Anxiety-Based School Refusal: Implications for School Counselors

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Abstract

School attendance problems (SAPs) have traditionally been viewed as a result of behavioral challenges in student populations. Increasing evidence suggests, however, that a substantial portion of SAPs and school refusal behaviors are related to underlying anxiety in students. The school counselor, as an advocate for all students, is well-positioned to transform school response to SAPs and school refusal behavior to anxiety-informed approaches. This conceptual article reviews the literature surrounding anxiety-based SAPs and school refusal and suggests approaches for school counselors to implement in their districts.

Keywords: school counseling, school attendance, truancy, counselor education, anxiety

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School attendance problems (SAPs) greatly impact a student's academic, social, emotional and career development (Heyne, Gran-Landell, Melvin & Gentle-Genitty, 2019). Students experiencing SAPs are at increased risk for lower academic performance (Carroll, 2010; Gottfried, 2014), substance abuse (Henry & Huizinga, 2007), and both interpersonal and intrapersonal social-emotional difficulties (Carroll, 2013). Further, a lack of attendance in school correlates with lower career outcomes (Rocque, Jennings, & Piquero, 2017) as well as a higher chance of incarceration in adolescence and beyond (Bennett, Mazerolle, Antrobus, Eggins, & Piquero, 2017). These issues have received increasing attention in recent years as professionals work to manage them and minimize the impact they have.

While school attendance problems have many sources, school refusal is one of the major contributors to student attendance problems and negative outcomes (Ingul, Havik, & Hayne, 2019). School refusal is when students refuse to attendance school and/or participate in certain functions of school activities for a prolonged period of time (Ingul et al., 2019). Traditional methods of conceptualization viewed school refusal, as well as all SAPs as products of defiance or laziness, however, recent research suggests that school refusal behavior is highly correlated with feelings of anxiety, depression, and related mental health disorders (Heyne et al., 2019; Heyne, Sauter, & Van Widenfelt, 2011; Kearney, Turner, & Gauger, 2010). While research has provided mental health informed guidelines to address anxiety-based school refusal (Ingul, et al., 2019; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Maric, Heyne & de Heus, 2012; Maynard et al., 2018) these studies were not conducted from a school counseling perspective. Given the

access of the school counselor to student populations, their training in mental health and systemic interventions, and the influence of school counselors on student assistance teams, further exploration into the role of the school counselor in addressing anxiety-based school refusal is needed.

Literature Review

Differentiation of School Refusal

SAPs encompass all reasons behind attendance issues ranging from school phobia to student withdrawal to family-motivated truancy to chronic nonattendance (Heyne et al., 2019). Each of these issues are classified to fall under one of four categories: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school exclusion (Heyne, et al., 2019). Without differentiation between the various forms of SAPs, it is difficult for professionals to communicate effectively, serve the actual needs of students, and research appropriate interventions for these populations moving forward (Heyne, et al., 2019; Heyne, Sauter, & Ollendick, 2014).

Unlike truant students, students experiencing school refusal often stay at home when not attending school, and do not elect to miss school in order to go somewhere or engage in a preferred activity such as watching television or spending time with friends (Ingul et al., 2019; Wimmer, 2010). Further, unlike truant students, school refusing students do not try and hide their lack of attendance from their parents. Parents are often aware of their absence and have attempted to get the student to attend school (Ingul et al., 2019). These students experience emotional distress associated with attending school and completing school activities, however these students do not exhibit antisocial drives or behaviors (Ingul et al., 2019). School refusal occurs more often

following vacations, weekends, or at the beginning of an academic year due to the potential of anxiety building up over these periods (Wimmer, 2010). The origins of school refusal behavior tend to be emotionally difficult situations, including prolonged illness, the death of a loved one, or a major life transition, including changing schools (Wimmer, 2010). The emotional component of school refusal is clear considering that school refusing students often have an interest in or even complete their assigned schoolwork, demonstrating other influences keeping them out of the classroom (Fremont, 2003).

