



"School can't: a conceptual framework for reframing school refusal and recognising school related stress/distress"

Rachel Leslie, Glenys Oberg, Cris Townley, Tiffany Westphal, Louise Rogers & Annette Brömdal

To cite this article: Rachel Leslie, Glenys Oberg, Cris Townley, Tiffany Westphal, Louise Rogers & Annette Brömdal (01 Sep 2025): "School can't: a conceptual framework for reframing school refusal and recognising school related stress/distress", British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2025.2552132](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2025.2552132)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2025.2552132>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 01 Sep 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1905



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

“School can’t: a conceptual framework for reframing school refusal and recognising school related stress/distress”

Rachel Leslie^a , Glenys Oberg^b , Cris Townley^c , Tiffany Westphal^d,
Louise Rogers^d and Annette Brömdal^a 

^aUniversity of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia; ^bUniversity of Queensland, St Lucia; ^cWestern Sydney University, Penrith; ^dSchool Can’t Australia

ABSTRACT

School attendance rates continue to concern educators and researchers internationally, especially when these absences are linked to emotional distress in the children and young people affected. The Australian government has called for more research and action on school attendance issues, often termed school refusal. The authors argue that the term school refusal pathologises students and overlooks the complex interplay of individual and socio-environmental factors. They suggest using the terms school-related emotional stress/distress and school can’t to better capture the emotional impact of school-based stressors and the reduced capacity experienced by children and young people. The paper highlights the overrepresentation of neurodiverse, LGBTQI+, and Indigenous students in school non-attendance data, drawing on submissions to the Australian Senate Inquiry and existing literature. It proposes a new conceptual framework based on a dynamic socio-ecological model, shifting the focus from individual pathology to a social model, and advocates for trauma-informed, inclusive educational practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2025
Accepted 20 August 2025

KEYWORDS

School attendance; school refusal; school distress; intersecting identity

Introduction

Increased concerns around school attendance difficulties in children and young people (CYP) are internationally universal and drive research aimed at prevention and intervention approaches (González & Inglés 2019). School non-attendance, or *school refusal*, has increased in countries such as: Japan (where non-attendance increased 65% since Covid 19) (Nishimura et al. 2024), England (which saw a gradual increase prior to Covid and an increase of 50% post Covid 19) (Lester & Michelson, 2024) and the United States of America (where chronic absenteeism rose by 91% between the 2018/2019 and 2021/2022 school years) (Dee, 2024). Whilst it is difficult to make direct comparisons between countries due to difference in data collections and schooling systems (Kreitz-Sandberg et al. 2022), calls have been made for international policy reviews on intervention strategies or changes to educational structures

CONTACT Rachel Leslie  rachel.leslie@unisq.edu.au

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

(Kearney et al. 2019). There is international recognition that there is homogeneity in the presentation of emotional distress, such as somatic and externalised symptoms, amongst this group of CYP (Bacon and Kearney, 2020; Leduc et al. 2024; Tekin & Aydin, 2022). However, there is also significant heterogeneity in the diversity of affected populations of CYP and the factors that contribute to the phenomenon.

In Australia there is a consensus that school attendance challenges are a growing concern amongst caregivers and educators. So significant is this issue that the Australian Federal Government undertook to explore the phenomenon through a Senate Committee Inquiry (referred to in this paper as the ‘Senate Inquiry’) that resulted in a report on the national trend of school refusal and 19 recommendations for action (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). The Senate Inquiry recognised worrying school attendance data, with school attendance rates (a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended) declining from 92.6% in 2015, to 88.6% in 2023. Further, the Senate Inquiry reported that the school attendance level (the proportion of full-time students in Years 1–10 whose attendance rate is equal to or greater than 90%) of Australian CYP fell dramatically from 77.8% in 2015 to 59.8% in 2024 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024; Australian Government Department of Education 2024).

Prolonged and consistent absence from school or low rates of attendance are often described as *school refusal*. In the literature, contrast to truancy and withdrawal, school refusal is characterised as occurring with the caregivers’ knowledge, unlike truancy, and, unlike withdrawal, by a level of emotional distress associated with attending school (Knage 2023; Leduc et al. 2024). Indeed, in 94.3% of incidents a CYP experiencing school attendance difficulties will involve mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023). The term *school refusal* is generally rejected by those with lived and living experience as it fails to capture the affective and environmental components of the phenomenon that lead to school attendance difficulties (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023). Indeed, the Senate Inquiry (Australian Government Department of Education 2024) recognised the way the term school refusal portrays the phenomenon as a choice made by the CYP as problematic (Paragraph 1.15). Further, the recommendations of the inquiry called for a deeper understanding of the drivers of school attendance difficulties, including those issues related to emotional distress (Recommendation 6.18) and a nationally agreed upon definition of the phenomenon (Recommendation 6.38).

In line with the Senate Inquiry (Australian Government Department of Education 2024, p. 1.15), we take a position that the use of school refusal as a term pathologises and portrays the CYP and their distress as either irrational or deviant, with the young person being responsible for their behaviour choices. Pathologising the inability to attend school limits the understanding of the complexity of the experience (Knage 2023) and of ways to navigate this complexity in the best interests of the CYP. Accordingly, this paper proposes, and will use, the term *school can’t* in recognition that for many CYP the emotional impact can result in a nervous system shutdown (Australian Government Department of Education 2024) which reduces their capacity to attend school, even if they want to Connolly, Constable, and Mullally (2023; Heyne et al. 2021).

Previous literature, and submissions to the Senate Inquiry, have indicated that there are many groups of students identified as being disproportionately represented in the school can’t data, including those who are neurodiverse (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023; Rogers & Westphal, 2022), LGBTQI+ (Townley and Moss 2023), Indigenous (Mallee District

Aboriginal Services 2022) and those born with innate variations of sex characteristics (Brown 2022; Intersex Human Rights Australia, 2022). However, little exploration has been undertaken into the reasons why such diverse groups can have a similar response to their school experiences. A sociological lens suggests that schools are designed with a normative child in mind, who is, for example, White (Francis 2025), heterosexual (van Leent & Spina, 2023) cisgendered (Horton 2023), endosex (Brömdal et al. 2021), and neurotypical (Waltz et al. 2020). For CYP that do not align with these norms school is more difficult.

This conceptual paper is a collaboration between allies, practitioners and cross disciplinary researchers, with all authors positioned with more than one of these perspectives. Five of the six authors are living with CYP who experience school can't, whilst three have had experience as educators supporting CYP experiencing school can't. Drawing on academic literature, and informed by our collective living experience, this paper develops a conceptual framework and suggests a research agenda for future exploration of school can't, and education reform. This paper seeks to outline the range of factors that contribute to school non-attendance including mental health, disability, being part of the LGBTQI+ community, and neurodiversity. By shifting the conceptualisation of school non-attendance from a pathology associated with the CYP to a social model, we hope to address some of the factors that might increase school attendance amongst this diverse and vulnerable population.

