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'What Kind of Education System are We Offering': The Views of Education Professionals on School Refusal

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the issue of school refusal, particularly given the adverse effects on young people's social, emotional and educational development. School refusal is understood differently within contemporary literature; as a symptom of an underlying mental illness or disorder, or alternatively, as a signal that all is not well in the young person's world. These varying construal's have important implications for education responses to school refusal. This study explores education professionals' views and experiences of school refusal within second level schools in Ireland. The findings from seventeen in-depth interviews highlight the complex nature of school refusal and unique challenges it presents for professionals, young people and parents. Key themes include emotional and psychological distress experienced by young people and their exposure to adverse childhood experiences and trauma; the influence of family socio economic status and unequal access to support services and resources; the pressures for academic achievement and resulting conflictual relationships within the school environment and between home and school. This study highlights the need for trauma-informed approaches in schools and urges future research to consider school refusal within wider debates on social justice and the goals and purposes of education.

Keywords: school refusal, qualitative, education professionals, adverse childhood experiences

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‘Qué Tipo de Sistema Educativo Estamos Ofreciendo’: Visiones de los Profesionales de la Educación sobre el Rechazo Escolar

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Resumen

En los últimos años ha aumentado la preocupación por el rechazo escolar por los efectos adversos que tiene en el desarrollo social, emocional y educativo de los jóvenes. El rechazo escolar se entiende de manera diferente dentro de la literatura actual: como síntoma de una enfermedad o trastorno mental subyacente o, como señal de que no todo va bien en el mundo del/ la estudiante. Estas diferentes interpretaciones tienen importantes implicaciones para las respuestas educativas al rechazo escolar. Este estudio explora las opiniones y experiencias de los profesionales de la educación sobre el rechazo escolar en las escuelas de secundaria en Irlanda. Las diecisiete entrevistas en profundidad realizadas revelan la naturaleza compleja del rechazo escolar y los desafíos que presenta para los profesionales, el alumnado y las familias. Los resultados destacan la angustia emocional y psicológica que experimentan los jóvenes y su exposición a experiencias adversas y traumas infantiles; la influencia de la situación socioeconómica de la familia y el acceso desigual a los recursos de apoyo; las presiones por el rendimiento académico y los conflictos en la escuela y entre las familias y la escuela. Este estudio enfatiza la necesidad de enfoques que consideren las situaciones de trauma en las escuelas, y subraya la importancia de que futuras investigaciones consideren el rechazo escolar dentro de debates más amplios sobre la justicia social y los objetivos y propósitos de la educación.

Palabras clave: rechazo escolar, cualitativo, profesionales de la educación, experiencias infantiles adversas.

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School refusal can be a source of considerable distress for young people and their families. It can impede a young person's social, academic and psychological development resulting in short- and long-term consequences; including mental health difficulties, unemployment and over reliance on welfare services (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008; Thambirajah et al., 2008). School refusal is defined as a child's motivated refusal to attend school or remain in class for the duration of the school day (Kearney & Silverman, 1996) for reasons associated with emotional distress (King et al., 1999).

A review of literature in the area highlights that the prevailing understanding of school refusal is based on clinical and psychiatric models of distress. These fields tend to endorse a bio-medical perspective, whereby emotional distress is viewed as a 'symptom' of an underlying disorder or illness, rather than signals that all is not well in the young person's world (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; O'Toole & Devenney, 2020; Pelligrini, 2007; Stroobant & Jones, 2006; Yoneyama, 2000). O'Toole & Devenney (2020) have drawn attention to the very negative terms that are attached to young people experiencing school refusal who are often considered to have social 'impairments', emotional 'disturbances', 'maladaptive' thoughts and 'distorted' beliefs. They argue that this language has potentially far-reaching consequences for how young people are viewed and responded to in schools, as well as for how they view themselves. Fundamentally, the medical model serves to locate the problem within individual students and families and re-inscribes deficit perceptions and negative stereotypes.

Increasingly, it is recognised that there are many complex factors at play in understanding school refusal. Children will be hesitant to attend school for a wide variety of reasons (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Thambirajah et al., 2008). For example, adverse childhood experiences relating to poverty, homelessness, school violence, bullying, violence in the home, bereavement, family separation, divorce, neglect, addiction and neighbourhood violence have shown to be a dominant feature within the school refusal literature (Archer et al., 2003; Kearney, 2008). More recently, Stempel and colleagues (2017) have linked Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998) with prolonged school absenteeism. These findings contribute to a growing literature on associations between ACEs and negative educational outcomes including disengagement with school, poor school performance and

school absenteeism (Bethell et al., 2014; Burke et al., 2011). Thus, it seems important to recognise the possibility that ACEs or trauma might underpin a young person's school refusal behaviour.