Negative Impact of School Refusal

School refusal has a strong adverse effect on students' academic development. School refusal and subsequent absence from class may lead to a student failing to complete their coursework and missing significant assessments (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006), putting them at a greater risk for class failure, grade retention and early dropout (Maynard, et al., 2018; Pina, Zerr, Gonzales, & Ortiz, 2009). An additional challenge is that any negative feelings present in early school refusal are likely to grow as students feel anxiety over how far behind their peers they have fallen and how socially isolated they have become (Havik, Bru, & Ertevag, 2015). This is demonstrative of a vicious cycle, in which actions taken initially due to anxiety put students in further anxiety-developing situations, casting them further behind.

The lack of attendance in school also affects a student's social-emotional development and well-being. Students experiencing school refusal are understood to face difficulties with social adjustment and, as a result, miss key developmental milestones (Maynard, et al., 2018; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Kearney et al., 2010).

This includes limited development of social skills and relationships and increased risk of peer conflicts (Kearney et al., 2010; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003). The lack of steady interaction with other students may also result in school refusing students being more withdrawn, shy, or awkward, lending them to be susceptible to social isolation and bullying (Egger et al., 2003). Repeated absences also often prevent students from accessing supportive adults, such as school counselors, who could act as allies during these difficult periods (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006).

The academic, social, and emotional consequences also adversely impact a student's career development (Fremont, 2003). Missing schoolwork puts students at higher risk of retention and dropout, limiting their college and career options. School refusing students therefore often enter their careers with less academic accolades, fewer social skills, and more uncertainty regarding career options, putting them at a serious disadvantage when compared to other students (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Maynard et al., 2018). States have repeatedly emphasized career education and career development standards (Boyd, 2017), school refusing students miss out on the benefits of these programs and curriculums during an increasingly competition era of employment.

Anxiety-Based School Refusal

School refusal is demarcated from other forms of SAPs due to the prevalence of emotional distress such as anxiety and depression (Ingul et al., 2019). Although school refusal is not included in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2013), students displaying school refusal are often diagnosed with one or more internalizing disorders, such as separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, or a specific

phobia (Heyne, Sauter & Maynard, 2015). Between 0.4% and 5.4% of students experience some form of school refusal and approximately 50% of students referred to treatment meet the diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder, depressive disorder or both (Heyne et al., 2015). A study of 1,400 children aged 9 found that 88% of school refusers had at least one psychiatric diagnosis and 75% had a biological parent treated for mental illness (Egger et al., 2003). The researchers found the rate of mental disorders among school refusing students were three times greater than students with no attendance problems. Egger and colleagues highlighted the possibility that fear, and anxiety contribute to school refusal because school refusing students were found to experience more family stressors, including poverty, parental unemployment, minimal supervision and witnessing violence.

Anxiety significantly impacts an individual's life and has the potential to cause impairment in the performance of daily living activities (Lingenfelter & Hartung, 2015). A review conducted by Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) identified the two most common diagnoses for students displaying school refusal behaviors as separation anxiety disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. In addition, social anxiety disorder was identified as the sixth most common diagnosis in this population. Separation anxiety disorder is more commonly found in younger students that may be heavily dependent on their caretaker or have a fear that a loved one may be harmed while they are in school (Wimmer, 2010). Students with generalized anxiety disorder tend to worry about a number of events or situations they may encounter within the school setting and may even perceive the school as threatening. These students may become concerned about their performance in school or the possibility of catastrophic events occurring

(Lingenfelter & Hartung, 2015; Wimmer, 2010). Students with social or performance anxiety worry about what others think or how they will be judged. This form of anxiety may reveal itself if the student needs to give a presentation, is assessed or when playing sports (Lingenfelter & Hartung, 2015; Wimmer, 2010). This strong association between different forms of anxiety and school refusal draws attention to the need for professionals working with this population to understand anxiety in order to effectively address it.

