

APA 7th Edition Followed

**The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children’s
Learning Journey – Professionals’ and Parents’ Perspective.**

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EDU5001 – The Dissertation

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Abstract

This study examines how school refusal is perceived to affect young children's learning from both professionals' and parents' perspectives. Four main themes were generated from semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that school refusal was viewed as stemming from anxiety and emotional distress, with potential implications for various areas of children's development. Participants shared that refusing to go to school may affect children in many ways, both immediately and over time. They discussed how it could impact a child's confidence and their ability to manage their emotions. There was also a concern that missing school for too long might lead to fewer chances to socialise and difficulties in building resilience. Both professionals and parents felt that making a difference was about creating a safe environment and providing the right interventions at the right time to enable children to return to school. The results draw attention to an underlying message, which is that cases of school refusal are not just about attendance. These cases often reflect unmet emotional needs which, if left untreated, can interfere with a child's whole learning journey.

Keywords: *School refusal; absenteeism; young children; learning journey; parents' perspectives; professionals' perspectives*

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those children who face challenges attending school. All of you have inspired me to research this topic. You remind us that education should always be based on understanding and kindness.

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List of Acronyms

SR	School Refusal
ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
ODD	Oppositional Defiant Disorder
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5
SRAS-R	School Refusal Assessment Scale - Revised
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
SMS	Short Message Service
SMT	Senior Management Team
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation
FREC	Faculty Research Ethics Committee
NSSS	National School Support Services
EO	Educational Officer
SW	Social Worker
AH	Assistant Head
SAD	Social Anxiety Disorder
LSE	Learning Support Educator

Chapter 1: Introduction

“School refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance” (Thambirajah et al., 2008, p. 33).

When school pressures become extremely intense, they can surpass a child’s ability to cope, leaving them feeling unsupported (Leslie et al., 2025). The child does not lack the desire to learn; instead, the emotional distress creates a significant barrier. This ultimately makes school attendance seem nearly impossible (King & Bernstein, 2001). Consequently, the emotional burden of going to school can become so overwhelming that the child might avoid it altogether, even if they genuinely want to overcome their challenges (Kearney, 2008).

It is worth noting that in such cases, children miss out on their educational experience because the challenges become too much to handle. School refusal is a challenging issue that has gained growing interest in both educational and psychological studies over the past few years. According to Heyne et al. (2019), school refusal occurs when a child consistently struggles to attend school and often feels very anxious or upset, and can also exhibit challenging behaviours. Unlike truancy, where a child deliberately skips school without their parents knowing (which is more common among older children), school refusal usually occurs with the parents aware of the child's difficulties. It is closely linked to the child’s psychological well-being (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Young children

experiencing school refusal may complain of somatic symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches, particularly in the mornings before school. In addition, Egger et al. (2003) suggest that children with school refusal may experience a higher level of anxiety. This could be represented through crying or clinging, especially when they need to go to school. These behaviours underline that school refusal is not simply about disobeying rules but a complex response to internal worries and external stressors.

The importance of understanding school refusal becomes even clearer when we look at recent figures on school attendance worldwide. In Australia, for example, there was a noticeable drop in attendance from 92.6% in 2015 to 88.6% in 2023 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024). Even more worrying is the decrease in the percentage of students in Years 1–10 who attend school at least 90% of the time, from 77.8% in 2015 to just 59.8% in 2024 (ACARA, 2024). Similarly, in Oxfordshire, England, the number of students missing more than half of their school days significantly increased from 427 in 2015/16 to 2,305 in 2023/24, according to the Department for Education (Gudge, 2025).

These trends are concerning because they occur during key periods of children's learning curve. While these statistics reflect overall absenteeism rather than school refusal specifically, they remind us of the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological struggles that may play a part in some of these absences. In this regard, school refusal may represent a hidden but important contributor to the overall rise in absenteeism rates, making it a critical issue for educational stakeholders.