Conceptualisations of school refusal

Historical conceptualisations of school refusal have framed it as a functional behaviour, where CYP choose to not attend school because they are seeking attention, pursuing tangible objects (such as interactions seen as more pleasurable than attending school), or avoiding stimuli or social situations that provoke negative emotions/affect (Kearney and Silverman 1993). More recently Kearney and González (2022) have called for a dimensional perspective of school attendance problems, with emphasis on the functional impairment created as a result of school refusal in the domains of social, family and school functioning. Whilst their proposed method for assessing and thus treating those experiencing school refusal was grounded in a desire to support CYP, the use of words like *refusal*, *attention seeking* and *avoidance* imply an adult judgement about the behaviour that does not necessarily result in attention being directed to stressors, barriers, and difficulties experienced by the student.

Other investigations of school refusal have centred around the *type* of non-attendance with greater recognition of the role of emotional distress. In a review of historical conceptualisations of school non-attendance, Heyne et al. (2019) noted four types of non-attendance: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school based disciplinary absences. Of these, school refusal was acknowledged to stem from an emotional stress/distress response to attending school. Whilst Heyne et al. (2019) associate emotional stress/distress only with school refusal, the role of emotional distress in truancy, school withdrawal and disengagement, and disciplinary absences is also worth considering. This affective component of school refusal, or school non-attendance, was reinforced by Connolly et al. (2022) who advocated for the use of the term *school distress* to better recognise the experiences of the CYP with school attendance issues, arguing that *school refusal* does not adequately recognise the emotional distress. In a subsequent study by Connolly, Constable, and Mullally (2023)

of 947 parents of CYP experiencing school distress, 94.3% of children exhibited emotional distress such as clinically significant anxiety (92.5%). However, whilst Connolly et al.'s (2022; 2023) papers acknowledged the role of emotional *distress* experienced by the CYP, they did not have the scope to explore all the factors leading to emotional distress, such as the relationship between the CYP's sense of identity and the stress response to the school setting.

Further debates around the terminology and conceptualisation of school refusal build on the link between school non-attendance and emotional distress. In their review of research Inglés et al. (2015) stated that the term school refusal was acceptable on the grounds that it was commonly used in the literature and that it encompassed the "causal heterogeneity" (p. 38) or the range of reasons for school non-attendance and the many ways in which it can present. However, Elliott and Place (2019) highlighted that despite decades of research into school refusal, there is still little that is understood about the mechanisms that influence the phenomenon, especially considering the heterogeneous nature of school refusal. Indeed, they reflected on Kearney's use of the term school refusal and argued that it emphasised school non-attendance as a child-motivated problem and was of limited use in describing or explaining the transactions between the CYP and their environments. As such, though the functional behaviour approach recognises anxiety, a more nuanced understanding of school refusal as a function of a stress response or as safety seeking, is needed.

Whilst there is acknowledgement of a CYP's *distress* around attending school (Connelly et al. 2023), there is also growing acknowledgement of the *stress* that contributes to the *distress*. For example, studies such as Tekin and Aydın's (2022) scoping review of school refusal and anxiety among children and adolescents concluded that school refusal was strongly influenced by the quality of family functioning, parental depression or anxiety, and school punishment. However, these findings reinforce conceptualisations that centre the problem of school refusal within the child and the family, with limited consideration for day-to-day school related interactions and the school environment. In contrast, Heyne et al. (2020), recognised that a multidisciplinary approach to conceptualising school non-attendance was needed, providing recognition that the stressors may be cross-contextual. Additionally, they highlighted that little is known about the interpersonal causal factors that contribute to school non-attendance and called for additional research drawing on student and parental perspectives to gain insight into their subjective experience and the stressors related to school related distress.

A growing body of research is recognising the role that the school system and school related interactions have on school attendance difficulties. For example, a study by Hascher and Hadjar (2018) sought to conceptualise school alienation, the process by which CYP develop a negative disposition (cognition and affect) towards school and seek to distance themselves from school related experiences. Their approach to school alienation foregrounded the understanding that a negative disposition towards attending school may in fact be triggered by the educational setting and interactions with learning, teachers and/or peers. Within its scope, this study however did not consider how the negative disposition was in fact a stress response. Building on ideas of school alienation, Havik and Ingul (2021) posited that school non-attendance may be explained through a system integrated cognitive framework where students avoid school because they feel unable to deal with the stressors presented by the school environment. Thus, their cognitive appraisal of the situation is the result of the interplay between individual, interpersonal and environmental (structural) factors.

In support of greater recognition of the interplay between students and the school climate, Knage (2023) concurred that CYP might have valid reasons for their absences from school relating to their subjective experience. They called on future research to consider the complexities of student lives and to draw on theoretical frameworks that recognise the interaction between students as individuals and their schooling environments. Interpersonal interactions, such as those with teachers, may be one such valid reason for school attendance difficulties. In a study of 263 students Filippello et al. (2019) explored how teachers' behaviour towards students influenced students' feelings of self-determination. They found that students who perceived their teachers as controlling or unsupportive were more likely to have high school absences. Likewise, Bacon and Kearney (2020) examined how school climate related to rates of absenteeism in American students ($n = 128, 381$). They found factors such as academic, social and physical safety were concerns that increased a CYP's likelihood of not attending school, indicating a relationship between interpersonal interactions and school attendance patterns.

Similarly, other studies have shown that microaggressions in the school setting may contribute to a CYP's feeling of belonging or safety. Microaggressions, the subtle or seemingly innocuous verbal, non-verbal or environmental slights that demean or devalue a CYP based on their identity, can detrimentally impact the educational climate or culture (Ogunyemi et al. 2020). In their study of disabled middle school students ($n = 82$), González (2024) found that academic motivation and perceptions of school climate were impacted by exposure to microaggressions in the school setting. Further, they revealed that exposure to microaggressions significantly predicted a CYP's sense of safety at school (González, 2024).

Viewing school related school distress through a lens of structural, interpersonal and individual barriers to attending school, provides insights into the reasons why CYP find school attendance difficult. In their conceptual paper on the pedagogy of refusal, Miller (2016) highlighted that the act of refusing may be seen as an act of self-preservation, where students' perception of an unwelcoming educational environment may lead to them limiting their attendance as a means to protect themselves. Additionally, Miller (2016) highlighted that students may be made vulnerable by the education setting, whereby CYP feel unsafe in a school setting because their identity and needs are not acknowledged or supported in the educational context. Building on this understanding of stressors that influence a CYP's experience of school, and Connelly et al.'s (2023) earlier work on school distress, we propose that feeling unsafe in a school setting may lead to a significant stress response in CYP, that can escalate to emotional distress. Further we highlight how the stress/distress relationship may develop into school can't as a result of the diminished capacity experienced by CYP.

Though school refusal has previously conceptualised the phenomenon as related to the anxiety levels of the CYP and explored some of the factors that contribute to the complexity of school attendance behaviour and patterns, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the factors that create stress and the distress that results, is needed. In particular, consideration of intersectionality and the intersecting identity and experiences of the students made most vulnerable, including the ways that these individual attributes interact with structural and interpersonal elements may reduce capacity, and thus school can't will add insight to the issue.