Risk Factors for School Refusal

An obvious sign of school refusal is a student's absence from school. The extent of this absence can vary anywhere between arriving late to school, returning home during the school day or being absent for an entire day (Ingul et al., 2019). Anxiety, depression, other mental disorders, along with life stressors such as poverty or loss of a family member, all put students at increased risk of school refusal (Egger et al., 2003). It is important to note that students exhibiting anxious school refusal may express somatic complaints, including but not limited to headaches or stomachaches, which may be associated with the presence of anxiety or other diagnosable disorder (Egger et al., 2003). Students refusing to attend school are also understood to have more time to focus on somatic symptoms which can increase the intensity of these feelings (Ingul et al., 2019).

The average age of anxiety-based school refusing students is approximately 10 years old, suggesting that school refusal may be more prevalent or may emerge around this time (Egger, et al., 2003; Ingul, et al., 2019). Students around this age are experiencing many changes in both their personal and educational lives such as

transitioning from childhood to adolescence and moving from primary school to secondary school (Ingul et al., 2019). Students moving to a secondary school may be faced with a complex environment with more students and, as a result, can develop feelings of being unsafe due to their anxiety surrounding the unknown (Ingul, et al., 2019).

A qualitative study conducted by Baker and Bishop (2015) examined four students struggling with anxiety-related school refusal. The researchers found that all four children experienced issues in their transition to secondary school, including feelings of anxiety, isolation, and alienation from school rules and protocols. In particular, punitive measures aimed at these students served to make them more anxious and less willing to return to school, contrary to their purposes.

Transitions and sudden changes, such as switching schools, teachers, or returning after a prolonged absence from school, are other triggering events for school refusal behavior (Ingul, et al., 2019). A study conducted by Maric and colleagues (2012) found that school refusing students reported higher levels of negative cognitions regarding social threats and personal failure. In short, these students believed extreme outcomes regarding social threats and the meaning of their social or academic failure. In this vein, the researchers also found that students more likely of making cognitive overgeneralizations are at an increased risk of engaging in school refusal behavior. Through these studies, it’s clear that there is a cognitive component to school refusal, where feelings of isolation, worry, and overgeneralization make transitioning back to school emotionally overwhelming for students.

Parents of school refusing children report that poor classroom management and unpredictable schedules and protocols lead to their children feeling unsafe, insecure, and anxious (Havik et al., 2014). The predictability of a daily schedules and expectations were found to reduce student anxiety and worry regarding school attendance, while perceived frightening and strict teachers was cited to increase attendance issues (Havik et al., 2014). Parents in the study further reported a lack of connection with the school early on regarding these concerns, and that interventions and outreach had only been attempted when the problem became severe.

In a following study, Havik and colleagues (2015) found school refusal to be closely associated with a teacher's classroom management style and the perceived level of support students felt from that teacher. Students also indicated poor peer relationships and feelings of social exclusion contributed to school refusal. Bullying experiences in particular had a strong association with school refusal behavior, as the fear of future incidences caused students to avoid school.

While school environments may predict school refusing behavior, family characteristics may also put students at risk. One study found a strong correlation between school refusal and having parents with a history of mental health illness (Egger et al., 2003). The researchers inferred that not only might this put students at an increased risk of mental health concerns themselves, but also that the parents' conditions may reduce their ability to support and respond to their children's school refusing behavior. A study examining the connection between parent self-efficacy and school refusal revealed that parents with school refusing students experienced lower levels of self-efficacy when compared to parents of non-school refusing students

(Carless, Melvin, Tonge & Newman, 2015). The researchers suggested that these low levels may lead parents to believe they have failed in supporting their child and, therefore, these parents may put less effort into enforcing future school attendance. In addition, the researchers concluded that parents with low levels of self-efficacy also experience higher levels of anxiety and depression, further supporting the findings from Egger and colleagues.

When considering the prevalence of school refusal related to anxiety, the negative impact this refusal can have on a student's development, and the associated risk factors, the need to address this issue and implement effective interventions becomes clear. As a preventative, systems-driven professional, school counselors are well-suited to respond to the complex needs of school refusing student and their families s in an informed, proactive, and systemic fashion.

