

THE PHENOMENON OF SCHOOL REFUSAL AMONG THIRD-GRADE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS A CASE STUDY ON CAUSAL FACTORS AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

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Abstract

School refusal is an educational phenomenon characterized by a student's difficulty or reluctance to attend and participate in school activities, which may be related to psychological factors or experiences within the school environment. This study aims to describe the phenomenon of school refusal among third-grade elementary school students by identifying the contributing factors as well as the educational responses provided by parents and teachers. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. The research subject was a third-grade elementary school student exhibiting school refusal behavior, with data sources including the student, parents, and teachers. Data were collected through observation and interviews, then analyzed descriptively through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results indicate that the phenomenon of school refusal in the subject was characterized by a reluctance to go to school, behavior inappropriate for the learning environment, and difficulty controlling emotions while at school. The primary contributing factors included negative experiences in the school environment and separation anxiety from parents. These conditions were also reflected in the subject's need to be accompanied and waited on by his mother during classroom instruction. The educational response involved parental and teacher support and involvement to provide a sense of security and support to the subject during the learning process. These findings indicate that addressing school refusal in elementary school students requires a collaborative, step-by-step educational response focused on the students' psychological needs and comfort within the school environment.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Education is a process designed to develop students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and potential so that they can thrive in life. Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a vital role in providing a learning environment that is safe, supportive, and tailored to children's developmental needs. At the elementary school level, a conducive learning environment becomes increasingly important because students are in a developmental phase characterized by the growth of cognitive, social, emotional, and moral abilities. Therefore, educational success is determined not only by the process of delivering instructional content but also by the ability of schools and families to address various conditions that may hinder student engagement in education.

Elementary school students may face various barriers to their education. These barriers can stem from both internal and external factors, including psychological conditions, learning experiences, family, social relationships, and the school environment (Aflahah et al., 2021; Utami, 2019). One phenomenon that warrants attention is school refusal, a condition in which students experience difficulty attending or remaining in school activities due to emotional distress or specific psychological factors. Kearney (2004) explains that school refusal refers to the behavior of children or adolescents who have difficulty attending or remaining at school. Thus, school refusal

cannot be understood merely as student absenteeism but must be viewed in light of the reasons, experiences, and emotional conditions underlying this behavior.

School refusal must be distinguished from truancy. Truancy generally involves unauthorized absence from school and tends to occur without the parents' knowledge or consent, whereas school refusal may be related to anxiety, fear, emotional distress, or a desire to avoid specific situations at school (Kearney, 2008). Manifestations of school refusal can include reluctance to go to school, tardiness, absences at specific times, difficulty staying in school, physical complaints, or emotional responses when students face school-related situations. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be understood solely based on the frequency of absences but requires a comprehensive examination of the student's context and experiences.

The phenomenon of school refusal among elementary school students has implications for the continuity of the educational process. When students repeatedly struggle to attend school or participate in learning, their opportunities to interact with teachers and peers, gain learning experiences, and develop social and emotional skills may be disrupted. At the elementary school age, this condition may also be related to a child's need for a sense of security, attachment to parents, and ability to adapt to the school environment. Therefore, understanding the factors underlying school refusal is crucial so that the response provided is not solely focused on student attendance requirements but also takes into account the child's psychological needs and environmental circumstances.

The factors contributing to school refusal are complex and may involve interactions between individual, family, and school factors. Kearney (2008) categorized the functions of school refusal behavior as, among others, avoiding school stimuli or situations that cause stress, avoiding unpleasant social or evaluative situations, seeking attention from others, and obtaining positive reinforcement from activities outside of school. This perspective suggests that school refusal cannot be explained by a single causal factor. Negative experiences at school, separation anxiety from parents, social relationships, parenting styles, and the environment's response to the student's behavior can all be part of the dynamics of this phenomenon.

