea (2016) assert that there was even less research pertaining to students with disabilities and sense of school belonging within both general and segregated educational settings. In addition, although it is now more likely than not for Australian children with intellectual disability to begin their schooling in mainstream schools (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008), there appears to be very little follow up as to whether children with additional needs complete their schooling in mainstream schools. One study, conducted in 2018 by Mann, Cuskelly and Moni, explored parents' decisions to transfer their children out of regular and into special schools. They also investigated the Department of Education and Training (DET) database for the number of Queensland children who had not continued in regular schools. An analysis of these data revealed that of 4404 students enrolled in special schools in 2015, 36.8% (1622) had transferred there from a regular school (DET, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

Schools can support students' sense of belonging by encouraging strong relationships among staff, students and parents and providing structured opportunities for students to participate in school activities (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). Nevertheless, an investigation into student belongingness as it relates to students with disabilities, which explores interactions among all stakeholders (staff, parents and students) within a range of school environments, is not only lacking in Australia but extremely limited in the general literature.

## Conclusion

The nature of the risk factors around school refusal, school engagement, students' sense of school belonging and connectedness remains critical. These are still under-researched in determining their impact on school refusal and attendance. Continued reliance on school attendance as a metric, rather than looking at the factors that frame this measure, is a risk in itself. For students with special education needs even less research is available to guide our decisions about strategies and programs. Young children at risk of school refusal need to be helped to remain on a developmental pathway of engagement with the academic and social-emotional opportunities associated with school attendance and participation. Insisting every student attend a mainstream class will not be the answer for some students; hence the continued support offered by special schools as they respond to some students' individual needs in a nuanced and effective manner. By supporting students' sense of belonging, schools will be able to concentrate on their primary task of supporting children's academic and social-emotional development; and society will be relieved of the major costs associated with school dropout as a result of established school refusal.

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