Cefai and Cooper (2010) highlight how important emotional education is in schools. They point out that children who face emotional difficulties are more likely to pull away from learning. Their work shows a strong link between a child's emotional health and their overall school experience, helping us understand why refusing to attend school can have such serious consequences. Similarly, studies from around the world emphasise the need for early support and incorporating a comprehensive approach to children's needs when it comes to school refusal and its effects (Havik et al., 2015; Heyne et al., 2019). These studies emphasise how emotional distress and challenges with coping strategies are central to many children's refusal behaviours. Thus, this highlights the need for support that combines both educational and psychological viewpoints.

Furthermore, school refusal can profoundly affect a child's life, disrupting not just their academic progress but also social connections and emotional well-being. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) claim that "early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain, and the extent to which brain development remains open to change throughout the life span decreases over time" (p. 188). In the context of school refusal, ongoing absences from school during the early years can interfere with important stages of a child's learning and development. Therefore, understanding school refusal means caring for the child's overall well-being and ensuring they feel supported.

Moreover, children who refuse school often miss out on peer interactions that are crucial for developing social skills. In fact, Thambirajah et al. (2008) insist that persistent absence may contribute to feelings of isolation and a decrease in self-esteem. In the longer term, patterns of school refusal in early childhood have been linked to poorer educational

attainment and an increased vulnerability to mental health difficulties in adolescence and adulthood (Egger et al., 2003).

Parents and professionals often view school refusal differently, yet both perspectives are crucial for effectively addressing the situation. According to Havik et al. (2015), parents might attribute school refusal to their child's anxiety, while professionals often consider it a clinical issue needing an intervention. How these viewpoints come together affects how school refusal is managed and the support children receive. When parents and professionals do not see eye to eye, it can delay interventions and result in solutions that do not meet the child's needs (Heyne et al., 2019). Although research on school refusal is growing, it primarily focuses on older children, leaving younger children underrepresented in research. Additionally, many studies lean heavily towards either the professional or parental view, with few of them exploring how these perspectives interact in real-world scenarios. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining how school refusal affects young children's learning, considering the insights from both caregivers and professionals.

This study is guided by two research questions: “What is the current understanding of school refusal, and how is it defined by professionals and parents?” and “What are the perceived effects of school refusal on young children’s holistic learning from professionals’ and parents’ perspectives?”. Due to the complex nature of school refusal, a qualitative research design has been chosen. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to openly share their experiences and views in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method offers valuable insights into how both professionals and parents perceive school refusal. The data

is analysed using thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, to identify, analyse, and interpret recurring themes within the participants' accounts.

My passion for understanding school refusal grew out of my personal experiences while working closely with young children in classroom settings. I often saw children who appeared distressed about going to school; some would be visibly upset when separated from their parents. When I observed more, I noticed that some seemed uninterested during lessons or expressed a longing to go home. These moments made me wonder how such feelings could affect their early learning experiences.

As I reflected further, I began asking deeper questions: How does fear influence a child's relationship with learning? What happens to their growth when anxiety takes up their energy instead of curiosity? My interest expanded from observing individual behaviours to exploring the wider systems impacting these children. I found myself curious about how parents recognise and interpret their child's struggles. What I also wanted to know is how teachers decide when to be concerned about a student who has been missing a lot of school, and how communication between home and school can either support or hinder these children's needs.

Therefore, this thesis aims to voice these often-overlooked struggles while exploring how adult responses can either perpetuate avoidance or facilitate the child's return to school. This is because understanding school refusal early is vital not only for supporting educational development but also for maintaining a child's sense of being a capable learner.

1.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the topic by outlining the background and current literature surrounding the field. It also highlights the methodological approach taken and my personal motivation for the study. The second chapter provides an extensive review of existing literature, including empirical findings from various studies and some research gaps which may be present. The third chapter details the methodology, including the qualitative design, participant recruitment, ethical considerations, data collection methods, and the thematic analysis process. The fourth chapter presents the findings from the thematic analysis, highlighting key themes from interviews with parents and professionals. The fifth chapter interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and discusses their implications for theory and practice. The final chapter summarises the study's contributions, limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter aims to appraise pertinent academic literature with reference to how school refusal can present several challenges to the child's learning journey. This literature review explains the effects that school refusal might have on young children's holistic learning development in five sections: understanding school refusal, truancy vs school refusal, navigating the school transition period, school refusal and its perceived effects on learning, and overcoming school refusal. The first part introduces what school refusal is and the various conditions that may accompany it. It will also go into how school refusal may be diagnosed.