Although research on school refusal has expanded, studies that specifically explore this phenomenon among elementary school students through the students' direct experiences as well as the perspectives of parents and teachers remain important. Case studies are needed to gain a deeper understanding of how school refusal arises, the factors underlying it, and how the educational environment responds to this condition. This approach allows the phenomenon to be understood within the context of students' real lives, rather than solely based on indicators of school absenteeism. In the context of elementary education, this understanding is crucial because the responses of teachers and parents can influence students' sense of security, engagement, and ability to resume learning.

Given these circumstances, this study focuses on the phenomenon of school refusal experienced by third-grade elementary school students. The study aims to describe the forms or symptoms of school refusal, identify the underlying factors, and analyze the

educational responses provided by parents and teachers to this situation. It is hoped that this study will provide a contextual overview of school refusal among elementary school students and serve as a basis for teachers and parents to develop educational responses that are more supportive, collaborative, and tailored to students' needs.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This section of the methods must explain the research methods used, including the location, timing of the research, and how the procedures were carried out. The tools, materials, media, or research instruments must be explained clearly. If necessary and important, there is an attachment regarding the outline of the instruments or excerpts of the materials used merely to provide examples for the readers. If there are statistical formulas used as part of the research method, it is advisable not to write down formulas that are already commonly used. For example, specific provisions set by the researchers for the purpose of collecting and analyzing research data can be explained in this methods section. Writers are advised to provide references for the methods used.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of school refusal in grade III elementary school students. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on the behavior, experience, emotional state, and social context of the subject in natural situations. The case study design was used to examine one case of school refusal by paying attention to the relationship between the student's condition, experiences in the school environment and family, and the educational response provided by the people around him. The research was carried out for two weeks in one of the elementary schools in Wonogiri Regency.

Subject and Data Source

The main subject of the study was a grade III elementary school male student aged 8 years and 1 month who showed school refusal characteristics. The subjects were chosen purposively based on the consideration that students had difficulty participating in school activities independently and required the presence of their mothers during the learning process. Subjects tended not to attend school when their mothers could not accompany them. These conditions became the basis for examining the form of behavior, background factors, and educational responses to the school refusal phenomenon experienced by the subjects.

Supporting data sources include the subject's mother, class teacher, and classmates who know the subject's condition in the school environment. The use of multiple data sources is intended to obtain more comprehensive information and allow triangulation. The identities of the subject and informant need to be disguised in the research report to maintain confidentiality.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The researcher acts as the main instrument. Data was collected through observation and semi-structured interviews. Supporting instruments in the form of observation

guidelines and interview guidelines were prepared based on three research focuses, namely the phenomenon of school refusal, causative factors, and educational responses.

Observations were carried out directly in the school environment, especially during arrival, learning activities, interactions with teachers and peers, as well as situations when mothers were or were not around the subjects. Observations were directed to identify behaviors that indicate school refusal, students' emotional responses, involvement in learning, patterns of social interaction, and teacher-parent responses. The researcher recorded relevant behaviors and situations systematically.

The observation guidelines include three focuses. First, symptoms of school refusal, such as reluctance to come to school, difficulty in learning, dependence on parental attendance, emotional responses, and avoidance of school activities. Second, causative factors, such as students' experiences at school, relationships with teachers and peers, situations that cause discomfort, and responses when separated from parents. Third, educational responses, such as parental assistance, teachers' actions, strategies to provide a sense of security, and efforts to help students follow learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the subject, the subject's mother, the teacher's classmate, and relevant classmates. The interview with the subject was directed to explore their experiences and feelings while at school, the reasons for their reluctance to go to school, experiences that were considered unpleasant, and feelings when parting with their mother. The interview with the mother explored students' behavior before leaving for school, student experiences, mentoring patterns, and behavior changes. Interviews with teachers explored students' behavior during learning, interactions with teachers and friends, conditions when mothers were not at school, and mentoring strategies. Information from classmates was used as supporting data regarding social interactions and subjects' behavior in the school environment.