Intersectional perspectives

This paper takes an intersectional approach (Bešić 2020) that recognises that the experience of school can't is not homogenous across all student groups. It is a complex phenomenon whereby a number of axes of identity and experiences interact that can protect the child or compound the impact of school can't. Whilst this section does not exhaust all the possible intersecting identities and experiences for CYP, those discussed are important starting points identified in the literature. To understand the relationship between intersectionality aspects of oppression, intersecting identities and experiences, school related stress/distress and the school setting, this section is structured around four interconnected categories of barriers to school attendance found by a German study: emotional distress, lack of social belonging, negative teacher-student dynamics, and stressors in the home environment (Enderle et al. 2024). These categories reflect the dynamic nature of interactions between students as individuals and complex school, family and community environments.

Emotional stress/distress

The origins of the emotional stress/distress that leads to diminished capacity and school can't is likely to be different for different CYP. A systematic review of ecological factors present in school refusal identified anxiety symptoms and diverse learning needs as the most common differentiators between CYP who do and do not experience school refusal (Leduc et al. 2024). In Australia, the most comprehensive submission to the Senate Inquiry was informed by the living experience of 441 parents in the network School Can't (School Phobia, School Refusal) Australia (Rogers & Westphal, 2022). These parents reported CYP experiencing distress, frustration, anger, social isolation, judgement, and shame in school settings. At home, children experienced anxiety, depression, and "severe school can't" (Rogers & Westphal, 2022, p.6). The ongoing stress of these experiences was understood to result in a trauma response and ongoing negative mental and physical health impacts.

Additionally, there is a relationship between school related emotional distress and the educational learning needs of CYP. Of the children included in the School Can't Australia submission, 73% had been diagnosed with a disability, most commonly autism and/or ADHD (Rogers & Westphal, 2022). Similarly, Connolly et al.'s (2023) UK study of 947 parents of CYP with experience of school distress, analysed together with an age-matched control group, found that 92.1% of CYP experiencing school distress were described as neurodivergent, 83.4% as autistic, 56.9% with sensory processing difficulties, and 55% with ADHD. These significant overrepresentations of neurodivergent CYP experiencing school related emotional distress point to school environments that are "difficult and detrimental to their wellbeing" (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023, p. 12).

Further to this, some student populations such as First Nations or LGBTIQ+ CYP have, on average, poorer mental health due to racism, discrimination and minority stress (Hoy-Ellis, 2021; Twizeyemariya et al. 2017). In line with this, non-White students (Childs and Lofton 2021) and LGBTQ students (Peter, et al. 2021) have higher rates of school absence than their peers. However, recent analysis by Haque, Kabir, and Khanam (2024) concluded that mental health alone is not a direct casual factor for reduced attendance. Others, such as Connolly, Constable, and Mullally (2023), found that sensory experiences at school, played a role in school stress/distress for autistic students, whilst Chan and Suen's (2023) study of LGBTIQI students in China revealed that verbal abuse and social isolation

were school based stressors. Further consideration of these school-based stressors is required, which first requires recognition of their role in school related emotional stress/distress.

Safety and belonging at school

There are a range of factors relating to the school environment, both social and physical, which contribute to safety and belonging in schools, and to school can't. These include student experiences of: relationships with peers and teachers (Childs and Lofton 2021; Enderle et al. 2024), physical buildings (Childs and Lofton 2021; Li et al. 2024), feeling unsafe, experiencing violence or conflict (Childs and Lofton 2021), including pressure from high academic demands and teaching methods (Enderle et al. 2024, CESE, 2022). Recent literature has shown that autistic CYP face challenges at school and have reduced capacity to attend school (Adams 2022), that school refusal occurs at an earlier age in autistic children (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023, Ochi et al. 2020), and they are frequently moved between schools in search of a more inclusive environment (Mitchelson, Simpson, and Adams 2024). This is rooted in several reasons, including the quality of relationships present at school. More specifically, the school can't of CYP with autism is significantly associated with bullying (Ochi et al. 2020), and the physical school environment being designed for neurotypical brains and bodies (Li et al. 2024). In their study with parents of 200 autistic young people, Li et al. (2024) found that physical factors such as transitions between spaces and sensory stimuli had a greater impact on school participation than family factors or the traits of the child.

Research into the school experiences of LGBTQ+ CYP consistently also demonstrates that schools are hostile places for these CYP. A large scale, longitudinal Canadian study by Peter, et al. (2021) found that 37% of 2SLGBTQ (Two Spirit LGBTQ) students had skipped school because they felt unsafe at school or on the way to school, with 48% of trans students had skipped school due to feeling unsafe, compared to 18% of cisgender, heterosexual students. Among the 2SLGBTQ participants, more than half the Indigenous students reported skipping school because they felt unsafe. Gender and sexuality diverse students cannot rely on teachers supporting them. These young people report that in schools, 57% of adults never, or hardly ever intervened positively in the case of homophobic language, and 44% never or hardly ever intervened positively in the case of transphobic or homophobic physical harassment (Ullman 2021).

Further, a recent systematic review demonstrated that schools have an adverse impact on trans students in a number of ways, finding structural, interpersonal and individual level barriers to optimal mental health and educational outcomes (Day and Brömdal 2024). The conceptualisation of the school setting as a potentially harmful environment, or one that does not always promote a sense of belonging was supported by an Australian study with parents of trans CYP that indicated that an inability to attend school for a period of time was not uncommon for trans CYP, and parents worked hard to find appropriate education settings (Townley and Henderson 2024).

Students with innate variations of sex characteristics (also known as intersex variations/traits) often feel invisible and unsafe in schools, and have high rates of non-school attendance (Intersex Human Rights Australia 2022). This was evidenced in Jones et al. (2016) study that reported how only one quarter of Australian young people with intersex variations rated their education experiences positively, with one fifth not completing high school.

Home and neighbourhood environment

The family dynamic and connection to community also plays a role in the likelihood of a CYP experiencing challenges with school attendance. School non-attendance is often linked to family related factors, including economic disadvantage, lower parental education levels, family respect for education, low family connectedness to school, and low support for homework completion (CESE, 2022). Parents not in paid or stable employment, stressful home circumstances, at least one parent born overseas, poor parental mental and physical health, and fewer positive parent-child interactions are factors associated with higher rates of absence (CESE, 2022). Cultural factors are also linked to school attendance difficulties and contribute to the intersection of identities in CYP experiencing school-related emotional stress/distress. Childs and Lofton (2021) noted that the deficit approach is often used with students who also face racial discrimination. An example of this deficit approach is that cultural practices and obligations, such as those related to the death of a community member, are constructed as attendance barriers for Australian First Nations CYP (CESE, 2022).

Specifically, socio-economic status is a dominant lens that is deployed by education policy, where children in low socio-economic families and locations are viewed as at risk of poor school attendance (CESE, 2022). This is supported by Childs and Lofton (2021) who highlighted that students living with poverty had lower attendance rates and a deficit approach was often taken in response to attendance difficulties. Hayes and Skattebol (2015) explored school exclusion for young people in low socio-economic families, noting that many of their young participants were also not White. They argued that families and communities, and the students themselves, do want the young people to go to school and achieve educational qualifications, because they understand that this may interrupt intergenerational disadvantage. However, schools are such “shitty” (p. 522) places that this is often not possible. This supports the assertion that schools can be hostile environments that contribute to the stress/distress of CYP and school related emotional distress.