Role of the School Counselor

The ASCA National Model created by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) lays out the integral components of the profession and clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of all school counselors (ASCA, 2019). According to the ASCA National Model, counselors must exhibit leadership, collaboration, advocacy and systemic change in order to support every student in academic achievement, social and emotional learning and career development (ASCA, 2019). It is the responsibility for school counselors to advocate for the needs of all students through individual services, counseling groups, school-wide programs, school to community partnerships, and through leadership in the school (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Erford, 2019). Throughout this process, it is essential that school counselors collaborate

with other key stakeholders in the student's education. These stakeholders may include parents or guardians, administrators, teachers, other support staff or community resources. When collaborating, stakeholders work toward a common goal, share strategies and effectively monitor student progress (Erford, 2019; Dahir & Stone, 2009). This role of collaborator aligns with the need for an integrated, team-based approach when working with anxiety-based school refusing students (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The school counselor is well-positioned in the school, given their training in mental health and service coordination, to be a support system and advocate for school refusing students, empowering them to achieve the best academic, social-emotional, and career success from their schooling experiences.

Discussion

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors are well-positioned to identify the needs of at-risk students early. Methods by which school counselors can be made aware of at-risk students include conducting needs assessments throughout the school year. Such assessments can include sources such as discipline data, teacher reports, and student and family perceptions (Erford, 2019; Dahir & Stone, 2009). This data can be collected through the use of an online or physical copy survey which the school counselor can analyze for results. Results may indicate if attendance or anxiety are a concern coming up on the radars of administration, teachers, students, and families.

The school counselor can proactively address the issues of attendance and anxiety by integrating these topics into their classroom guidance lesson curriculum. This intervention would be classified as tier 1, meaning it is a proactive, preventative

approach available to all students (Erford, 2019). The benefits of addressing the value of attendance and how to identify and cope with anxiety are two-fold. One, students are given psychoeducation on what they may be experiencing along with the consequences, enabling them to better combat the issues they're dealing with. Two, conversations within the classroom around these topics may encourage students experiencing anxiety to come forward and make contact with the school counselor or other stakeholder, bringing needed attention and resources to this student. Thus, the school counselor is not waiting until school refusal is a serious compounding problem for the student, family, and school, and is instead empowering students to address these concerns early in their development.

Psychoeducation does not only benefit students, but other stakeholders as well. For example, the school counselor could send newsletters home to parents regarding issues of anxiety or depression, empowering them to understand symptoms in their students while providing information to available supportive resources, including the school. School staff can be empowered to identify what barriers are facing students through in-service presentations discussing school refusal and how anxiety may manifest in students and why. These efforts create a proactive system more prepared to meet the needs of anxiety-based school refusing students instead of allowing disjointed individuals to respond reactively to a student's situation.

School counselors should also be involved with leadership and advocacy within the school building. This includes serving on leadership or educational support teams (ESTs) (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). These teams are composed of stakeholders including members of administration, prominent teachers, the school counselor, the

school nurse, special educators, school psychologists, and even parents or outside mental health professionals depending upon the student (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). These teams aim to evaluate students who are struggling with academic or behavioral issues within the school setting and grant them access to support prior to higher needs interventions, such as a 504 or individual education plan (IEP). A major benefit of a school counselor leading this team is the early identification of students with anxiety-based school refusal behaviors. Early identification can allow for the EST to work with the child and family on effective interventions instead of misidentifying the issue as truancy and responding with punitive measures later in the process. This provides the student a family a voice, access to resources, and gets the student on the radar of stakeholders within the school. For example, the school counselor can provide check-in/check-out services to the student at the beginning and end of the school day, evaluating their anxiety, relationships to peers and teachers, thus allowing for proper group or program referral. Further, early awareness of anxiety conditions allows for early referral to an outside mental health counselor.