A review of the literature carried out by Lauchlan (2003), reveals a diverse number of issues in relation to schools' responses to school refusal. These include school policies containing a strict code of discipline, policies of streaming resulting in a student being placed in a classroom with troublesome and disgruntled peers and difficult student-teacher relations (formal, impersonal and hostile). Difficulty coping with academic demands, transition from primary to second level school, school size, unpredictability within school structures (frequent change of school staff) and school day (time periods between classes) were also reported to have a significant impact on the young person and school refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). These aspects of school culture may be particularly challenging for young people who have had prior exposure to adversity.

Aim of the Study

Set against this background, it is not unreasonable to ask how school refusal is construed within the field of education and how are teachers and other educational professionals responding to the issue? Driven by neoliberal and economic change (1970s), the culture of accountability has placed added strain on the relationships between "parents/students and educators/institutions" in the educational journey of the young person (Biesta, 2010, p.71). Whilst many scholars have highlighted the impact of accountability and performativity agenda's in education, especially in terms of creating a competitive and pressurised culture in schools (Apple, 1979; Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010, 2017), the potential impact of this in relation to school refusal has not been discussed.

The aim of this study was to explore the views of education professionals in relation to school refusal. Specifically, we sought to explore how school refusal was construed within the Irish context, how professionals respond to young people and families affected by school refusal, and challenges or concerns that professionals experience.

Methods

Participants and Sampling

Participants were professionals working in or supporting second-level schools in Ireland. The current study forms part of a larger research project on school refusal whereby a national survey on school refusal was initially distributed to all second-level schools in Ireland via electronic email (the details of which are reported elsewhere). At the end of the survey, potential participants were invited to take part in one-to-one interviews for this qualitative study. Inclusion criteria were that participants must be professionals who worked in or were supporting second-level schools in Ireland. These included principals, deputy principals, teachers, other school based staff and professionals from outside agencies (e.g. school completion officer). A total of 30 responses were received and were subsequently contacted by the researcher. A final 17 participants agreed to take part in this study: 8 male and 9 female. Participants have been provided with pseudonyms as seen throughout this paper. Personal details have been removed to protect the identity of participants.

Table 1

Background Information of Participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Professional role	School type
1.	John	Male	Teacher	Private, fee-paying, mixed gender
2.	Anna	Female	Retired Principal	Public, all-girls
3.	Sam	Male	Retired Principal	*DEIS, all-boys
4.	Frances	Female	Principal	Public, mixed gender
5.	Maeve	Female	Deputy Principal	Public, mixed gender
6.	Rachael	Female	Deputy Principal	Public, all-girls
7.	Amy	Female	School Completion Officer	Public, all-girls
8.	Jack	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender
9.	Aoife	Female	Guidance Counsellor	Public, mixed gender
10.	David	Male	Principal	Public, all-boys
11.	Emma	Female	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender
12.	Tanya	Female	Principal	DEIS, all-girls

Table 1 (continued)

	Pseudonym	Gender	Professional role	School type
13.	Thomas	Male	Principal	Private, fee-paying, all-boys
14.	Robert	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender
15.	Ethan	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender
16.	Phillip	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender
17.	Lisa	Female	Head Teacher	Public, all-girls

**Note.* DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) denotes those schools who qualify for entry into the DEIS scheme, a government funded scheme that provides additional resources for schools serving communities in low socio-economic areas.

Procedure

Participants who arranged contact with the researcher were provided with an information sheet and written informed consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted by telephone and took approximately 50 minutes - 1 hour. Pilot interviews were conducted with a small number of professionals (n=3) to allow for any changes to be made. Interviews were semi-structured and questions were designed to explore the experiences and challenges of working with young people at risk or experiencing school refusal.

Data from interviews (including pilot interviews) were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and analysed using thematic analysis. In this study, a hybrid approach was chosen as the main method of thematic analysis incorporating two contrasting approaches to the analytic process. First, themes and patterns were identified within the data using an inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), adopted by Braun & Clarke's (2006) analytic method. In this approach, the emerging themes were driven by the interview data without setting the data into a "pre-existing coding frame" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). A 'top down' theoretical process was adopted producing a set of a priori codes as outlined by Crabtree & Miller (1999). By using this approach, the research aims and questions could be examined by allowing the theoretical perspectives to be a central focus of the deductive process while also allowing for initial themes to emerge directly from the data using inductive coding. Within the deductive approach a "template organising style" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.166) was used which included the creation of a template of codes in the form of a codebook derived

from the research questions and theoretical framework used in this study. Any new codes that arose from the inductive analysis process were either included as separate from the a priori codes or used to expand upon the codes created in the codebook.

