Teachers' Perceptions on Classroom Determinants of School Refusal Behaviour among Lower Primary Learners in Nandi East District

A.K Magut□, C.K. Mumiukha and G. K. Ngeno

Department of Psychology, Counseling and Educational Foundation, Egerton University, PO Box 536 Njoro

Department of psychology, Moi University, PO Box 3900 Eldoret

Abstract

Many children are refusing to attend school or have problems remaining in the classes for an entire day. Refusal is associated with classroom climate factors and if not managed well they lead to multiple socio-economic risks spanning into adulthood. This study sought teachers' views on classroom determinants of school refusal behaviour among lower primary schools in Nandi East district with emphasis on class dynamics. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design in which variables were studied as they are in the field without manipulation. The accessible population consisted of all the 282 public lower primary class teachers in the district. The final sample size of 152 was determined by employing Stein's method. Stratified and simple random sampling methods were used to get the participants. Structured and semi structured survey questionnaire were used to collect data from class teachers. Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was used to determine the reliability of research questions; which established a reliability coefficient of .872. Descriptive statistics used to analyze quantitative data were percentages and frequencies. Statistical Packages of Social Science (SPSS) programme version 17 aided in analyses. The findings were summarized and presented in tables and figures. The study established that teachers consider the following dynamics as triggers of refusal: getting poor marks which lead to frustrations, learners inability to bring out their problems well, teachers forcing weak learners to repeat classes and learners getting demotivated because achievement and performance are not praised or rewarded. The study recommends the in -servicing of education stakeholders on nature of school refusal, improving provision of instructional materials to learners with special needs and improving school inspection.

Keywords: class dynamics, school refusal behaviour, classroom climate, The Functional Motivational Model

Introduction

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2001), reports that schools sometimes experiences child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or problems remaining in the classes for an entire day. Some children may worry about not understanding the work or about failing some subjects and others may think that their teachers don't like them. Others may worry about being unable to make friends or being bullied and therefore are worried on their safety. This make children so scared and worried that they refuse to attend school for weeks or even months or attend under duress. School refusal often makes school stakeholders frustrated and angry because they may easily think that their child is pretending to be sick (Weaver, 1994). Anger makes the child's fears and anxieties worse as they also begin to worry about upsetting their parents/teachers and about going to school.

Study by Spillane and Wheatley (2001), indicate a strong link exist between classroom climate and School Refusal Behavior (SRB). The study show that unfriendly classroom climate make learners develop aversion over such climate which motivates them to avoid future attendance. Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003) found that students rarely identified home factors as the cause of absenteeism, instead, school factors featured highly in their responses as reason for being absent from school. They found that children may fail to attend school for variety of reason like getting anxious over a particular teacher or classroom features among others. Other researchers conquer, as according to Blurn (2003), chronic absentees report low satisfaction with school and low relationship satisfaction with school personnel compared to the regular school attendees. He further reports that learners skip classes because they experience the education as sterile or disrespectful of students' learning preferences.

Identification and resolutions of problematic class-related stimuli that precipitate non attendance is therefore a very important step in the drive to achieving a high school attendance which will finally actualize the dream of having a educated population. Dube (2006) emphasizes the need for a classroom environment that nurtures a healthy development of learners and a high completion rates. This is because children spend a large portion of their time there and may provide an opportunity to nature lives that will be beneficial during lifetime of an individual. Classroom dynamics describe the process through which children learn and interact throughout learning time. It includes all interactions with teachers, materials and all other curriculum activities. Interactions include relationship between a teacher and learners, the kind of teacher instructions, learners activities in a lesson, teacher-pupil rapport, pupil-teacher level of engagement, relationship among learners, the degree of

participation, relationship among learners, the degree of participation by learner in instructional activities, and quality of classroom assessment and adjustment made to accommodate children's needs (NCES, 1997).