It then considers several other factors that may potentially influence the development of school refusal, including the family context, COVID-19, and school-related influences. The second section distinguishes between truancy and school refusal to help the reader understand the difference more clearly. The third section delves into the challenges of the school transition period, as well as the aspect of reinforcement in school refusal. The fourth section explains in detail the holistic impact that school refusal may have on the child's learning from different perspectives. The fifth and final section examines the various strategies that may be useful for school stakeholders to address the issue of school refusal.

2.1 Understanding School Refusal

2.1.1 What is School Refusal?

School refusal, previously known as school phobia or school avoidance, is a child's persistent reluctance to attend school due to emotional distress related to one or more factors (Havik & Ingul, 2021). Moreover, school refusal can also be defined as the prolonged difficulty a particular child experiences in staying in class for the entire day (Prabhuswamy, 2018). According to Wimmer (2010), around 2-5% of school-aged¹ children exhibit school refusal behaviour, and correspondingly, Kearney and Albano claim that school refusal occurs in children between 5 and 17 years of age (2007).

Garfi's research (2018) aligns with Kearney and Albano's findings on the typical age range for school refusal. She highlights that while school refusal can occur across a broader spectrum, it most commonly peaks during two critical periods, between the ages of 5-7 and 11-14 (2018). This might imply that children often start exhibiting school refusal when they are transitioning either from kindergarten to primary school or from primary to secondary school.

¹ *School-aged children* refers to the age of compulsory schooling, which in Malta is between 5-16 years (Education Act, 1998)

2.1.2 The Psychological and Social Underpinnings of School Refusal

School refusal usually develops gradually rather than suddenly and often results from various psychological or social causes (Garfi, 2018). Research indicates that these causes can include anxiety disorders such as separation anxiety and social anxiety, which is also referred to as social phobia (Ingul et al., 2019). Additionally, Ingles et al. (2015) note that school refusal may occur alongside conditions like Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and panic disorder. Notwithstanding, school refusal can sometimes occur suddenly, especially after events that elicit heightened emotional distress in children. This may include family conflict, peer conflict in their own class, starting or changing school, bullying and other issues (Havik & Ingul, 2021).

Separation anxiety has been found in various studies to be a common factor contributing to school refusal. It is defined as “developmentally inappropriate, excessive, persistent, and unrealistic worry about separation from attachment figures”, which are usually their primary caregivers. (Dabkowska et al., 2011, p. 313). Kossowsky et al. (2011) argue that separation anxiety disorder manifests itself as an excessive fear of being separated from primary caregivers. This fear directly impacts a child’s ability to attend school.

Feriante et al. (2023) substantiate this by initially suggesting that separation anxiety from the primary caregiver is normal from the first year of life until age 3 to 4. However, sustained worry that reaches excessive levels after that age becomes a problem. Bernstein and Borchardt’s study (1991) is consistent with Dabkowska et al.’s (2011), which concludes

that school refusal has a 75% co-occurrence rate in children with separation anxiety disorder. Furthermore, according to Karlovec et al. (2008), separation anxiety is found in around 80% of children with school refusal behaviour, which may suggest that separation anxiety is quite prominent in children exhibiting school refusal. Kossowsky et al.'s study (2011) is in line with other research. It adds that separation anxiety disorder in children may result in having intense feelings of apprehension about leaving their home, which may contribute to avoidance behaviours like school refusal. Similarly, social anxiety disorder involves a pervasive fear of social situations where embarrassment might occur (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Heyne et al. argue that such fears may lead to significant anxiety surrounding classroom participation, ultimately resulting in the avoidance of the school environment (2019).

Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) often feel like no one gets them, which can make them push back against authority figures like teachers and other school staff (Hawes et al., 2023). This might come from a desire to escape situations that feel too strict, turning school into a stressful place for them. On the other hand, children who have gone through trauma and develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may find themselves reliving painful memories and trying to avoid anything that reminds them of their trauma (Kawsar et al., 2022). It is important to recognise these feelings as their way of coping with challenging experiences. Kawabata (2001) states that for children with PTSD, the school environment might be a trigger factor, particularly if the trauma is linked to factors within the school. In fact, further research indicates that symptoms such as hypervigilance and concentration difficulties can hinder a child's ability to participate in the school routine (Wimmer, 2008).