The relationship between the family, school and social disadvantage is bi-directional. Reports from families indicate that the longer the child is experiencing difficulty, the more the socio-economic status of the family is eroded (Rogers & Westphal, 2022). Indeed, time caring for a child with school stress/distress, and seeking out alternative educational possibilities can mean a loss of income, community and housing. Adams (2022) found a significant covariance between school refusal in autistic children and parental non-employment, identifying parental non-employment as a risk factor for school refusal, despite acknowledging the possibility that parenting an autistic child through the experience of school can't may in fact lead to loss of employment. The more parents are under stress the harder it is for them to look after the child compassionately and persevere in seeking possibilities to heal stress/distress and find supportive and accessible education (Bahali et al. 2011).

Utilising Enderle et al. (2024) categories of barriers to school attendance, including emotional distress, lack of social belonging, negative teacher-student dynamics and stressors in the home environment allows for a deeper consideration of the diverse and intersecting identities and experiences of students who are most impacted by school related emotional distress.

A conceptual lens for school related emotional stress/distress

We propose a school-related emotional stress/distress conceptual lens that combines a dynamic socio-ecological framework with trauma informed pedagogy to describe the cycle

of school related emotional stress/distress that results in school can't. We argue that the emotional stress/distress can be understood as a trauma response that contributes to a diminished capacity to attend school (Brunzell, Stokes, and Waters 2016) that means students cannot, rather than will not, attend school). Drawing on a revised and dynamic socio-ecological model adapted by Clark, White Hughto, and Pachankis (2017) and White Hughto et al. (2018) we visually highlight the interlocking and dynamic forces informing school can't. This model, also used elsewhere in educational and youth settings (Day and Brömdal 2024; Watson et al. 2024) explores the complex interplay of structural, interpersonal, and individual barriers influencing and affecting vulnerable students' experiences to meaningfully engage with education in school settings (see Figure 1).

At the structural level, unsupportive systemic cultures, including learning and teaching material, curriculum and educational policies are inhibiting CYP facing school can't from experiencing positive educational outcomes (Mokhtarian 2024; Rogers and Westphal 2022). Furthermore, due to lack of explicit and consistent school attendance and trauma-informed policies, affirming procedures and practices, education is not accessible for CYP experiencing school can't, resulting in their poor educational outcomes (Rogers and Westphal 2022; Ulaş and Seçer 2024). These approaches would support schools to reduce stressors that make attending school feel threatening, unsafe and impossible (Heimans et al. 2024). This consequently requires systemic change and a shift in societal thinking to help remove a culture passing judgment, blame and shame on to students and families experiencing school can't, and instead seek to understand and attend to the root cause of their distress leading to school can't (Heimans et al. 2024).

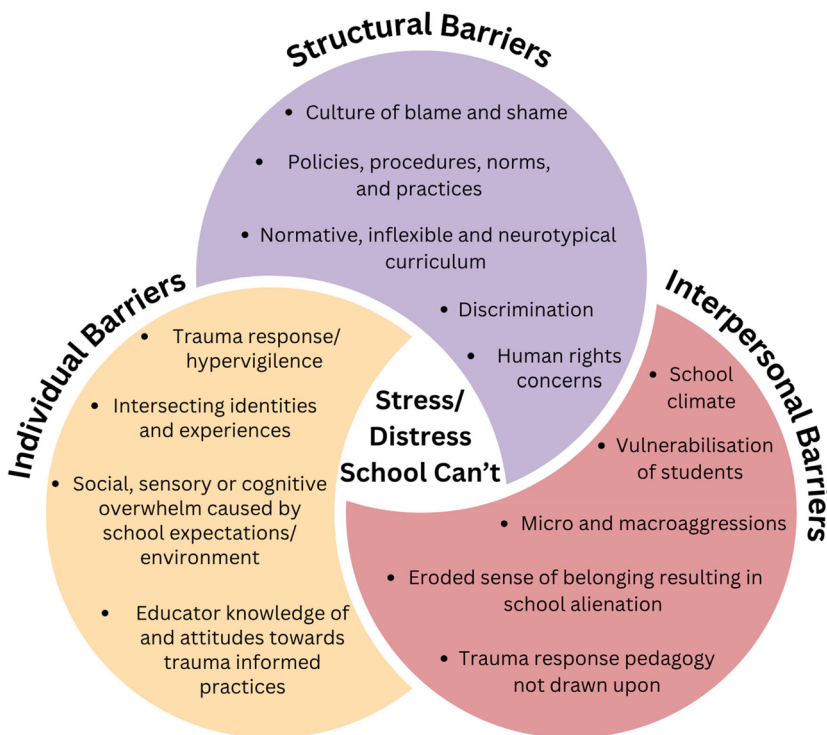


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of structural, interpersonal and individual barriers informing school can't and stress/distress relationships.

Our conceptual lens of school related emotional stress/distress and school can't recognises that at the interpersonal level, the educational experiences and educational outcomes of CYP experiencing school can't are shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of peers and school staff that contribute to the school culture and environment being emotionally and physically unsafe (Haque, Kabir, and Khanam 2024; Rogers and Westphal 2022). Distressing learning environments that make attending school feel threatening, and unsafe, limit the capacity of the CYP, including bullying, physical abuse, micro and macro aggressions, emotional neglect, peer exclusion, academic pressure, physical buildings and school environments. These can individually and collectively have a traumatising effect on the health and wellbeing of CYP experiencing school can't (Heyne et al. 2019).

From a health and wellbeing perspective, this non-affirming, stigmatised, hostile and non-supportive learning environment has numerous negative, harmful and violent consequences, illustrated by a nervous system stress response influenced by these various stressors (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023; Rogers and Westphal 2022). However, through safe and supportive interactions between educational systems, staff, and peers, including positive school staff interventions when CYP are verbally, emotionally and physically abused or harassed by peers, there can be a shift in how the interpersonal barriers may inform school can't. Similarly, by providing opportunities and support for people in educational settings to critically think about how particular hostile, unsafe and unsupportive behaviours and environments, including not catering for diverse learning needs, may collectively contribute to anxiety, other anxiety-related symptoms, and ultimately school can't, there is a change in the narrative (Leduc et al. 2024).

The individual level then, concerns the personal characteristics of CYP, their peers, educational staff, including school psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and guidance staff. For example, the lack of trauma-informed knowledge and understanding from educational staff and peers about the neurological responses to stress and need for safety can quickly translate into school can't (Rogers and Westphal 2022). The individual lens also encompasses the CYP experiencing school can't, the intersectional forms of oppression associated with their identity and how this contributes to their stress response, and the consequential educational outcomes of the CYP affected by school can't and their family.