Research indicates that exposure-based and cognitive behavioral therapies are effective means to combat school refusal (Bernstein, Layne, Egan & Tennison, 2005; Freemont, 2003). By linking the student to an appropriate counselor, the school counselor can work in conjunction with the family and therapist to help the student stay in school and succeed. This early intervention approach provides a new lens on students experiencing anxiety-based school refusal, decreasing the chances that their challenges will be misidentified as truancy and remain undiscovered until problems reach a serious level.

School counselors can also deliver direct services to students experiencing school refusal. School-based groups focusing on anxiety management and social phobia show promise in reducing anxiety in school refusing students (Bernstein et al., 2005). School counselors can also work with students regarding anxiety and behavior management with individual plans. Such examples include cognitive-behavioral strategies to reduce anxiety in the moment within the classroom and when at home (Pina et al., 2009). Individual counseling sessions can include strategies of managing the anxiety as well as those to inform teachers and parents about what the student is experiencing (Pina et al, 2009). In this way, the school counselor may act as a resource for the student but also a bridge to teacher and parental understanding, which will benefit the student in the long run.

Kearney and Gracyzk (2014) suggest using a response to intervention (RTI) model when working to promote student attendance in school. While Tier 1 includes elements such as classroom lessons and programmatic efforts to reduce bullying, some severe cases of anxiety-based school refusal will require more specific interventions as the Tier 2 and 3 levels (Kearney & Gracyzk, 2014). Tier 2 or targeted interventions may involve psychological approaches implemented from support staff or changes within the classroom setting to minimize feelings of anxiety in students (Kearney & Gracyzk, 2014). An example of a tier 2 intervention is changing the student's teacher or providing classroom management strategies to a teacher if the student identified a poor classroom climate as contributing to their anxiety. If these approaches are done in conjunction with an EST, it is likely the school refusing student may receive whatever plan necessary within the district to receive individualized behavior responses, whether

it be a behavior plan, 504, or IEP. At the Tier 3 level, students could receive alternative instruction in a separate space or smaller classroom, removing them from stressors such as a particular teacher or group of students (Kearney & Gracyzk, 2014).

Implications for Counselor Education

Counselors-in-training should be exposed to case studies and real-life client situations where anxiety and depression are underlying the specified problem behavior in a student. This includes work in assessment courses where the nature of presenting anxiety and depressive disorders are contextualized with what type of behavior may manifest. For example, case study vignettes or conceptualization papers focused on these issues within an assessment, theories, practicum, or internship class, would allow school counseling students to more deeply consider the root causes of student absenteeism and school refusal, allowing them to take these skills into their professional work.

School counselors-in-training may also participate in efforts to curb low attendance at their internship sites. Group supervisors should encourage students to propose holistic preventative approaches such as anxiety counseling groups and psychoeducation. Having direct experience with this type of work will allow these future school counselors to hit the ground running and enact these interventions as professionals. Further, these graduate students should be encouraged to conduct needs assessments on their practicum and internship sites, allowing them to gain valuable experience in data collection and program assessment while also empowering them to identify anxiety and attendance issues early in their future professional work.

Implications for Research

Future research is needed on the effectiveness of school counselors on assisting students with anxiety-based school refusal. The effectiveness of targeted groups, individual counseling, and school-wide programming would inform professionals of the appropriate methods in meeting the needs of this population. Future research is also needed into the multicultural aspects of school refusal, including the role that systemic racism, classism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination may play in students' school refusal. Such research would pave the way for school counselors to be ideal advocates for this high-needs population, allowing them to make a major difference in the lives of countless students. Further, this necessary research would inform competent approaches in counselor education, allowing for a more prepared future generation of school counselors.

Conclusion

While school refusal has often been mistaken with truancy, evidence suggests that anxiety is at the root of most school refusing behavior. The school counselor, as a mental health and systems focused professional, is in a key position to assist school refusing students through early identification, schoolwide programmatic response, groups and individual counseling, and community resource referrals. Through proactive efforts, the school counselor can shift behavior responses within their school district and provide students the best opportunity to be understood and succeed despite anxiety and school refusing behavior. Future research is needed on the effectiveness of these specific approaches and what methods best prepare counselors-in-training to work with this population.

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