Table 1. Research Observation Focus

Focus	Observed Indicators
Symptoms of school refusal	Reluctance to come to school, difficulty in learning, dependence on mothers, emotional responses, and avoidance of school activities.
Causative factors	Responses to the school environment, negative experiences, relationships with teachers and peers, and anxiety when separated from parents.
Educational response	Mother's assistance, teacher response, peer support, strategies to create a sense of security, and efforts to help students follow learning.

Table 2. Research Interview Focus

Informants	Focus Questions
Students	Experiences at school, feelings when at school, reasons for not wanting to go to school, unpleasant experiences, and feelings when parting with mothers.
Mother	Behavior before leaving school, students' experiences at school, reasons why students need assistance, and the form of support provided.
Classroom teacher	Student behavior during learning, interaction with friends and teachers, conditions when mothers do not accompany, and mentoring strategies.
Classmates	Interaction with the subject, the subject's behavior when participating in learning, and the experience of interacting with the subject.

Data Validity

The validity of the data was checked through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from students, mothers, class teachers, and classmates to see the consistency of information regarding school refusal symptoms, causative factors, and educational responses. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of observations and interviews. The researcher also double-checked observation and interview records so that the interpretations made remained in accordance with the field data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data is analyzed qualitatively through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. In the reduction stage, researchers select, classify, and organize data based on research focus. Data are categorized into three main themes, namely (1) forms or symptoms of school refusal, (2) factors that cause school refusal, and (3) educational response to the subject's condition.

At the data presentation stage, the results of observations and interviews were arranged in narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to show the relationship between the subject's behavior, background factors, and the response of the educational environment. Data from each informant were compared to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in information. The researcher then interpreted the patterns found by linking them to the concept and results of previous research on school refusal.

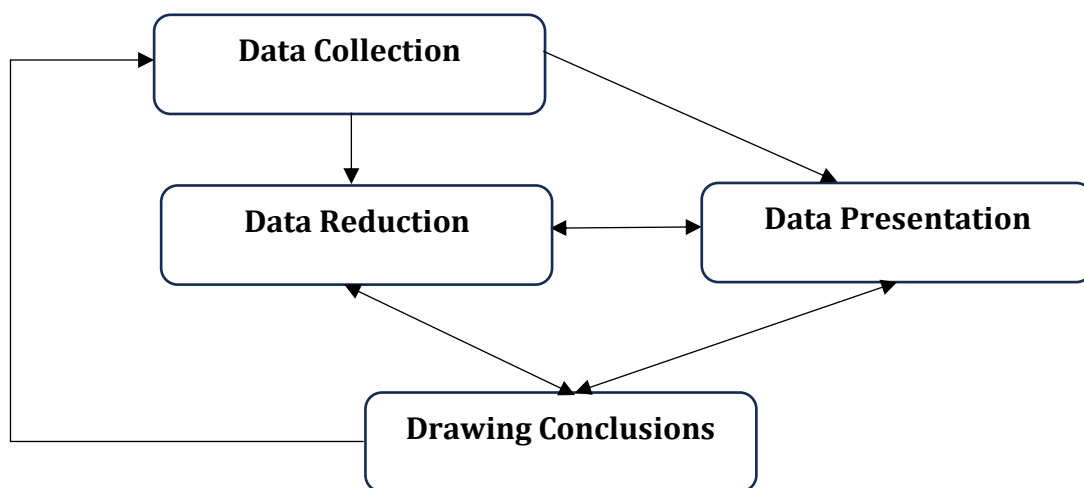
At the conclusion drawing stage, conclusions are drawn based on the pattern of findings that have been examined through triangulation of sources and techniques. The analysis is carried out repeatedly so that the researcher can return to the field data if information that requires clarification or deepening is found.

Research Procedure

Research is carried out through the preparation stage, data collection, data analysis, and report preparation. In the preparation stage, the researcher determines the focus of the research, identifies the subject according to the characteristics of the case, prepares observation and interview guidelines, and coordinates with the school and parents. Data collection is carried out through direct observation and interviews with the subject and supporting informants.

The data obtained were then organized, categorized, and analyzed based on the research theme. The researcher triangulated before compiling the final interpretation. The research report was prepared in the form of a case description that contained the phenomenon of school refusal, causative factors, and educational responses from the school and family environment.

