

**EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND SELF-ESTEEM AS
DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOUR**

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Abstract

The menace of out of-school children in Nigeria is a scary development that continues get worse every day. While focus has been placed on children denied access to education as a result of socio-economic hinderances, there are young individuals that can afford school but are psychologically handicapped from attending school because of inexplicable state of fear, panic and anxiety. This correlation study was conceived to ascertain the socio-emotional determinants of school refusal behaviour (SRB) among in-school adolescents in Aguata Education Zone, Anambra State. Two research questions and one hypothesis were formulated to guide this study. The population comprised all 8351 SS1 students enrolled in the 2023/2024 academic session in the 52 public secondary schools in the 6 LGAs in Aguata Education Zone. The Multistage sampling technique was used to select a sample of 600 students. Adapted versions of the Emotional Regulations Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – Revised were used to collect data for the study. Data collected were analysed using PPMC and multiple regression. Findings revealed a significant association between emotional regulation, self-esteem and school refusal behaviour. it was recommended among others that evidence-based social-emotional learning programmes should be implemented in schools to help young learners acquire healthy coping strategies.

Keywords: Emotional Regulation, Self-Esteem, School Refusal Behaviour

Introduction

Nigeria is presently bedeviled with myriads of problems that range from economic hardship and political uncertainty to security challenges and living cost crises. In addition to this plethora of concerns is a pervasive out-of-school problem that keeps getting worse every day. In fact, recent reports by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, UNICEF (2019), one of every five of the world's out-of-school child is in Nigeria. This implies that over 10.5 million of Nigerian kids between 5 and 14 years are not in school. This makes for a gruesome reading, considering the myriads of developmental problems that have bedeviled the country. From poverty to unemployment, illiteracy and high maternal mortality, one could be forgiven to assume that a future without education appears bleak for the erstwhile robust West African economic power horse. This is because of the pivotal role played by education in enhancing opportunities and development for the people (Nwakego & Mohammed, 2024). Out of school problem in Nigeria have been attributed to several factors including poverty (UNICEF, 2019); lack of access to quality education (World Bank, 2020); early marriage and pregnancy (UNFRA, 2016), and family factors (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2018). It is important to note that while factors beyond a child's control could play a significant part in denying access to school, there are learners that may willingly stay out of school because of their personal inclinations and possibly acquired characteristics. This avoidant disposition towards school is referred to as school refusal behaviour.

School refusal behaviour is characterized by reluctance or refusal to attend school. It refers to several behaviours that typify school avoidance and may range from poor attendance, inability to remain in class and failure to meet age-appropriate school engagement milestones. According to Olusegun (2015:241), school refusal behaviour is a "psychosocial problem for students characterized by severe emotional distress and anxiety at the prospect of attending school which

leads to difficulties attending school”. This implies that school refusal behaviour is a complex condition that is distinct from mere absence from school as it is more pervasive and often appears as a comorbidity of more debilitating psychological problems.

In fact, school refusal behaviour is considered a psychological and behavioural disorder as it involves an individual’s perception of phenomena and appraisal of events. Nursalim *et al.* (2018) and Nwosu et al., (2022), were of the opinion that school refusal behaviour is typical of severe separation anxiety and hallucinations that affects a child’s relationship with teachers, peers and significant others. Suffice it to say that children with SRB perceive their teachers as ghosts, may do anything to avoid seeing them and run back to their parents whom they have a morbid fear of being separated from. In addition, Kesrney (2007) made a case for understanding the sub-types of SRB to better understand etiology, risk and protective factors. All SRB sub-types indicate school non-attendance but slightly differ based on triggers. While some children with SRB exhibit anxiety and fear for social elements they may encounter in school another sub-type is characterized by test anxiety and other forms of teacher evaluations (Nursalim *et al.*, 2018; Kearney, 2007).

In most cases, the terms truancy, absenteeism and school refusal behaviour are wrongly misapplied in describing school non-attendance among young learners. However, while school refusal is typical of a pervasive situation that involves staying home, perhaps with the consent of the parents’ truancy apply in cases where deviance is often the motivating factor as parents, teachers and significant others do not consent to this behaviour and may not even know the whereabouts of the young individual. Absenteeism, on the other hand is a broader and more ambiguous term that emphasizes the learner’s non-attendance. In drawing this distinction, it has to be pointed out that school refusal behaviour, absenteeism and truancy may be interconnected in outcome, but differ in the

source of the non-attendance behaviour. Kearney (2008) delimited SRB to reluctance or refusal to attend school as a result emotional distress or anxiety, Henry (2007) saw truancy as a form of non-attendance that is linked with delinquency, while Chang and Romeo (2008) described absenteeism as all forms of absence that could be authorized or unauthorized.