Findings

The following analysis is based on interviews with seventeen professionals. Key themes have been identified from professional's descriptions and challenges experienced in working with young people and school refusal. These include emotional distress, adversity, family's socio-economic backgrounds and school responses to school refusal.

Emotional Distress and Trauma

All participants reported that emotional distress was a key issue in students' experience of school refusal. Participants reported that young people struggled with a range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, emotional withdrawal, isolation and somatic or bodily complaints. The parent-child relationship was perceived to be a factor with many participants noting an "attachment issue" or "attachment or separation anxieties" as signifying students' difficulty in being away from home. It was evident that teachers were often concerned for young people's welfare as Lisa recalled a student who came to school: "She [the student] came [into school] very upset and I was worried about her mental health and the fact that she had self-harmed before".

School refusal was also linked to a range of psychiatric diagnoses including, "depression", "autism", "Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)" and "Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)". Thomas also described school refusal as a "condition" that is part of the individual experience of the student:

> …because they have to go on to maturity and try and manage their condition. A lot of these issues that are [at] the root of school refusal, just don't go away. They will have [these issues] in work and they'll have to manage their condition (Thomas).

This suggests there was a tendency to think of school refusal as akin to a condition or disorder that originates within the child. Nevertheless, most participants recognised that the young person's emotional distress was linked to their life circumstances, particularly childhood adversities and traumas: "students that have refused to come to school… they come from families where there were issues... Mum and Dad were separated...maybe Dad wasn't on the scene" (Lisa). Frances reported that family circumstances such as parental separation and divorce proceedings influenced school refusal, acknowledging that families are sometimes "traumatised". She reflected on the impact of bereavement and loss resulting from the death of a family member, stating "I can understand how a young child is reluctant to say goodbye to a parent, and kind of trust the school environment that everything's going to be okay". Emma noted that family difficulties were a "common trend" in school refusal whereby "I don't think they [families] have any child that's a chronic attender if there aren't problems in the family".

However, whilst there was awareness of the challenges faced by families, this did not always translate into a compassionate understanding of their plight. Indeed, families could sometimes be criticized for failing to face up to or deal with their problems: "…there is something systemic somewhere in family systems or family operations … so rather than facing up to whatever was going on, this child just didn't come to school and so that was it" (Aoife). This was particularly evident in the case of families from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Socio-economic Status

The findings showed that school refusal cuts across social class divides, but those with greater social, cultural, financial capital tend to have the necessary resources to manage the situation and ensure a positive outcome. Frances reported that school refusal can be evident in families "[…] from very wealthy backgrounds [and] from working class backgrounds". Jack commented: "I wouldn't say it's exclusive to one or other [social group]". However, it was evident that there were major differences in how families from different socio-economic backgrounds were viewed. Lisa stated that "the more disadvantaged the background, the less parents want to get involved [with the school]". Conversely, families of higher socioeconomic status were perceived as more motivated and committed to supporting their child in re-engaging

with the school. Aoife commented that "the middle-class parents are more willing to work with us. They trust us a bit more. They probably have had more positive experiences of school themselves; that would be my guess". She also noted that middle class families "…try and resolve whatever the issue is".

Thomas viewed families from higher socio-economic background to be more proactive and motivated in dealing with school refusal. However, he seemed more aware of the differences in resources and social capital that families possessed or had access to.

> I think that a lot of the middle class parents would have a lot more alternatives, are very proactive in the sense that they do everything they can possibly do to motivate their children and they have probably more social networks and links to ensure that their child is motivated to come to school (Thomas).

Thomas also indicated that parents from higher socio-economic background have more choice in accessing private services for assessment and therapeutic supports. They were more "confident" and "engaged" in finding a solution. Furthermore, even when a young person was not attending school, the more resourced families were able to access alternative enriching environments where their young person could learn new skills or try out different roles: "He [student] has done some wonderful work experience in his dad's office and other peoples offices, by virtue of the fact that his dad is trying to motivate him…".