The conceptual lens also acknowledges the individual factors that influence the phenomenon and recognises school can't as a neurological and trauma response (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021) as shown in Figure 2. In many instances, CYP may feel that school can't is a survival mechanism (Miller 2016) or a way to respond to burnout (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023). As such, students experiencing school can't may feel it is safer to hide and dissociate themselves from others and their schooling. This is a strategy to protect themselves from further exposure to the root cause of their distress and school can't's such as, bullying, discrimination, physical violence, academic pressure, and unmet needs (Connolly, Constable, and Mullally 2023; Leduc et al. 2024; Miller 2016).

Trauma informed pedagogy offers a critical lens through which to conceptually understand the school can't phenomenon, emphasising the interplay of safety, neurobiological responses, and adaptive behaviours in school environments. Trauma, as described by Nadal, Erazo, and King (2019), takes many forms, from dramatic instances like physical abuse to subtler yet persistent experiences such as microaggressions and emotional neglect. As a result, these daily stressors in the school environment, such as those discussed above, create distress and can accumulate over time, to the point where students who feel unsafe are less

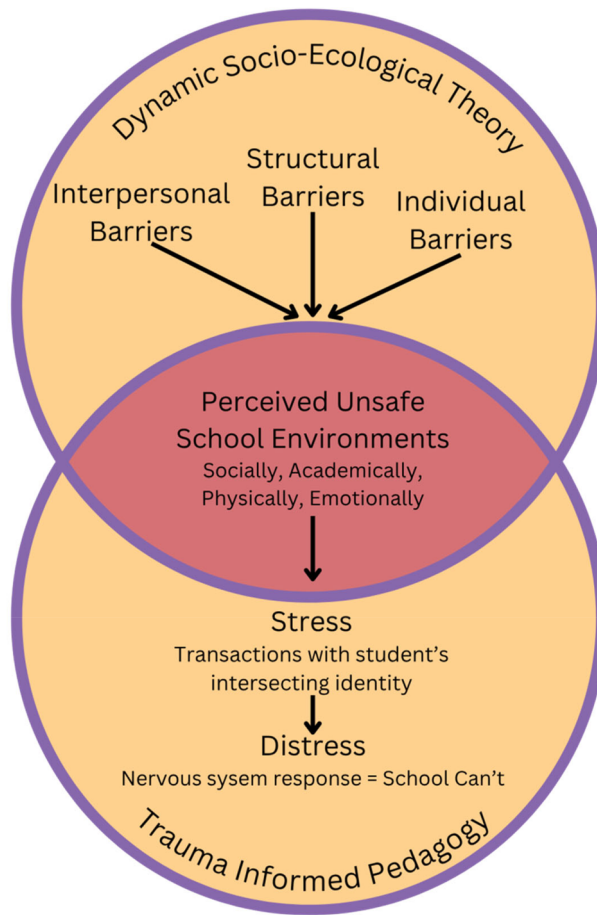


Figure 2. Conceptualising school can't as a distress response to stressful school environments.

able to regulate their emotions and are more likely to exaggerate threats (Hughes et al. 2010). This sense of unease, compounded by chronic exposure to stressors, result in a lack of capacity to attend school. This manifests as school can't, where attendance and participation become insurmountable challenges for students.

When an individual CYP finds themselves having to attend a school environment that they perceive as overwhelmingly stressful (socially, academically, emotionally, physically), it can lead to a heightened sensitivity in the brain to these perceived threats (van der Kolk 2014). This sensitivity, reflected in the amygdala's hyperactivity, drives a state of hypervigilance where students are constantly on alert. The 'fight, flight, or freeze' response, mediated by stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, becomes a dominant mode of functioning (Sheridan and McLaughlin 2020). Whilst this response is adaptive in the short term, its chronic activation in environments perceived as unsafe hinders emotional regulation and cognitive functioning. Miller (2016) underscores the emotional labour associated with navigating micro and macroaggressions, which amplifies this hypervigilance and leaves students emotionally and physically exhausted. For students, these stress responses often manifest in physical symptoms, such as headaches or nausea, as documented by Knage (2023). Havik and Ingul (2021) described school refusal as a last resort coping strategy,

rooted in students' perceptions of school as threatening or overwhelming. This aligns with Elliott and Place (2019) findings that interpersonal dynamics, such as bullying, can evoke post-traumatic stress responses, further reinforcing school related emotional stress/distress behaviours. In this context, school can't is not a matter of defiance or lack of will but an adaptive response to environments that fail to meet students' needs for safety and create a sense of distress. The concept of safety is pivotal in understanding and addressing the stress/distress cycle of school can't.

Lyon and Cotler (2007) highlight the importance of creating predictable and supportive environments to reduce the brain's stress response. Trauma-informed approaches, which emphasise safety and emotional validation and that can be implemented by individual educators, as well as systemically, help students shift out of survival mode, enabling the re-engagement of the prefrontal cortex and improving cognitive and emotional functioning (Lyon and Cotler 2007). As a pedagogical framework, trauma informed practice also encourages educators to view behaviours not as problematic but as reflective of students' adaptive responses to stressors and trauma. For example, Heyne et al. (2019) advocate for strategies that address the root causes of school related emotional stress/distress, such as anxiety-provoking social interactions or unpredictable routines, to create environments where students feel secure. Downey (2007) further supported the notion that trauma-informed practices can foster resilience by addressing the neurobiological underpinnings of chronic stress and promoting emotional regulation. By understanding the complex interplay of trauma, safety, and neurobiology, educators and policymakers can design holistic interventions that focus not only on attendance but also on the broader wellbeing of students. These approaches ensure that students feel valued, understood, and supported, ultimately enabling them to the challenges of school can't and thrive in educational settings.

Through a whole-school approach, developed and led by CYP and their families experiencing school can't, as well as advocates and allies (Leslie, Brown, and Larsen 2025;; Rogers and Westphal 2022; Webster, Cumming, and Rowland 2016), it is recommended to include and mandate trauma-informed and inclusive anti-bullying policies and guidelines. Including education on root causes informing school-related emotional distress in school curriculums and teacher education programs are equally paramount. Attending to the complex interplay of structural, interpersonal, and individual barriers influencing and affecting vulnerable students' experiences to meaningfully engage with education in school settings, collectively they have the potential to address the growing challenge of school-related distress informing school can't (Rogers and Westphal 2022).

Implications for research

Reconceptualising school refusal as school can't, viewing the phenomenon through a dynamic socio-ecological model (Day and Brömdal 2024) and understanding the role of structural, interpersonal, and individual factors, broadens the possibilities for research in this space through greater recognition of the role the environment plays as a stress/distress or for CYP who are made invisible and vulnerable by the school setting (Havik and Ingul 2021; Miller 2016). This shift invites researchers to consider the interplay of structural, interpersonal, and individual factors as contributors to heightened stress and as leading to a trauma response. Research that continues to pathologise the CYP, or present school can't as child centric, rather than recognising the relationship between the structural,

interpersonal and individual barriers informing school non-attendance will fail to capture the complexity of the phenomenon or point to effective solutions. Additionally, in line with the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry, there is a need for researchers to co-construct research with those with living experiences to better understand the subjective reality of school can't (Knage 2023). The emphasis on the subjectification of research will help researchers to amplify the voices of those with living experiences.