Campbell (2010) report that studies on the school tone and classroom climate as contextual variables for school refusal has not been done. Many educationists shy away from studying refusal because of the difficulties of determining from many wide ranges of reasons a true cause of absenteeism. For a long time, there has not been widely accepted approach in regard to diagnosis of refusal by educationist. The job has often been left to other professionals like psychiatric doctors who by virtue of their training are able to undertake studies and treatment of refusal.
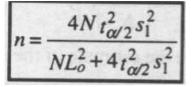
While there is psychological literature on the causes of school refusal within the child, there has been little educational literature on factors at school that might cause the problem. There has also been little research into the strategies that can be adopted by education managers to support pupils with SRB (School Refuser Organisation,2011). The study utilised the Functional Motivational Model of conceptualizing school refusal to identify and propose mitigation measures for learners with school refusal behaviour (Kearney, 2003). This framework is based on Kearney and Silverman's work (1996), which posits that children typically refuse school for one or more of the following functional conditions: to avoid school-related objects or situations that cause general distress such as anxiety, depression or physiological symptoms; to escape uncomfortable peer interactions and/or academic performance situations such as test-taking or oral presentations; to receive attention from significant others outside of school and to pursue tangible reinforcement outside of school.

Through seeking the teachers' perceptions, this study aimed to identify specific classroom based dynamics in the lower primary classes in Nandi East District which motivate refusal. This was in light of report that the issue of absenteeism is widespread with several classroom and school-based factors being cited as being responsible for high absences and drop-outs, and hence low completion rates among primary school pupils (Abagi and Odipo, 2005). This absence covers a range of behaviours, including school refusal. The same report cite factors within schools, for example, institutional configurations, processes and practices and schooling relations, as key influence of refusal and dropping out of school. Inspection reports and personal communication at the Ministry of Education in Nandi East indicate a high prevalence of absenteeism among learners in lower classes. An average of 3-5 learners are absent in a typical school day in these classes. Many children miss tests , become distressed and remain home, give excuses in order to miss school, feign sickness to remain home, and delay in coming to school with the hope that they will be allowed not to attend school. The reports further indicate that by the time cohorts of children entering class one together reaches class three, up to five percent of them would have exited school. If such a situation is left unaddressed it can lead to short term problems for children such as distress, academic decline, alienation from peers, family conflict, and financial and legal consequences. Some common long term problems include school dropout, delinquent behaviours, economic deprivation, social isolation, marital problems, and difficulty maintaining employment (UNESCO, 2005). Moreover, according to UNICEF (2010), high rates of student absenteeism are believed to affect regular attendees as well, because teachers must accommodate non-attendees in the same class.

Procedures and Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design describes the state of affairs as it exists (Heppner, Bruce & Kivlighan, 2009. Survey was used in this study because according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), it gathers data on a one-shot basis and hence is efficient.

The accessible population was made up of 282 teachers handling lower primary classes. The rationale is that these teachers teach all subjects and generally run all activities in their class including reporting and doing follow up on issues of absenteeism. Children in class one to three are ideally at age range of between 6-8 years. These are the years when children are adapting to a transition from a home to a school environment, which according to Wimmer, (2003), may bring about a variety of reactions from learners including refusing school.Out of the teacher population, the final sample size was determined by employing Stein's method as shown below (Nassiuma, 2000).

$$n = \frac{4N t_{\alpha/2}^2 s_1^2}{NL_o^2 + 4t_{\alpha/2}^2 s_1^2}$$

Where
- $s^2 1 = 6$
- $t^2\alpha/2 = 3.8416$
- $N = 282.$
- $L^2o = 0.25$

The final sample size was found to be 152.