Pressure to Perform

Many participants referred to pressures related to examinations and keeping up with schoolwork as key issues in school refusal. John linked the young person's experience of school refusal to a "pressure to perform … pressure to do the course and pressure within the class". Phillip also commented that young people experiencing school refusal are "…anxious students, their self-concepts would be very low, they are expecting to fail". Anna reflected on the transition from primary to second-level education with corresponding change in curriculum and expectations as key factors contributing to school refusal:

> Now many teachers would try their very best in first year to kind of keep somewhat of the primary school [ethos] going, but the minute they [students] get in, they are told – 'now you are going to do your Junior Certificate' (state examination taken midway through secondary school) and it is all about exams and it is test driven and I think it is a very big jump from…primary to secondary school (Anna).

Robert also questioned current approaches in education, which he felt were "…trying to make everybody fit into the same type of box or the same type of category". He questioned the value that society places on the Leaving Certificate and how academic performance is seen as all important: "in our society, if you do not get your Leaving Cert[ificate] you kind of feel that you are a failure". The Leaving Certificate is the state examination taken at the end of second level schooling in Ireland; it determines entry to University as well as other education or employment options. Anna also remarked on the levels of stress associated with the Leaving Certificate examination as "…it is so stressful because we have made students believe their whole life depends on it and there's no other way". Aoife commented on the pressures of academic performance on relations between young people and parents as: "Parents identify their own self-worth and their children's self-worth in academic achievement, and they want to be able to say - 'they [child] got five hundred and twenty points' and that can be a lot of pressure, sometimes" (Aoife).

Participants recounted the pressures parents seemed to be under to ensure their son or daughter returned to school. For example, David recalled a boy whose "family would drag him; coax him into the classroom to keep him in there". He noted that: "It has been quite distressing at times with the father dragging him in … and the father going out and the boy roaring and crying and crying and so on" (David).

This incident was distressing for everyone present – the boy, his parents and school staff.

Strained Relationships

Difficult and strained relations between school personnel and students/parents and between school and support services were evident in the experiences of most participants in this study. Participants spoke of the impact of school

refusal on teacher-student relationships. John expressed a sense of frustration in "trying to make them [students] catch up … and they are missing course curriculum and that is one of the most frustrating things about school refusal" and adds, that he feels "quite helpless" in getting the young person to engage in the course curriculum. Lisa, recalled how her teaching staff would often feel under pressure when the young person returned to school after a long period of absence and commented "… staff are coming to me and saying that it is not fair on other students, this student is coming in and he is upsetting the dynamics of the class and taking up my time…". By contrast, Rachael describes the young person's experience within the classroom as one of fear and embarrassment particularly at the anticipation of "being singled out … that idea that you might be spoken to in front of the class".

The pressure on teachers to complete curriculum course work was prevalent in all accounts. School leaders expressed a "genuine concern" for their teachers who feel "responsible" and "accountable" for the young person to complete their state examinations. Maeve referred to the non-completion of project components and curriculum-based assessments as a result of school refusal, which contributed further to stress and frustration amongst her teaching staff:

> I know that some of our teachers would be extremely stressed about that and those who have a project component to their subjects, which is more and more of them, and the teachers get really stressed around [school projects]. They [the students] haven't got their science workbook done, or they haven't got their religion project done, they haven't got their CBA's (Curriculum Based Assessment) done. [So], the teachers get really, really stressed about that when a student doesn't come in and some of our teachers will give a considerable amount of extra time to their students [who have missed classes] (Maeve).

Participants' spoke about strained relations between schools and outside support services (child protection and family support services, social work and psychological services). While most participants expressed appreciation for the supports these services offer, the pressure of liaising with a large and diverse array of services was evident in all accounts: "You have so many services involved and a lot of them are kind of barking instructions at the

school …" (Francis). Rachael felt that sometimes there were too many agencies involved:

> I mean every single agency imaginable was on that [school refusal]. So, therefore, she [young person] literally would be collected and brought into school by her father as agreed by case conferences. […] She desperately, at the same time, wanted to feel she belonged to something. So, the school kind of put out all the stops to make her feel welcome but invariably she sat with me in my office (Rachael).

Some participants grappled with what the role and duty of schools should be, asking are we "care providers" or "education providers"?

> I always remind everybody when we are really worried about somebody, our main soul focus in this school is we are education providers, we are not care providers… So, there's a certain point - we can provide scaffolding and support - but there is a point where we say CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] will have to take over, the medical services have to take over, this is not our job (Tanya).