Interestingly, despite these differences, common underlying factors contribute to these phenomena, including emotional distress, poor academic performance, family and social influences (Ezemenaka *et al.*, 2018; Gottfried, 2015; Epstein & Sheldon 2016). This brings to fore the importance of looking at socio-emotional factors that could explain the development of school refusal behaviour in young learners. This is important, bearing in mind that the child's understanding of his own feelings and perception of how people around him regard him could be veritable factors that could predispose the child to SRB. In fact, in studies related to SRB and academic outcomes, several socio-emotional variables have been looked at, however much more focus have been placed on mental health conditions and socio-demographic variables with little focus on self-esteem and the child's emotional regulation. These socio-emotional variables will form the focus of this study.

Emotional regulation refers to an individual's ability to manage their emotions. This encompasses one's ability perceive, evaluate, and modify emotional responses, which is critical for psychological well-being and adaptive functioning in daily life. Considering that school refusal behaviour possibly stems from maladaptive approaches to handle negative emotions, Mc Shane and Wooley (2022) suggested that children who are able to restrain their feelings and manage their emotions better are less prone to avoidant behaviours as they cope better with wholesome techniques that bode well for their mental well-being. Emotional regulation plays a vital role in young learners' academic adjustment and engagement as it helps them manage academic stress and academic pressure.

Thus, a learners' deficiency, in respect to acceptance emotional regulation threshold is a risk factor for anxiety and other mood related problems and could culminate in school avoidant behaviour like SRB (Burges *et al.*, 2020; Kaplan *et al.*, 2020).

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. It stems from what one feels about how other people around him perceive the said individual. Self-esteem is seen as a fundamental core of young learner's identity as it shapes their feelings of belongingness and may determine how they acclimatize to their psychosocial environment to their psychosocial environment (Burke *et al.*, 2019). Several studies have shown that adolescents' self-esteem predict several mental and academic outcomes. Orth *et al.* (2012) found that young learners that posses healthy self-esteem tend to achieve better in school and have better mental health outcomes. Hung (2016) posited that self-esteem is positively associated with good grades enhanced academic engagement and academic self-efficacy, while other studies have explicitly provided links between low self-esteem among adolescent learners and depression (Kuyten *et al.*, 2020; Neff *et al.*, 2019), and anxiety symptoms (Orth *et al.*, 2018; Madigan *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, a strong case is made that fluctuations in self-esteem could have a transitive relationship with SRB.

Statement of the problem

With focus of several studies on school refusal behaviour centred on risk factors associated with mental health (depression, anxiety and conduct disorder), little has been done to explore the possible associations between less pervasive behaviours that stem from a learners social and emotional milieu. In-school adolescents belong to an age range struggling to form a stable sense of identify and gaining control over their emotions. These could affect how they perceive themselves and how they gauge people's opinions of themselves. This study sought to plug this gap by exploring the possible socio-emotional determinants

of school refusal behaviour. Thus, the researchers focused on ascertaining the relationship among emotional regulation, self-esteem and school refusal behaviour among in-school adolescents in Aguata Education Zone, Anambra State.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between emotional regulation and school refusal behaviour of public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone.
2. What is the relationship between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour of public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone.

Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no joint predictive influence of emotional regulation and self-esteem on school refusal behaviour of Public Secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone.

Method

The study adopted a correlational research design as the study sought to examine the direction and intensity of relationship that exists between the variables of the study. The population for the study consists of 8351 SS1 students enrolled in the 52 public secondary schools in Aguata Education Zone, Anambra State during the 2023/2024 academic session. The multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting 600 students for this study. At the first stage, Aguata Education Zone was split into six (6) strata, representing the local government Areas in this Education Zone. From each LGA, five (5) public schools were randomly selected. A total of 30 secondary schools were selected via balloting. From each of these schools, 20 students with relatively poor school attendance record were selected purposively for the study.

The instruments for data collection were adapted versions of Emotional Regulation Questionnaire developed by Gross and John (2003) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale developed by Rosenberg (1965). To measure school Refusal

Behaviour, the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (Child version) by Kearney (2002) was used. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale consists of 10 items that are scored on a 4-point Likert Scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. For items 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 the weight of the scores are SA(3); A(2); D(1), and SD(0), while items 3, 5, 8, 9 and 10 were scored, Strongly Agree (0); Agree (1); Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (3). The Emotional Regulation Questionnaire consists of 10 items which were scored on a 7-point Likert Scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised version consists of 24 items scored on a 5-point Likert Scale. The weight are distributed thus; Never(0); Rarely(1), Occasionally(2), Most times(3) and Always (4).

The adapted instruments were validated by experts' psychometricians from the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Reliability of the scales was computed based on scores from 70 SS1 students from private secondary schools in Ogidi Education zone. The Cronbach Alpha technique yielded .89; .92; and .90 coefficients for the ERQ, RSES, and SRAS-R, respectively. 600 questionnaires were distributed and collected by the researchers who worked as a team. Data collected were analysed using SPSS version 25. Research questions were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation, while the hypothesis was tested using Multiple regression.

Results

Research Question One: What is the relationship between emotional regulation and school refusal behaviour of secondary school students?

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Showing the Relationship between Emotional Regulation and School Refusal Behaviour of Secondary School Students.