Implications for practice

In embracing a dynamic socio-ecological model of school can't, consideration can be given to how well-equipped schools are to provide safe and nurturing learning environments through the interpersonal interactions and structural elements. A deeper understanding of forces that make CYP vulnerable (Carel and Kidd 2025;; Miller 2016), especially those who have intersecting identities and experiences, can allow schools to support CYP and families from an empathetic perspective. Providing school environments that foster a sense of safety, thus reducing the likelihood of a stress or trauma response (Brunzell, Stokes, and Waters 2016) will facilitate students from diverse backgrounds to participate in schools meaningfully, whether this is in mainstream or alternative education settings (Reimer and Longmuir 2021). This will be a crucial step towards reducing the emotional stress/distress felt by an increasing number of students, and in also improving school attendance data. In addition, increased representation of intersecting identities and experiences within schooling staff, resources and policies would help to foster a sense of safety and belonging for students of diverse backgrounds and reduce the identity erasure that these CYP can feel (Miller 2016). Positive recognition of intersecting identities and experiences would additionally serve to validate, humanise, affirm and normalise diverse ways of *being* and thus reduce contributors to stress and trauma (Papa and Parmenter 2025). In turn, schools that promote *safe spaces* would create settings where CYP belong and *can* attend in line with human rights obligations concerning their right to an education (UN, 1948; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

Implication for policy

Adopting a new conceptual lens through which to view school can't, opens possibilities for policy to reflect this more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the structural, interpersonal and individual elements that contribute to the stress/distress response triggered in CYP made vulnerable by the school setting. The focus becomes less about interventions for CYP experiencing *school can't* (Melvin et al. 2025) and more about considering ways to facilitate *school can* through proactive planning that could prevent the reduced capacity in CYP that leads to school can't. Government and school-based policy needs to shift from psychosocial supports and interventions for those experiencing school can't and emphasise prevention of the stress/distress response by addressing the structural, interpersonal and individual barriers that exist in alignment with their human rights obligations concerning the right to access an education (UN, 1948; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). Though there are considerable Australian and international student wellbeing frameworks already enacted across educational jurisdictions globally, there is a need to revise how these frameworks are pragmatically enacted.

Consideration can also be given to the considerable teacher workload and burnout concerns (Oberg, Macmahon, and Carroll 2025), as addressing the support and wellbeing needs of teachers and school administrators will enhance their capacity to address the factors which increase a CYP's stress response within the school setting, culminating in school can't.

Conclusion

This paper reconceptualises school refusal to school can't by drawing on a dynamic socio-ecological understanding, emphasising the critical relationship between intersecting identities and experiences, stress and trauma responses, and vulnerability within structural, interpersonal, and individual educational contexts. For a growing number of CYP, the inability to attend school is not a matter of choice. Rather, it has become an adaptive response to school environments that have failed to foster a sense of safety and belonging, or to cater for their diverse needs. Intersectional forms of oppression associated with marginalised identities and experiences, such as neurodivergence, LGBTQI+ status, socio-economic status, and race often compound the challenges faced by CYP resulting in exclusion, systemic marginalisation and trauma. Day-to-day school experiences become cumulative stressors that work against a student's need for social, emotional, sensory and physical safety.

Greater recognition of school can't as a survival mechanism will broaden the understanding of school attendance issues and discourses, and place emphasis on the systemic and environmental factors that contribute to the emotional distress associated with school attendance issues. Adopting trauma-informed practices and promoting greater representation and sensitivity to intersectionality and students with marginalised and intersecting identities and experiences in school policies, educators can reduce the vulnerabilisation of these students and foster environments where all students feel a sense of belonging. The move from reactive psychosocial interventions that place the onus of change on the CYP, to preventive measures need to rely upon informed collaboration with those who have living experience. This will allow both researchers, community stakeholders, and educational settings to affirm and empower diverse student populations. This reconceptualisation invites researchers, educators and policy makers to undertake a comprehensive rethinking of educational priorities, aiming not merely for attendance but for the holistic wellbeing, meaningful engagement, and success of every student.

Ethical approval

This project did not require ethical approval

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding or grants were received or utilised in the writing of this article. Tiffany and Louise are Board Members for School Can't Australia.

ORCID

Rachel Leslie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0485-181X>
 Glenys Oberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3790-4519>
 Cris Townley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5996-2878>
 Annette Brömdal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1307-1794>

Data availability statement

There is no data associated with this paper.

References

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. 2024. "Student Attendance." <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/student-attendance>
- Australian Government Department of Education. 2024. "The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters." https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000090/toc_pdf/Thenationaltrendofschoolrefusalandrelatedmatters.pdf
- Bacon, V. R., and C. A. Kearney. 2020. "School Climate and Student-Based Contextual Learning Factors as Predictors of School Absenteeism Severity at Multiple Levels via CHAID Analysis." *Children and Youth Services Review* 118: 105452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105452>.
- Adams, D. 2022. "Child and Parental Mental Health as Correlates of School Non-Attendance and School Refusal in Children on the Autism Spectrum." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 52 (8): 3353–3365. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05211-5>.
- Bahali, K., A. Y. Tahiroglu, A. Avci, and G. Seydaoglu. 2011. "Parental Psychological Symptoms and Familial Risk Factors of Children and Adolescents Who Exhibit School Refusal." *East Asian Archives of Psychiatry: Official Journal of the Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists = Dong Ya Jing Shen ke Xue Zhi: Xianggang Jing Shen ke yi Xue Yuan qi Kan* 21 (4): 164–169. <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.891167358105280>.
- Bešić, E. 2020. "Intersectionality: A Pathway towards Inclusive Education?" *Prospects* 49 (3-4): 111–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09461-6>.
- Brown, A. 2022. "Unintelligibility, Personhood and Curriculum Silences of Intersex Bodies in the Life Orientation High School Classroom: A Case Study." *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 18 (1): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v18i1.1099>.
- Brunzell, T., H. Stokes, and L. Waters. 2016. "Trauma-Informed Positive Education: Using Positive Psychology to Strengthen Vulnerable Students." *Contemporary School Psychology* 23 (4): 343–355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-018-00290-3>.
- Annette, Brömdal, Agli, Zavros-Orr, Kirstine, Hand, Bonnie, Hart, lisahunter, (2021). Towards a Whole-School Approach for Sexuality Education in Supporting and Upholding the Rights and Health of Students with Intersex Variations. *Sex Education*, 21(5), 568–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1864726>.
- Carel, H., and I. J. Kidd. 2025. "Individual Vices and Institutional Failings as Drivers of Vulnerabilisation." *Social Epistemology* 39 (2): 150–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2024.2400083>.
- Childs, J., and R. Lofton. 2021. "Masking Attendance: How Education Policy Distracts from the Wicked Problem(s) of Chronic Absenteeism." *Educational Policy* 35 (2): 213–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820986771>.
- Clark, K. A., J. M. White Hughto, and J. E. Pachankis. 2017. "What's the Right Thing to Do?" Correctional Healthcare Providers' Knowledge, Attitudes and Experiences Caring for Transgender Inmates." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 193: 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.09.052>.