The statement below also depicts key issues such as pressure on schools to maintain contact with families (e.g. phone calls and house calls) and difficult relations between schools and parents:

> … schools are told that social services say you keep ringing [the family], you keep affirming the child, keep in contact with them. That is very difficult to do if the child actually has blocked your number or if the child doesn't want to engage with the school… You find that parents, on some occasions, are not necessarily going to open their door really to the school looking for support (Thomas).

Challenges with "communication" between teachers and parents in relation to school refusal were reported by Anna to be "very difficult". Other participants felt that parents were under pressure when it came to the decision-making process in issues relating to school refusal and that "[…] parents feel as if they have been cast adrift" (Frances). Maeve remarked that despite the best efforts of schools and parents working together, student engagement was difficult to maintain:

> I have found that suggestions that we made and programmes that have been tailor-made to the interests of the student have been responded to very enthusiastically by the student and their family. There would be initial improvement, vast improvement in the attendance but it tapers off [decreases] unfortunately (Maeve).

School Responses

Participants reported using a wide range of policies and practices to support students having difficulties attending school. Efforts were made to track and monitor student attendance, and to link with outside agencies as necessary. Thomas remarked that "there would be custom and practice whereby we contact every parent with a child absent" when responding to school non-attendance.

> Every morning, [parents] get an email or a text message to say your child isn't in or your child is late. … If your child is absent for two days you get an email, or you are asked to contact the school to let us know what is happening (Thomas).

Jack referred to the involvement of a Home School Community Liaison officer and a School Completion officer. These are school personnel who work closely and individually with young people and their families usually within disadvantaged school communities. Staff in these roles aim to promote cooperation between families and school, to support children attendance and participation in education, and to foster positive attitudes toward lifelong learning. Jack noted: "so we put in a huge amount of effort and time into tracking the student who has poor attendance and trying to get them back in".

Participants noted a range of strategies to support students when they feel overwhelmed. In some schools these included the provision of a "personal time-out pass" a "stress ball" and access to designated "relaxation room" in the school. These strategies were attempts to ensure the school was perceived as a safe and calm space for the student. Another school used an "attendance matters" strategy, which aimed to promote full attendance. This involved placing the names of students who have had full attendance on the inside of the front door of the school: "we want to get the idea into students minds that full attendance is what's required, so it's not okay to actually miss a day here and miss a day there" (Emma). The implementation of weekly wellbeing

programmes was also used as a positive approach to young people's mental health and wellbeing, while other participants followed a "Code of Behaviour" and reduced timetables in working with young people and school refusal. However, these strategies were often not effective and some participants expressed frustration and a sense of "failure", as Frances noted: "I had two successes [in student attendance] and all the others have been failures". Other participants noted that medication had worked to help students cope with school related worries:

> Sometimes they need medication, because in two of the success cases it was medication that got them over the threshold of the door of the school… Anxiety beta blockers that kind of thing, to actually get them in, and then a reduced timetable can work as well. We have tried everything under the sun, and I suppose sometimes it works, but I feel in the last two years, I haven't had much success (Frances).

Nevertheless, Anna voiced concern about the use of medication. If students need medication to get them to school, she wondered what this says about the contemporary education: "we would have first year [students] on medication... so, what kind of education system are we offering is the big question... and what is the purpose of our education system?".

Discussion

This study highlighted that in educators' experience, there is considerable emotional distress, trauma and adversity associated with school refusal; and this is often heightened or aggravated by social inequalities. It also highlighted the pressure to achieve academically, which was felt not only by students, but by teachers and parents as well. These pressures can cause tensions in relationships and although schools were doing all they could to support young people experiencing school refusal, on the whole, they felt their efforts were largely futile. These findings have important implications for how education professionals think about and respond to students experiencing school refusal.

Their experience of responding to school refusal prompted some professionals to question what "kind of education system we are offering", when attending school evidently causes so much distress. Professionals, for example, referred to a wide range of emotional issues (e.g. anxiety,

depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation and somatic complaints) and difficulties in the family home as key concerns in relation to school refusal. These findings correspond with previous studies which highlight links between school refusal and young people's lived experience of adversity and trauma (i.e. parent mental health issues, separation, divorce, single parent families, traumatic events, violence, carer role and poverty) (Archer et al., 2003). While scholars agree that there are numerous and complex factors at play in understanding and responding to school refusal, there exists a pervasive view that the responsibility of school refusal lies with the individual students and their families, which reinforces negative stereotypes and stigma. Acknowledging the social context plays an important role in understanding young people and their difficulties relating to school refusal. This underscores the need to understand school refusal, less in terms of a medical condition (as suggested by a biomedical model), and more in terms of young people's life experiences.