	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Sig. Value
Emotional Regulation – School Refusal Behaviour	-.31**	.10	.03	.001

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results in Table 1 revealed that the correlation coefficient between emotional regulation and school refusal behaviour is -0.31. this indicates a negative relationship between emotional regulation and school refusal behaviour of secondary school students. This implies that when a student lacks the ability to regulate emotion the tendency to exhibit school refusal behaviour is high and vice versa.

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour among secondary school students?

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Showing the Relationship between Self-Esteem and School Refusal Behaviour of Secondary School Students.

	R-value	R²	Adjusted R²	Sig. Value
Self-Esteem – School Refusal Behaviour	.29	.08	.01	.01

Result from Table 2 revealed that the correlation coefficient between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour is 0.291 which implies that there is a positive but weak relationship between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour of secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone.

Hypothesis: there is no predictive influence of emotional regulation and self-esteem on school refusal behaviour of secondary school students in public schools in Aguata Education Zone.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Coefficients Result

Regression Model Summary^b						
Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error	F-value	N
1	.479 ^a	.23	.21	.13	15.29	250

a. Predictors: (Constant), ER, SE

b. Dependent Variable: SRB

Model		Unstandardized		Standardized		t	Sig.	Remark
		B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	4.21	.63			6.69	.001	
	ER	-.35	.09	-.31		-3.89	.001	Significant
	SE	.29	.10	.29		2.91	.004	Significant

Dependent Variable: School Refusal Behaviour (SRB).

Emotional Regulation (ER) and Self-Esteem (SE).

The above table revealed that the overall regression correlation R value is 0.479 which implies that a moderate relationship exists between the independent variables (Emotional regulation and Self-Esteem) and the dependent variable; school refusal behaviour. The R-squared coefficient of determination of goodness of fit of the regression model, R^2 value of 0.23 shows that the independent variables jointly were able to explain 23% of the variables in the dependent variables. Furthermore, the adjusted R^2 value of 0.21 implied that even though an adjustment has been made in the explanatory variables, the independent variables still were able to account for about for about 21% changes in the dependent variables. Based on the results on tables 3, the independent variables significantly predict the dependent variables. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected as emotional regulation and self-esteem significantly predict school refusal behaviour among public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone.

Discussion of Findings

The answer to Research Question One indicated that there is a negative relationship between emotional regulation and school refusal behaviour among public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone. This implies that when emotional regulation is low or absent, the tendency to exhibit school refusal behaviour is high. This is in line with the findings of Nwosu *et al.* (2022) that identified profiles of school refusal behaviour based on the intensity of the

behaviour and associating higher profiles of SRB to students with reduced emotional support and high anxiety. In addition, the findings are also in agreement with that of Balakrishman and Andi (2019) that noted significant association between students' dissatisfaction towards the school climate and school refusal behaviour. students that struggle to cope with the school psychological and social environment were observed to have SRB tendencies.

The answer to the second research question indicated that there is a weak relationship between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour of public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone. This augurs well with the findings of Kaplan *et al.* (2020) that found low self-esteem to be associated with school refusal behaviour among in-school adolescents. Kaplan *et al.* (2020) also found a relationship between anxiety and school refusal behaviour. Ezemenaka *et al.* (2016) also found that a negative relationship exists between self-esteem and school refusal behaviour as students with low self-esteem were predisposed to exhibiting SRBs. Conversely, Huang *et al.* (2019) refuted this finding as no significant relationship was found between self-esteem and SRB, in their study. Huang *et al.* (2019), however identifies anxiety and depression as stronger indicators of school refusal behaviour.

Results from the hypothesis test indicated a significant joint predictive influence of emotional regulation and self-esteem on school refusal behaviour of public secondary school students. The findings of this study corroborates with studies of Kaufmann and Houtz (2021) that found that poor emotional regulation and lower self-esteem significantly predicted school refusal behaviour among adolescents. The authors reported that self-esteem acted as a mediator between emotional regulation and school refusal, suggesting that enhancing emotional regulation could improve self-esteem and subsequently reduce school refusal rates. Tzeng and Cheng (2022) also concurred with the findings of the study, identifying both emotional regulation and self-esteem had significant joint

predictive effects on school refusal behaviour over time. On the contrary, Johnson and Jones (2020) argued that while emotional regulation and self-esteem are considered important factors, it is a simplistic to consider them predictors of school refusal behaviour.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that secondary school students have individual peculiarities that may shape their general disposition towards school and school-related tasks. This study found that a significant association exists among emotional regulation, self-esteem and school refusal behaviour of public secondary school students in Aguata Education Zone, Anambra State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. School should implement evidence-based socio-emotional learning programmes to enhance self-esteem, emotional regulation and other coping skills required to cope in school.
2. School should provide individualized support and counselling for students with low self-esteem and anxiety.
3. School management should engage parents in socio-emotional learning, SEL workshops to promote positive parenting practices
4. There is need for broad community-based collaborations that involves mental health professionals to provide accessible counselling services.
5. Government can play a role by providing grants for training educators on global best practices in identifying risk and protective factors for persons with school refusal tendencies

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