- Connolly, S., K. Patterson, E. Hockey, and S. L. Mullally. 2022. "School Distress in UK School Children: Characteristics and Consequences." medRxiv. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.09.28.22280324>.
- Connolly, S. E., H. L. Constable, and S. L. Mullally. 2023. "School Distress and the School Attendance Crisis: A Story Dominated by Neurodivergence and Unmet Need." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14: 1237052. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1237052>.
- Day, M., and A. Brömdal. 2024. "Mental Health Outcomes of Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Schools: A Systematic Literature Review." *International Journal of Transgender Health*: 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2024.2359934>.
- Dee, Thomas S. 2024. "No One-Size-Fits-All Solution to Chronic Absenteeism." *Phi Delta Kappan* 106 (3): 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00317217241295423>.
- Devenney, R., and C. O'Toole. 2021. "What Kind of Education System Are we Offering?: The Views of Education Professionals on School Refusal." *International Journal of Educational Psychology* 10 (1): 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.2021.7304>.
- Downey, L. 2007. "Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatized Children." Child Safety Commissioner <https://childabusestory.com.au/calmer-classrooms-guide-trauma>
- Enderle, C., S. Kreitz-Sandberg, Å. Backlund, J. Isaksson, U. Fredriksson, and H. Ricking. 2024. "Secondary School Students' Perspectives on Supports for Overcoming School Attendance Problems: A Qualitative Case Study in Germany." *Frontiers in Education* 9: 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1405395>.
- Elliott, J. G., and M. Place. 2019. "Practitioner Review: School Refusal: Developments in Conceptualisation and Treatment since 2000." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines* 60 (1): 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12848>.
- Filippello, P., C. Buzzai, S. Costa, and L. Sorrenti. 2019. "School Refusal and Absenteeism: Perception of Teacher Behaviors, Psychological Basic Needs, and Academic Achievement." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: 1471. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01471>.
- Francis, D. A. 2025. "Nae Problem Here": Troubling Race and Racism in Scottish Education." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 164: 105092. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2025.105092>.
- Gonzalez, N. M. T. 2024. Impact of Ableist Microaggressions on Dis/Abled Youth: Perceptions of School Climate and Academic Motivation (Doctoral dissertation, Illinois State University). <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1961>
- González, C., and C. J. Inglés. 2019. "Current Advances on School Refusal and Other Attendance Problems: An International Perspective. Introduction to the Special Issue." *European Journal of Education* 12 (1): 5–9. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/199184989.pdf>.
- Haque, U. M., E. Kabir, and R. Khanam. 2024. "Investigating School Absenteeism and Refusal among Australian Children and Adolescents Using Apriori Association Rule Mining." *Scientific Reports* 14 (1): 1907. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-51230-4>.
- Hascher, T., and A. Hadjar. 2018. "School Alienation – Theoretical Approaches and Educational Research." *Educational Research* 60 (2): 171–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2018.1443021>.
- Havik, T., and J. M. Ingul. 2021. "How to Understand School Refusal." *Frontiers in Education* 6: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.715177>.
- Hayes, D., and J. Skattebol. 2014. "Education and the Politics of Belonging: Attachments and Actions." In *Handbook of Children & Youth Studies*, edited by J. Wyn & H. Cahill, 517–528. Singapore: Springer.
- Heimans, S., G. Biesta, K. Takayama, and M. Kettle. 2024. "School Can't? Thinking about Refusal in Education." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 52 (1): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2023.2300890>.
- Heyne, D., M. Brouwer-Borghuis, J. Vermue, C. van Helvoirt, and G. J. W. Aerts. 2021. "Knowing What Works: A Roadmap for School Refusal Interventions Based on the Views of Stakeholders Netherlands Initiative for Education Research." <https://www.nro.nl/sites/nro/files/media-files/Eindrapport%20Knowing%20what%20works%20%28nov.%202021%29.pdf>
- Heyne, D., C. Gentle-Genitty, M. Gren Landell, G. Melvin, B. Chu, M. Gallé-Tessonneau, K. G. Askeland, et al. 2020. "Improving School Attendance by Enhancing Communication among Stakeholders: Establishment of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA)." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 29 (7): 1023–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-019-01380-y>.

- Heyne, D., M. Gren-Landell, G. Melvin, and C. Gentle-Genitty. 2019. "Differentiation between School Attendance Problems: Why and How?" *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 26 (1): 8–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>.
- Horton, C. 2023. "Institutional Cisnormativity and Educational Injustice: Trans Children's Experiences in Primary and Early Secondary Education in the UK." *The British Journal of Educational Psychology* 93 (1): 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12540>.
- Hoy-Ellis, C. P. 2021. Just practice with midlife and older LGBTQ adults. In J. L. Finn (Ed.), *The just practice framework in action: Contemporary case studies* (pp. 25–37). Oxford University Press.
- Hughes, E. K., E. Gullone, A. Dudley, and B. Tonge. 2010. "A Case-Control Study of Emotion Regulation and School Refusal in Children and Adolescents." *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 30 (5): 691–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431609341049>.
- Inglés, C. J., C. González-Maciá, J. M. García-Fernández, M. Vicent, and M. C. Martínez-Monteagudo. 2015. "Current Status of Research on School Refusal." *European Journal of Education and Psychology* 8 (1): 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejeps.2015.10.005>.
- Intersex Human Rights Australia (IHRA). 2022. "Submission to the Inquiry on School Refusal: 'School I Can't and School Phobia.'" (Submission 28) https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Submissions
- Jones, T., B. Hart, M. Carpenter, G. Ansara, W. Leonard, and J. Lucke. 2016. *Intersex: Stories and Statistics from Australia*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.
- Kearney, C. A., González, C., Graczyk, P. A., & Fornander, M. J. 2019. Reconciling contemporary approaches to school attendance and school absenteeism: Toward promotion and nimble response, global policy review and implementation, and future adaptability (Part 1). *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 2222. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02222>
- Kearney, C. A., and C. González. 2022. "Unlearning School Attendance and Its Problems: Moving from Historical Categories to Postmodern Dimensions." *Frontiers in Education* 7: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.977672>.
- Kearney, C. A., and W. K. Silverman. 1993. "Measuring the Function of School Refusal Behavior: The School Refusal Assessment Scale." *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* 22 (1): 85–96. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp2201_9.
- Knage, F. S. 2023. "Beyond the School Refusal/Truancy Binary: Engaging with the Complexities of Extended School Non-Attendance." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 32 (4): 1013–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2021.1966827>.
- Kreitz-Sandberg, S., A. Backlund, U. Fredriksson, J. Isaksson, M. Rasmusson, and M. G. Landell. 2022. "Recording and Reporting School Attendance and Absence: International Comparative Views on Attendance Statistics in Sweden, Germany, England, and Japan." *ORBIS SCHOLAE* 16 (3): 187–212. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2023.9>.
- Leduc, K., A.-M. Tougas, V. Robert, and C. Boulanger. 2024. "School Refusal in Youth: A Systematic Review of Ecological Factors." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 55 (4): 1044–1062. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01469-7>.
- Leslie, R., A. Brown, and E. Larsen. 2025. "Parental Allyship for Children With Dyslexia: A Conceptual Lens on Disability Experience." *Learning Disability Quarterly* 48 (1): 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073194872412517>.
- Lester, K. J., and D. Michelson. 2024. "Perfect storm: emotionally based school avoidance in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context." *BMJ Ment Health* 27 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjment-2023-300944>
- Li, B., D. Heyne, A. Scheeren, E. Blijd-Hoogewys, and C. Rieffe. 2024. "School Participation of Autistic Youths: The Influence of Youth, Family and School Factors." *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 28 (9): 2295–2310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613231225490>.
- Lyon, A. R., and S. Cotler. 2007. "Toward Reduced Bias and Increased Utility in the Assessment of School Refusal Behavior: The Case for Diverse Samples and Evaluations of Context." *Psychology in the Schools* 44 (6): 551–565. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20247>.
- Mallee District Aboriginal Services. 2022. "Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters Submission 43 to the Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal

- and Related Matters.” <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=5656da2d-c420-4b07-83d8-806efb78a008&subId=732598>
- Melvin, G., L. McKay-Brown, D. Heyne, and L. Cameron. 2025. “Barriers to School Attendance and Reasons for Student Absence: Rapid Literature Review.” Australian Education Research Organisation <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-12/barriers-school-attendance-and-reasons-for-student-absence-aa.pdf>
- Miller, S. 2016. “Trans*+ Ing Classrooms: The Pedagogy of Refusal as Mediator for Learning.” *Social Sciences* 5 (3): 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5030034>.
- Mitchelson, H., K. Simpson, and D. Adams. 2024. “Should we Stay or Should we Go? Parent Experiences of Moving or considering Moving Their Autistic Child between Mainstream Schools.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28 (6): 839–856. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1968515>.
- Mokhtarian, N. 2024. “Roll Call: A Scoping Review for School Attendance Problems Among Youth.” Doctoral diss., Université d’Ottawa| University of Ottawa. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/bad2b9f9-ef72-4b08-b470-b495dc1ce45c/content>.
- Nadal, K. L., T. Erazo, and R. King. 2019. “Challenging Definitions of Psychological Trauma: Connecting Racial Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress.” *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology* 11 (2): 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.11.2.2-16>.
- Nishimura, T., M. Wakuta, Y. Osuka, N. Tsukui, I. Hirata, M. Takahashi, ... and A. Senju. 2024. “Early detection of students’ mental health issues from a traditional daily health observation scheme in Japanese schools and its digitalization.” *Frontiers in Public Health* 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1430011>
- Oberg, G., S. Macmahon, and A. Carroll. 2025. “Assessing the Interplay: Teacher Efficacy, Compassion Fatigue, and Educator Well-Being in Australia.” *The Australian Educational Researcher* 52 (2): 1105–1131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00755-8>.
- Ochi, M., K. Kawabe, S. Ochi, T. Miyama, F. Horiuchi, and S-i Ueno. 2020. “School Refusal and Bullying in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 14 (1): 17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00325-7>.
- Ogunyemi, D., C. Clare, Y. M. Astudillo, M. Marseille, E. Manu, and S. Kim. 2020. “Microaggressions in the Learning Environment: A Systematic Review.” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 13 (2): 97–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000107>.
- Papa, L. A., and J. G. Parmenter. 2025. “At the Intersection of Intersectional Identity and Microaggressions: An Examination of the Experiences and Identity of Sexual and Gender Diverse BIPOC Individuals.” *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 31 (1): 175–186. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000624>.
- Peter, T, et al. 2021. “Still in Every Class in Every School. Final Report on the Second Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools. Egale Canada Human Rights Trust.” https://indd.adobe.com/view/publication/3836f91b-2db1-405b-80cc-b683cc863907/2o98/publication-web-resources/pdf/Climate_Survey_-_Still_Every_Class_In_Every_School.pdf
- Reimer, K., and F. Longmuir. 2021. “Humanising Students as a Micro-Resistance Practice in Australian Alternative Education Settings.” In *Global Perspectives on Microaggressions in Schools*, edited by J. K. Corkett, C. L. Cho, & A. Steele. New York: Routledge.
- Rogers, L., and T. Westphal. 2022. “Parent Perspectives on School Can’t: Implications for Health, Welfare, Disability and Education.” (Submission 76) https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Submissions
- Sheridan, M. A., and K. A. McLaughlin. 2020. “Neurodevelopmental Mechanisms Linking ACEs with Psychopathology.” In *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Using Evidence to Advance Research, Practice, Policy, and Prevention*, edited by G. J. G. Asmundson & T. O. Afifi, 265–285. San Diego, USA: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-816065-7.00015-X>.
- Tekin, I., and S. Aydın. 2022. “School Refusal and Anxiety among Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Scoping Review.” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2022 (185-186): 43–65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20484>.

- Townley, C., and C. Henderson. 2024. "What Parents Know: Informing a Wider Landscape of Support for Trans and Gender Diverse Children and Adolescents." *Children and Youth Services Review* 160: 107612. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107612>.
- Townley, C., and M. Moss. 2023. "Transgender and Gender Diverse Children – Submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters. In." Submission 130: Parliament of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Submissions
- Twizeyemariya, A., S. Guy, G. Furber, and L. Segal. 2017. "Risks for Mental Illness in Indigenous Australian Children: A Descriptive Study Demonstrating High Levels of Vulnerability." *The Milbank Quarterly* 95 (2): 319–357. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12263.28589608>
- Ulaş, S., and İ. Seçer. 2024. "A Systematic Review of School Refusal." *Current Psychology* 43 (21): 19407–19422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-05742-x>.
- Ullman, J. 2021. "Free2Be... Yet? The Second National Study of Australian High School Students Who Identify as Gender and Sexuality Diverse." Western Sydney University. <https://doi.org/10.26183/3pxm-2t07>.
- United Nations. 1948. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 1989. "Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights." <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- van der Kolk, B. A. 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. United Kingdom: Viking.
- van Leent, L., and N. Spina. 2023. "Teachers' Representations of Genders and Sexualities in Primary School: The Power of Curriculum and an Institutional Ideological Code." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 50 (3): 683–700. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00515-6>.
- Waltz, M., H. B. Rosqvist, N. Chown, and A. Stenning. 2020. *The Production of the 'Normal' Child: Neurodiversity and the Commodification of Parenting: A New Critical Paradigm*, 15–26. New York, USA: Routledge.
- Watson, J., I. Bryce, T. M. Phillips, T. Sanders, and A. Brömdal. 2024. "Transgender Youth, Challenges, Responses, and the Juvenile Justice System: A Systematic Literature Review of an Emerging Literature." *Youth Justice*, 24 (1): 88–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14732254231167344>.
- Webster, A., J. Cumming, and S. Rowland. 2016. *Empowering Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2084-1_11.
- White Hughto, J. M., K. A. Clark, F. L. Altice, S. L. Reisner, T. S. Kershaw, and J. E. Pachankis. 2018. "Creating, Reinforcing, and Resisting the Gender Binary: A Qualitative Study of Transgender Women's Healthcare Experiences in Sex-Segregated Jails and Prisons." *International Journal of Prisoner Health* 14 (2): 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-02-2017-0011>.