Furthermore, Heyne et al. (2019) and Kearney et al. (2004) highlight in their research that depression and panic disorder can play a significant role in why some children refuse to go to school. Studies consistently show a strong relationship between depression and school refusal, meaning each one can make the other worse. Kearney (2008) suggests that school refusal is often a sign of deeper mental health issues, with depression being a key factor. The main symptoms of depression, like loss of pleasure, tiredness and feelings of worthlessness, are precisely the kinds of challenges that make it hard for children to handle school demands (Heyne et al., 2019). A long-term study by Finning et al. (2019) found that children with depression are more likely to develop ongoing attendance problems, indicating that depression can be a strong risk factor for school refusal.

On the other hand, the effects of school refusal can further enhance a child's level of depression through their avoidance behaviour and low mood (Egger et al., 2003). This is supported by other research, which indicates that emotional dysregulation underpinning school refusal behaviour may be characterised by high levels of association between depressive symptoms and absenteeism (Muris et al., 2000). Panic disorder, characterised by spontaneous and recurrent episodes of intense fear, can lead to anxiety about experiencing these attacks at school, thereby reinforcing school refusal (Bernstein et al., 1996).

While school refusal often results from growing emotional distress, it can also develop unexpectedly, usually triggered by acute stressors. For example, parental separation may threaten a child's sense of stability, making them feel uncomfortable about attending school (Silverman & Ollendick, 2005). It is worth noting that social issues like bullying can cause children to be afraid, and this fuels their school avoidance behaviour

(Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Moreover, King and Bernstein (2001) argue that starting or changing schools is another important consideration. They mention that the unfamiliarity of a new environment, combined with the need to build social connections and follow new routines, may increase the child's anxiety. Monks and Coyne's book (2011) corroborates Ttofi and Farrington's (2011) findings, emphasising that children subjected to ongoing peer bullying are considerably more likely to develop behaviours of school refusal.

2.1.3 The Family Situation: A Precursor to School Refusal Behaviour?

The literature consistently highlights that familial conflict and insecure attachment patterns are prominent antecedents to school refusal behaviours (Elliott & Place, 2019; Heyne et al., 2019). Kaczynski et al. (2006) argue that one of the main ways through which family situations bring about school refusal is when a child is exposed to unresolved parental conflict, including the process of separation and divorce. Research by Harold and Sellers (2018) emphasises that it might not be the separation *per se*, but the presence of poorly managed interparental conflict that is most damaging to the child. This conflict can destabilise a child's sense of safety. The child's home, which should be a secure base from which to explore the world (Bowlby, 1969), becomes a source of perpetual threat.

In turn, this dynamic directly fuels school-related anxiety. The child, preoccupied with what is happening at home, may encounter fears that a parent will come to harm in their absence or that the conflict will escalate catastrophically if they are not present to monitor it (Egger et al., 2003). This anxiety may manifest somatically, such as stomach aches and headaches, followed by further avoidance behaviours. The temporary relief from anxiety

gained by staying home negatively reinforces the school refusal, creating a self-perpetuating cycle (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). Joanne Garfi, in her book *Overcoming School Refusal*, emphasises that fear and anxiety are central to school refusal behaviour. In fact, she claims that:

Once fear sets in, anxiety quickly follows and grows exponentially as anxiety is fed by fear...Once fear and anxiety are present, avoidance is highly likely to develop, as no one (irrespective of age and gender) will willingly place themselves in a situation that provokes fear and anxiety. (Garfi, 2018, p. 7-8)

This illustrates the recurrent cycle of fear, anxiety, and avoidance, in that fear causes worry, which then increases over time, creating a strong emotional response. This could be perceived as a cycle that may frequently result in school refusal, since individuals instinctively strive to avoid circumstances that evoke uncomfortable feelings. Garfi's insight highlights a universal principle, that being fear and anxiety are deeply rooted in human survival mechanisms, and although maladaptive, avoidance can become a natural coping strategy (2018).