The study employed stratified proportionate sampling method to ensure each zone ultimately has the same sampling fraction. Simple random sampling was then used used to get the actual participants from each of the five educational zones. This ensured the final sample reflected the relative numbers in the population as a whole. The teacher questionnaire was adapted and structured based on the recommendations of NCES, (1997) and Mishra (2010) who proposes some specific variables to use when studying classroom environments. This questionnaire was used to find out classroom dynamics features that contribute to school refusal behaviour, prevention and intervention services to address school refusal behaviour and challenges school face when working to reduce school refusal behaviour. To ensure content validity of the instruments, expertise of a psychometric expert and an educational psychologist was sought. Reliability of the instrument was determined through a pre test among 30 lower primary teachers. There was need to pre test the questionnaire to determine its reliability because it was adapted and contained additional items meant to make it fit the study area situation. Alpha coefficient was calculated using the variance of the total test score and the variance of the individual item scores. The SPSS computer software version 17.0 aided in working out this coefficient. The items achieved Cronbach's Alpha of .872. The participants were assured of confidentiality and encouraged of the need to answer all questions truthfully.

The qualitative and quantitative data generated through the questionnaires were analysed descriptively with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 17.0 version for windows. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the raw data from the questionnaires. The qualitative data was further organized by the researcher in such a way that a meaningful interpretation could be deduced from it at the analysis stage.

Results and Discussions

This study sought to identify perceptions of teachers on nature of classroom dynamics that contribute to school refusal behaviour among lower primary school learners in Nandi East District. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Teacher's rating of Classroom dynamics as a SRB trigger in Nandi East District

	Responses									
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
Statement	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Getting poor marks which lead to frustrations	41	27.0	91	59.9	2	1.5	18	11.7	0	0
Feeling out of place due to being a member of a minority group	22	14.6	44	29.2	20	13.1	47	30.7	19	12.4
Inadequate playtime and rest at school	17	10.9	62	40.9	21	13.9	40	26.3	12	8.0
Rigid attendance policies e.g. arrival time	34	22.6	51	33.6	21	13.9	38	24.8	8	5.1
Lack of child's 'voice' in decision making	27	17.5	36	23.4	27	17.5	41	27.7	21	13.9
Negative ethnicity within classroom	6	4.4	30	19.7	10	6.6	47	30.7	59	38.7
Teachers do not discourage dangerous/intimidating games that can hurt others physically or emotionally	10	6.6	19	12.4	16	10.2	63	41.6	44	29.2
Teachers are only close to some children (like those of their friends and relatives)	16	10.2	27	17.5	13	8.8	41	27.0	55	36.5
Teachers force weak learners to repeat classes	34	22.6	69	45.3	17	10.9	17	10.9	15	10.2
Learners are always fighting with each other in their classes	9	5.8	24	16.1	26	16.8	63	41.6	30	19.7
Learners are unable to bring out their problems well	41	27.0	82	54.0	16	10.2	4	2.9	9	5.8
Learners get demotivated because achievement and performance are not praised or rewarded	32	21.2	65	43.1	15	9.5	28	18.2	12	8.0
In many classrooms, learners are not trained on ways to control their feelings	22	14.6	51	33.6	37	24.1	33	21.9	9	5.8
Teachers are partial and treat girls and boys differently	11	7.3	20	13.1	33	21.9	61	40.1	27	17.5
Teachers fail to provide learners with adequate information about tasks, behaviour expectations and goals	4	2.9	47	30.7	16	10.2	61	40.1	24	16.1

The results in table 1 show that   (86.9%) of respondents felt that learners refused school because they get poor marks which lead to frustration. The statement that learners are unable to bring out their problems well was supported by 81% of the respondents. When the respondents were asked if teachers force weak learners to repeat class making some to refuse school, 67.9% of them agreed. It can also be seen from the table that 64.3% of respondents said learners get demotivated because achievement and performance was not praised or rewarded.