Figure 1. Research Stages



C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Symptoms of School Refusal in Subjects

Observation and interview findings showed that subjects showed behavior consistent with difficulties in participating in school activities independently. The subjects were grade III elementary school students who were waited for by their mothers in class during learning. School information also showed that the subjects did not attend school several times and their learning outcomes were below the class average. The data illustrates that the problems experienced by the subjects are not only related to attendance, but also related to their involvement and independence in learning.

The subject's behavior differs according to the context of the activity. Before the lesson begins and during the break, the subject can play with his friends without constantly looking for the mother. However, when the learning begins, the subject runs out of the classroom to look for the mother and tries to get her back in. When the mother leaves the class, the subject goes back to look for her. This pattern shows that the subject's difficulties are more pronounced when he has to be in class and participate in learning activities without being in direct proximity to the mother, rather than when the whole school situation is taking place.

During learning, subjects seemed to pay little attention to the teacher's explanations, had not prepared study materials independently, and often asked the mother to help them complete the assignment. When they had difficulties, the subjects whined to the mother, refused to read in front of the class, or did not continue the assignment independently. The mother then prepared a book, helped answer the questions, and on several occasions completed the assignment when the subject was not willing to do it.

These findings suggest that dependence on the mother arises along with difficulty dealing with academic demands in the classroom.

This behavior also did not appear with the same intensity in all school activities. When participating in PJOK practice in the field, subjects seemed more comfortable being some distance from their mothers and were willing to do activities with friends. Conversely, when PJOK learning took place in the classroom, subjects returned to seek out their mothers and asked for help in doing assignments. Subjects also did not participate in flag ceremonies and gymnastics together and stayed away from the location of the activity. These differences in responses suggest that the subjects' involvement was influenced by the type of activity and the situation they faced.

The interview with the teacher corroborated the results of these observations. The teacher said that the subject tended to ask the mother when he could not answer the question or had difficulty in the task. The teacher also explained that the subject could be left before the lesson started, during a break, or when the teacher was not in class, but wanted the mother to remain in the class during the lesson. Meanwhile, the mother said that the subject refused to leave if he was not dropped off and waited, and had to go home alone when he was not waited. The mother even had to leave work to accompany the subject at school.

Based on the overall data, the main symptoms in this case can be summarized into three patterns: difficulty attending or surviving school without the mother's assistance; avoidant behavior or asking for help when facing learning demands; and emotional responses in the form of whining and anxiety when the mother is not around. These three patterns are interrelated, but should not be treated as a clinical diagnosis. The data of this study is a picture of one case based on observations and informant statements.

Factors Related to School Refusal

Data analysis showed two factors related to school refusal behavior in subjects, namely unpleasant experiences in school activities and difficulties in separating from mothers. The two factors appeared to be related: experiences of difficulties or fear during learning increased the subjects' need to be close to their mothers, while the presence of mothers made subjects remain willing to be at school without having to face the situation independently.

The first factor is an unpleasant experience in learning. According to the mother's statement, the behavior of asking for assistance began to stand out when the subject was in grade I and felt afraid when he was unable to complete the Religious Education assignment. The mother said that the subject was worried about being scolded by the teacher if the answer was wrong. At first, the subject asked the mother to wait for the subject, then the need for assistance extended to other subjects, especially when the task was considered difficult. The mother also reported another experience when the subject was reluctant to participate in the recitation activity after being reprimanded for using the uniform. This information indicates that the situation perceived as failure, reprimand, or difficult demands may be related to the subject's increased reluctance to engage in activities.

Observations show that academic difficulties are still part of the situations that subjects avoid. Subjects appear to spell when reading, refuse to read in front of class, and rely on mother's help in completing assignments. Thus, unpleasant experiences

cannot be separated from the demands of learning that the subjects have not been able to face independently. However, the available data are not enough to conclude that academic ability is the only cause. These findings are more appropriately understood as a possible relationship between learning difficulties, fear of making mistakes, and avoidance behaviors that need to be further studied.