Kearney et al. (2004) echo Garfi's (2018) findings, noting that children frequently refuse school when anxiety is triggered by specific worries, such as being apart from loved ones. They point out that while avoiding these scenarios may temporarily soothe a child's distress, it may eventually heighten the anxiety. Barlow (2002) stresses that by evading the stimuli they fear, children block the process of working through those fears.

Moreover, children whose parents are dealing with mental-health difficulties are substantially more prone to avoid school (Ingul et al., 2019). When young children have an anxiously preoccupied attachment, they often lack a feeling of safety that would let them separate from their caregivers. Consequently, they come to see school as a looming threat rather than a place where they can learn (Elliott & Place, 2019; Bowlby, 1982). The child's feelings may intensify if a parent is dealing with anxiety or depression. As such, mental-health struggles can negatively impact the parent's ability to provide support for school attendance (Heyne et al., 2019). Occasionally, a parent's own psychological difficulties may carry over onto the child, leading to the reluctance to attend school because the child feels compelled to stay and emotionally support the parent (Ingul et al., 2019). In the analysis, school refusal can be understood as a symptom of mixed emotional and relational challenges between the child and caregiver.

2.1.4 The COVID-19 Effect: Unpacking the Rise in School Refusal

Researchers have identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant catalyst behind the rise in school-refusal behaviour (Mizuno et al., 2025). In Malta, this pattern is evident in the decline of school attendance. Specifically, the average physical attendance rate in state schools dropped by roughly 15 % in 2020 compared with the two preceding years (Berger, 2021). This pattern of increased absenteeism persisted, with attendance rates in every government college in Malta and Gozo continuing to decline during the 2022-2023 scholastic year (Times of Malta, 2024).

School refusal was also intensified by several COVID-19-related factors that were likely to exacerbate the primary risk factors for school refusal. The length of time students were separated from their classmates and the fact that all classes moved online had severely damaged many students' self-confidence. This confidence is related to factors such as academics and social abilities, potentially creating severe anxiety regarding their return to school. Elliott and Place (2019) have stated that when individuals lack academic and social confidence, they are likely to experience high levels of negative affectivity. Therefore, it can be inferred that school refusal during COVID-19 may have occurred due to a limited capacity to tolerate the school environment. Additionally, the pervasive fear and health-related anxiety present during the COVID-19 pandemic seem to facilitate what is referred to as catastrophizing in psychological literature (Taylor, 2022; Clark & Beck, 2010). A child who has become obsessed with contracting or spreading a virus may develop maladaptive thoughts about the risks associated with going to school, which might further solidify the cycle of avoidance.

In addition to these factors, the stress caused by people losing their jobs and facing various economic challenges could perhaps have resulted in more family tensions (Taylor, 2022). This could end up limiting a child's ability to deal with anxiety and create a big barrier to attendance in school. Furthermore, according to recent research, the lockdowns that occurred during the pandemic caused parents to display more overprotective behaviours (Taylor, 2022) as they attempted to protect their children from health-related threats. As a consequence of children having fewer opportunities to independently cope with challenges, they became more dependent on others. This means that going to school becomes even more difficult, potentially increasing the rate of school refusal.

2.1.5 School-Related Factors Contributing to School Refusal

Leduc et al. 's (2022) research identifies several potential contributing factors to school refusal behaviour, including academic pressure and bullying (2024). Their findings are consistent with those of Kearney et al. (2004), who found that children who experience difficulties with their learning often view the school environment as a place where they can be judged, which raises the possibility of school avoidance.

Unfortunately, bullying is a common occurrence in schools, and sustained bullying has been identified by Prabhuswamy (2018) as having a significant correlation to school refusal. This is because children tend to avoid environments that make them feel unsafe. According to Garfi (2018), avoidance behaviours can develop from experiencing fear in certain situations and therefore avoidance becomes a method for coping with these types of situations. Murray et al. (2009) indicate that school refusers experience high levels of emotional distress due to unstable routines. Additionally, the relationship between teachers and students can serve as a protective factor against school refusal, which can be provided through empathy and open communication. Thapa et al. (2013) also highlight that a positive school climate can promote positive relationships between students and staff. Apart from that, it can encourage effective communication among all stakeholders, which could reduce the anxiety experienced by students and subsequently the likelihood of school refusal.