The main issue emerging from the data in Table 1 is that school staff emphasizes cognitive competence and passing of examination by learners at the expense of a balanced and child – centred interactions between teachers and learners. This is explained by the sizeable number of respondents citing academic issues like getting poor marks, class repetition and lack of recognition of achievement as being the main triggers of refusal among the learners. Educational demands and pressures (e.g. unidentified learning needs, learners wish to do better, fear of failure in class or tests, fear of examination, fear or dislike of a specific teacher or subject) according to Turner (2009) triggers school refusal. Emphasis on academic competence alone imposes chronic stress on children which results in some children hating school and staying away whenever they could. Teachers needed to understand that their job is not to just teach specific learning skills and knowledge, but to stimulate and expand the child's learning potential through medium like manipulation of things, play and music which young children find none threatening. Learners use such a media to acquire social-emotional skills in order to function successfully as part of a group, restrain their social impulses, obtain what they want in a socially acceptable way, cope with stress and have knowledge of self and others (Kariuki et al, 2007)

These findings are in agreement with those of Hunt, (2010) who indicates that significant drop outs in primary schools are as a result of children repeating grades and children having low achievement levels. According National Association of School Psychologist (NASP) (2008), children perceptions indicate that children consider repetition as one of the most stressful life events and avoid school when forced to do so. NASP further indicate that learners who were made to repeat a class are 5–11 times more likely to drop out of school. The probability is even higher for students who are retained more than once. NASP discourage this practice as they report that initial academic improvements may occur during the year the student is retained, but that achievement gains decline within 2–3 years of retention. This means that over time, children who are made to repeat either do not show higher achievement, or sometimes show lower achievement than similar groups of children who were not retained.

Learners who are underachieving and are made to repeat in Nandi East actually require special education services in order to improve; otherwise they may despair, refuse school and ultimately drop out. Without specific interventions, most repeaters do not catch up. NASP recommend that repetition, where it is necessary, should be accompanied by a focused individual assessment of a child's educational needs after which the needs should be addressed consistently.

Over 80% of the respondents also observed that school refusal occur because learners are unable to bring out their problems well, a situation that apparently make teachers fail to provide necessary support to them. This suggests that teachers find it hard to understand and react to children's' issues appropriately because the learners do not bring out their fears and concerns clearly. This finding is consistent with those of Anxiety Care (2011), which indicates that many young people who refuse school are socially isolated, have few or no friends and have negative experiences with peers such as bullying or ostracism. Moreover, they get severe emotional distress about going to school and there is absence of antisocial behaviours such as juvenile delinquency (School Refuser Organisation, 2001). With findings in this study indicating that all teachers in the study area are professionally qualified, expectations are they have knowledge and skills to help such kind of learners bring out their concerns. They should, ideally, be able to listen to a child and determine if there is anything specific that is bothering them during instruction time like performance or examination. They should be able to do this bearing in mind that the child might not be forthcoming with the information because of fear or embarrassment. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that children refuse school and teachers cite their inability to understand the needs of the learners as the key reason. This inconsistency may be due to teachers lacking preparation on absenteeism issues, a deficiency that makes it hard for them to recognize and manage the warning signs of school refusal. There is need, therefore, for teachers to learn skills like gathering information across more than one setting, such as interviews, observation of the child, and a review of academic records and attendance history in order to be able to identify and help learners with SRB. Also, lower primary teachers need to embrace a "child centred" approach which starts with the needs of the student rather than the maintenance of, or compliance with, school systems. Furthermore, the development of positive peer relations can be a crucial element in assisting a teacher understands needs of refusers. Peer to peer strategies can help a teacher know problems of a child, and the peers can encourage refusers to attend, or keep them in touch with events at school. The development of positive peer relations can therefore be a crucial element in assisting young people to bring out their problems so that they can be helped to return to school (Community Connection, 2009).