The second factor is the difficulty of separating from the mother during the learning process. The mother becomes the figure that makes the subject willing to enter and stay in the classroom. When the mother tries to leave the room, the subject immediately goes out to look for her and asks the mother to come back. The subject also refuses to leave if the mother cannot drop off and wait. On the other hand, when playing with friends or practicing sports in the field, the subject is relatively able to do activities without direct proximity to the mother. This pattern shows that the need for the mother's presence is especially strong in the context of formal learning and situations that are felt challenging.

The teacher's information showed that the school had tried to persuade and encourage the subjects to be more independent. This effort was followed for a few days when the subjects were willing to go to school without waiting, but the change did not last long. In the study period, the teacher left the mother in the classroom because she was worried that the subjects would not want to participate in the learning if the mother was asked to leave the class. This response can be understood as a short-term effort to keep the subjects present, but the available data have not shown that the mentoring pattern helps build independence in the long term. At the same time, the mother's assistance in preparing equipment and doing tasks has the potential to reduce the subject's chances of practicing to face the demands of learning gradually.

The findings are in line with the literature that places anxiety—including separation anxiety and school-related anxiety—as factors often associated with school refusal (Tekin & Aydın, 2022). The systematic review also emphasizes that school attendance difficulties need to be understood ecologically, taking into account the interaction of individual, learning, family, peers, and school environment factors, not just the characteristics of the child (Leduc et al., 2024). This literature helps place the case within a broader framework, but does not directly prove the causes of the subject's behavior; the interpretation of the case remains based on observational and interview data.

Synthesis of Findings and Educational Implications

This case shows that school refusal is not always shown through total refusal to come to school. In the subject, difficulties also appear in the form of dependence on the presence of mothers, leaving the classroom to look for mothers, avoiding certain activities, and asking mothers to take over assignments when facing difficulties. Thus, observation of attendance alone is not enough to understand the problem. It is also necessary to pay attention to whether students are able to enter the classroom, persevere in learning, interact with teachers, and do assignments according to their abilities.

The findings also show that the subjects' behavior is contextual. Subjects can interact with friends at certain times and are more independent when participating in sports activities in the field, but show anxiety and a stronger dependence on classroom learning. This difference is important for educators because it shows a situation that is relatively easier for the subject to face and can be a starting point for understanding their support

needs. However, this study did not test an intervention so it cannot state that certain strategies have been effective in overcoming school refusal.

In practical terms, the case data suggest the need for consistent communication between families and schools to understand trigger situations, emotional responses, and students' learning needs. Educational support can be considered through adjustment of task demands, strengthening student efforts, gradual habituation of independence, and coordination of teachers and parents. These steps are suggested implications based on findings, not actions that have been proven to be performed or successful in this study. If anxiety and rejection persist and interfere with learning function, schools and families may consider consulting with competent professionals.

As a case study of one student, the results of this study are not intended to be generalized to all elementary school students who experience school refusal. Its contribution lies in a detailed picture of how perceived unpleasant learning experiences and the need for closeness to mothers can arise simultaneously in a single school context. Follow-up research can involve more cases, delve deeper into students' perspectives, and observe behavioral developments over time to understand the triggers and factors that maintain school attendance difficulties.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, school refusal among the study participants manifested in three main patterns: refusal to attend school without their mother's accompaniment; avoidance behavior or displaying unexpected responses when faced with academic demands; and difficulty managing emotional responses while at school. This study identified two factors associated with this condition: unpleasant experiences during learning activities and anxiety when separated from the mother. Both factors appear to be related to the subject's need for the mother's presence, particularly when facing academic difficulties and classroom learning situations. These findings suggest that school refusal must be understood by considering the interrelationship between learning experiences, students' emotional states, and family support. Given that this study focused on a single case, the results cannot be generalized to all elementary school students; however, they can serve as a basis for teachers and parents to recognize and understand school refusal behavior in children.

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