This in turn raises important questions on the level of awareness amongst education professionals of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma; and how such experiences impact a young person and can potentially lead to school refusal. It also raises questions about school responses and whether these are sufficiently sensitive to the needs of the young person, or are they otherwise serving to re-traumatize the student. It is likely that coercive, confrontational and controlling strategies will trigger painful memories and potentially re-traumatise young people (Anderson et al., 2015). Trauma-informed practice has been advocated in schools as a way to support staff in understanding the nature of trauma and how it impacts on an individual's life (biological, psychological and social) (Anderson et al., 2015; O'Toole, in press; SAMHSA, 2014). Developing trauma-informed practice involves a number of measures that necessitates commitment and support from inside school structures. These include changes to school policies and procedures, administering teacher and staff professional development, creating positive and restorative responses to student behaviour as well as trauma sensitive classroom practices (Oehlberg, 2008; Thomas et al., 2019). In essence, being trauma-informed means being aware that trauma is a very real possibility. It means creating environments that offer a felt sense of safety, understanding the effects of trauma on the whole person, and how troubling behaviours/responses (Johnstone et al., 2018) may reflect courageous attempts to cope with trauma. It encourages a conceptual shift in understanding young

people's responses to situations as intelligible and serving a purpose rather than a condition that signifies that there may be something 'wrong' with this person (Read & Harper, 2020). Furthermore, it is about maximizing a sense of agency by offering choices, collaborating, validating and supporting, whilst being mindful of cultural, historical, and gender issues (Harris & Fallot, 2001; O'Toole, in press).

The association between mental health difficulties, low socio-economic status and poverty is widely established in the literature and within the field of school refusal (Berg et al., 1993; Place et al., 2000). The findings in this study suggest school refusal cuts across social class categories. Yet, young people from families of a higher socio-economic background were viewed as having more "enhanced" opportunities (i.e. access to private services with greater engagement in the education system) than a family from a lower socio-economic background. In contrast, low income and marginalised families were more likely to be blamed for their lack of motivation or their inability to manage their own problems. These findings highlight the importance of attending to the issues of power and inequality in school refusal research. Economic and material power influences are visible in the young person's (and their family's) access to resources. These include resources relating to housing, transport, leisure, medical interventions and in education, where access to psychoeducational assessments and therapeutic supports would be deemed necessary resources in school refusal. This emphasises a need to recognise the negative impact of economic and social inequality on the young person's educational engagement and opportunities.

This study highlighted the considerable pressures to achieve academically, which were felt not only by students, but by teachers and parents as well. Teaching staff expressed concern in relation to the non-completion of project components and curriculum-based assessments, which evoked significant levels of stress and frustration on their part. It is clear that the heightened focus of educational achievement and exam performance is a contributing factor, not just in school refusal (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008; Yoneyama, 2000) but also in high levels of stress and burnout amongst the teaching profession (Foley, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005; Kerr et al. 2011). These findings raise broad questions about the goals and purposes of education, particularly the way in which education has become narrowed in recent times, to such an extent that academic attainment is considered the sole

and quintessential purpose of schooling (Biesta, 2010). Thus, focusing primarily on education achievement and qualifications can create imbalance within the current education system. Equally, young people can become more vulnerable to distress through the external pressure of exam performance, fear of failure and a sense of not doing enough. This can also have negative consequences for educators in meeting the needs of students and parents, resulting in difficulty in establishing reliable and trusting relations between educators/institutions, parents/young people (Biesta, 2010). The findings highlight the need to locate school refusal research within wider debates about the goals, purposes and values of education (Biesta, 2017; O'Toole & Simovska, in press).

In sum, school professionals highlight adversity and trauma as underlying factors in the experience of school refusal and they point to the considerable emotional and psychological distress experienced by young people. This suggests a need for schools to adopt trauma-informed approaches when designing school structures and policies, and to embed trauma-awareness in everyday interactions with students at risk of or experiencing school refusal. This research also serves to highlight that school refusal should not be considered merely an individual or family problem. School refusal does not occur in a vacuum and it is important, therefore that school refusal research is located within wider debates in education, particularly in relation to social justice and the purpose of education. Further research in these areas is needed. In addition, there is need for further research to provide greater insight into the lived experience of the young person and families who have experienced school refusal first-hand.

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