Thapa et al. (2013) found that students attending schools that provided a supportive environment had lower rates of school refusal than students who did not receive the same support. Additionally, interventions that focused on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) were

found to increase students' ability to cope with difficult experiences and increase their resilience.

As Durlak et al. (2011) demonstrate, social-emotional learning programmes can significantly enhance students' emotional regulation, thereby reducing school refusal. These findings emphasise the importance of fostering a positive school climate and creating supportive relationships to mitigate school refusal behaviours effectively.

2.1.6 How is School Refusal Diagnosed?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (2013), school refusal is not an official diagnosis, but rather a symptom of a different condition/s, as mentioned in section 2.1.2. Recent research reiterates the importance of implementing standardised assessment tools for identifying school refusal. For example, the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R), first developed by Kearney and Silverman (1993) and then revised by Kearney (2002), is widely utilised (to this day) by professionals to evaluate the underlying functions of school refusal behaviour. This tool specifies that school refusal manifests due to four primary factors:

1. "To avoid school-related stimuli that provoke a sense of general negative affectivity.

Example²: The student has a poor relationship with the teacher.

2. To escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school.

² The examples used in the four subscales are not part of the quote.

Example: Having a test

3. To pursue attention from significant others.

Example: Separation anxiety

4. To pursue tangible reinforcement outside the school setting.”

Example: To stay at home and play games. (Kearney, 2002, p. 235)

Kearney and Silverman’s (1993) framework aligns with push and pull factors in school refusal literature. Push factors, such as those listed in the first two subscales above (e.g., bullying, negative school relationships), drive the child away from the school environment. In contrast, pull factors (e.g., staying at home to watch TV or play video games) encourage children to stay away from school (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). This is also related to positive reinforcement, which happens when a child enjoys certain activities through school absenteeism, further reinforcing their school refusal behaviour.

Conversely, negative reinforcement is evident when a child avoids unpleasant stimuli, such as tests or exams, by staying at home (Woods & Scott, 2016). Many of these concepts have been supported throughout research studies, especially by Heyne et al. (2019), which supports the claim that reinforcement is one of the primary ways to maintain school avoidance behaviour.

The SRAS-R measures the four subscales using six items each (for a total of 24), and respondents rate how frequently they engage in those behaviours on a scale from 0 (never) to 6 (always). According to Kearney (2002), a child must present at least one of the above-mentioned criteria to be diagnosed with school refusal. Unlike strict diagnostic frameworks

like those for anxiety disorders in the DSM-5, the duration and intensity of school refusal behaviours are not uniformly fixed in the SRAS-R.

While school avoidance is evident when a pattern develops over time, this does not necessarily mean the child will meet the criteria for a school refusal diagnosis. This is because the school professional will assess the extent to which the avoidance behaviour hinders the child's daily functioning. This includes anything related to the child's education, relationships, and emotional well-being (Kawsar et al., 2022). The greater the functional impairment, the stronger the case will be for the child to receive a professional assessment for school refusal using the SRAS-R. The SRAS-R is considered reliable and valid in assessing the primary reasons for a child's school refusal behaviour. As such, it provides a basis for developing specific interventions to help reintroduce the child to the school community (Kearney, 2008). Familiarity with the general format of the SRAS-R and the types of questions asked, as illustrated in Figure 1 below (Kearney, 2008), is crucial for educational

School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (C)

Name: _____

Age: _____

Date: _____

Please select the answer that best fits the following questions:

- How often do you have bad feelings about going to school because you are afraid of something related to school (for example, tests, school bus, teacher, fire alarm)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 6
- How often do you stay away from school because it is hard to speak with the other kids at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 6
- How often do you feel you would rather be with your parents than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
<input type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 6

Figure 1 – A small part of an SRAS-R (C) Sheet (Kearney, 2008). The (C) in the sheet title indicates that the SRAS-R is for the child to complete.

professionals to understand how the child's underlying motivations are assessed and translated into a functional profile.