Contrary to expectations, this study did not find the teacher management of learner behaviour to be key in determining refusal in classroom. Less than half of respondents agreed with statements that indicated that

teachers do not discourage dangerous games (19.0%) and teachers fail to provide learners with adequate information about tasks, behaviour expectations and goals (33.7). These results are inconsistent with reports that the primary education in Kenya has to cope with high number of learners and inadequate teachers and infrastructure Nungu (2010). Moreover, Saito (2011) report that pupil fights, vandalism, classroom disturbance, and theft are very common in Kenya primary schools. These factors can combine to make classrooms unfriendly resulting in some children becoming apprehensive and refuse school. Wimmer (2008) cited such school factors to be associated with school refusal behaviour when he attributed SRB to: school violence and gang activity; large class sizes; large groups of low-achieving older students; too much emphasis on competition or testing; a high level of discipline problems and low staff morale. This finding is therefore unexpected and suggests that teachers could have been slow to attribute to themselves some of the triggers of school refusal in their schools. They are most likely to have attributed the reasons for SRB to external influences, as opposed to suggesting class- related factors which could point to their inability to manage school refusal among learners in their classrooms.

The overall perceptions of the teachers of classroom dynamics depends on the cumulative interaction of all the 15 statements in teacher questionnaire. A perception index was computed from the 15 statements by adding up the scores on each level (agree, neutral and disagree) in the distribution table. The index score varied between 15, indicating low perception rating, and 75, indicating high perception rating of classroom dynamics as a SRB trigger in Nandi East. The higher the score, the more positive was the perceptions of the teachers about the role of dynamics in triggering SRB, and vice versa. The index score was later coded into three ordinal categories in order to differentiate between the levels of rating among the respondents. This included a score of between 15 and 35 indicating low rating, a score of between 36 and 55 mean to indicate average rating and a score of between 56 and 75 depicting high rating of classroom dynamics as a trigger of SRB. Table 2 depicts the distribution of the teachers according to their reported level of perceptions.

Table2: Level of Perception of Classroom Dynamics as a Trigger of SRB

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Low (15-35)	64	42.11
Moderate (36-55)	19	12.50
High (56-75)	69	45.39
Total	**152**	**100**

The results in Table 2 indicate that 45.39% of the teachers had a high perception about the classroom dynamics as a determinant of SRB in Nandi East district. Another 42.11% had a low perception on the same, with only 12.5% of them having moderate perception. The result show that the teachers were generally evenly split between those with low and high perception levels. This could be attributed to the fact that the teachers could have been slow to attribute to themselves some of the triggers of school refusal in their schools (Shivlock, 2010).

Table 3: Correlation Analysis between Gender and Classroom Climate

		Gender	Classroom dynamics
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.271[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	152	152
Classroom dynamics	Pearson Correlation	.271[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	152	152

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results from table 3 indicate that gender of teachers was positively correlated and had a significant relationship with classroom dynamics (r = .271, p = .001). It can therefore be concluded that both male and female teachers believe that classroom dynamics influence school refusal behaviour.

Table 4: Influence of Teaching experience on Teachers perception on classroom dynamics that trigger SRB

		Teaching Experience	Classroom dynamics
Teaching Experience		1	-.142
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.098
	N	152	152
Classroom dynamics	Pearson Correlation	-.142	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.098	
	N	152	152

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

Conclusion and Recommendation

Teachers consider classroom dynamics as a trigger of school refusal and specifically cite emphasis of grades as major determinant of the behaviour. Also, teachers lack basic skill and knowledge on ways of catering for child developmental needs and therefore find it hard to understand and react to children's' issues appropriately. In addition, teachers lack preparation on absenteeism issues, a deficiency that makes it hard for them to recognize and manage the warning signs of school refusal. Finally, teachers generally attributed the reasons for SRB to other influences other than themselves.

MoE need to revise the teacher training curriculum to enable teachers respond better to issues of SRB. There is need for teachers to learn skills like gathering information across more than one setting, such as interviews, observation of the child, and a review of academic records and attendance history in order to be able to identify and help learners with SRB. School inspections ought to be improved to ensure there is quality provision of instructions in classrooms. In addition, future studies should get views from personnel like children, school quality assurance officers and even children officers on classroom determinants of SRB, as the school staff may have an element of bias in their responses.

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