2.2 Truancy vs School Refusal

2.2.1 Key Differences

Previous research has often used the term “truancy” to describe children who skip school without their parents’ knowledge (Martin et al., 2020). Nonetheless, Martin et al. (2020) indicate that such behaviour is less common among primary school children compared to school refusal, particularly in light of compulsory schooling laws. When a child is truant, meaning they fail to attend school without prior notification, schools typically have established protocols to inform parents of the absence via SMS (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2014). Notwithstanding, there is a greater likelihood of this behaviour occurring in secondary schools due to the greater independence with which the student makes decisions concerning their own school attendance.

School refusal occurs when parents are aware of their child's emotional distress and therefore support the child's decision to refrain from attending school. However, unexcused absences that persist over time may result in legal action against the parent or guardian in accordance with local law. For example, in Malta, fines for parents who fail to send their children to school without a legitimate reason and/or without notifying the school have been significantly increased. Such penalties include fines of up to €500 per day and/or a prison term of up to three months in certain cases (Balzan, 2022). Therefore, school refusal

complicates the issue at hand because it might not elicit the same level of reaction from the school as truancy would. As expressed by Heyne et al. (2019), the school response may provide more emphasis towards the mental health of the child, rather than taking disciplinary action.

2.3 Navigating the School Transition Period: A Critical Juncture in Education

2.3.1 The Challenges of Transition

Many students experience challenges during transitions in their educational environment. Research suggests that transitions are periods of significant stress, particularly for the more sensitive students, and can result in school refusal behaviours (Garfi, 2018). The transitions between schools involve substantial changes to the academic environment and the child's social circle. As Longobardi et al. state, "transitions require a series of changes and adjustments to new people, environments, and needs, which may be perceived by minors as a source of stress." (2019, p. 2).

Transitions from preschool (kindergarten) to primary school require children to get accustomed to new routines and a new way of learning. Similarly, Jindal-Snape et al. (2023) argue that the transition to secondary school also involves adjusting to a more complex timetable and more challenging material.

Anxiety caused by uncertainty, such as struggling to form new friendships, can hinder students' ability to adjust to change (Heyne et al., 2019). Moreover, Longobardi et al. (2019)

note that transition periods can disrupt the predictability children rely on for emotional stability, which could heighten their sense of insecurity. Research conducted by Havik et al. (2015), similar to Heyne et al.'s findings, shows that students with existing anxiety-related disorders (such as separation anxiety disorder) have a higher chance of experiencing extreme distress when transitioning into a new environment. Thus, they sustain that the unpredictability of a new environment amplifies these children's fears, which may subsequently lead to school refusal.

Ttofi and Farrington (2011) suggest that children may have trouble integrating into new social groups or become targets of bullying when transitioning to a new school, which intensifies feelings of isolation and fear. Furthermore, for students already prone to emotional dysregulation, even the thought of being rejected by peers can trigger avoidance behaviours (Rueger et al., 2014). Correspondingly to Ttofi and Farrington's research, an empirical study conducted by González et al. (2021) concluded that children in the *non-school refusers* group had low scores in the four factors of the SRAS-R (discussed in section 2.1.3) and consequently had high scores in social functioning³. This might suggest that forming new social relationships, which several studies have found to be essential for successfully transitioning from one educational level to another, may act as a protective barrier to school refusal.

³ Social functioning is the ability to interact and build relationships in social settings. This is essential for an individual's well-being; however, it may be negatively impacted in school refusers (Crowe et al., 2011).

Thus, having an effective support system plays a crucial role during these transitions. In fact, King and Bernstein (2001) argue that the absence of proactive measures, such as positive teacher-student relationships, can exacerbate the difficulties faced by vulnerable students. Conversely, schools that focus on the child gradually adapting to the school and utilise open communication between educators and parents are better equipped to mitigate the impact of transitions on these students (Fernandez-Zabala et al., 2016)

2.3.2 School Refusal: A Reinforcement Issue?

As briefly mentioned in *section 2.1.6*, González et al. (2021) propose that school absenteeism can arise for four distinct reasons (see the named section). Thus, a child might throw a tantrum to avoid an upcoming test. In this scenario, the child's behaviour exemplifies negative reinforcement, as the parent removes the undesirable experience of attending school by allowing the child to stay home. In contrast, positive reinforcement occurs when a child is given an incentive for not being present. This could include the child having more time with a parent (especially relevant in cases of separation anxiety), sleeping longer, or playing on the tablet (Martínez-Torres et al., 2024).

School refusal has both short-term and long-term consequences to children's learning, which all affect their general holistic development. Therefore, understanding the relationships described above is crucial for developing a better understanding of how school refusal impacts a child's learning process. As a result, this allows educational professionals and parents to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies to help these children.

2.4 School Refusal: Multifaceted in Its Effects on Learning?

2.4.1 Professionals' Perspectives on the Holistic Implications of School Refusal

According to various research findings, children who refuse to attend school miss out on many learning opportunities and are thus denied the chance to learn the fundamentals of various subjects (Prabhuswamy, 2018). This indicates that they not only miss lessons but also the social experiences of learning within a school environment. In line with Prabhuswamy's (2018) study, Garfi (2018) adds that in such situations, children must not only re-integrate with the rest of the class (which can already be very challenging in itself) but also catch up with all of the material lost. This may ultimately result in children feeling too overwhelmed, which can result in pushing students out of school again.

Moreover, Kearney notes that when a child refuses to attend school, the amount of knowledge they miss increases each time, making it increasingly difficult for them to keep up with their peers (2008). Sustained school refusal can mark the beginning of a learning accumulation deficit. Each day a child misses school is another day that they are unable to address what has been learnt at school. Over time, the academic deficits continue to accumulate as children may encounter difficulties with new material. For example, when a student misses multiple lessons on multiplication, they may not only find it difficult to understand the concept of multiplication but also to understand fractions and decimals, which are built upon the foundation of multiplication (Cunningham et al., 2022). The further behind a student falls, the less confident they become, creating an ongoing cycle of anxiety and avoidance (Chitrakar & Nisanth, 2023).

Correspondingly, prolonged absence from school may also interfere with the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are essential for children's development. Students in classrooms engage in group work and discussions that help them develop such skills. If a student does not attend school, they miss out on the chance to learn the social and academic skills they need (Garfi, 2018). Studies have shown that students who refuse to attend school are more likely to drop out of school than students who do attend school. Dropping out of school may prove detrimental to a student's future education and career. In fact, school refusal is often associated with a lower educational achievement, fewer job opportunities, and a greater risk of isolation in adulthood (Garfi, 2018).

From a social standpoint, school refusal can isolate children from their peers, which in turn makes it harder for them to develop crucial social skills (Cunningham et al., 2022). Egger et al. (2003) substantiate this by claiming that when children consistently avoid school, they lose out on important interactions that are essential for building communication skills and empathy. Garfi (2018) adds that "the school refuser may initially continue contact using social media or phone calls but as friends begin to question their protracted absence, the school refuser begins to distance themselves in order to avoid answering questions" (p. 26). Thus, this could suggest that the child isolates themselves, not only from school but also from their friends, which increases feelings of loneliness and ultimately makes their return to school even more challenging.

Being in school allows children to share the day with their peers, helping them connect with each other. When children miss school due to absences, they miss these same shared experiences. As a result, it may become more difficult for them to be accepted into

social groups when they return to school. The sense of being alone that can come from missing school can add to feelings of anxiety and could create a pattern that may cause the student to want to stay home even more.

Similarly, Baker and Bishop's study (2015) concludes that the primary cause of this isolation is the absence from the school environment, which is central to students' social life. As a result, according to Kljakovic et al. (2021), these students tend to have lower-quality peer relationships compared to those who attend school regularly. Over time, staying disconnected from friends can lead to a negative cycle in which the anxiety that keeps them away from school worsens as they fall behind academically and socially.

Garfi (2018) emphasises that isolation can make children easier targets for bullying because they lack close friends who could support them. On the other hand, Zammit-Cutajar (2021) found that bullying itself can make children want to avoid school even more, showing how these issues reinforce each other. Both studies highlight how important peer relationships are in preventing negative cycles of school refusal and bullying.

Long-term effects of school refusal can be quite serious, and various studies suggest that children who stay socially withdrawn for a long time may develop social anxiety or avoid challenges in their personal lives (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021). These findings highlight the need for early support to help children overcome school refusal and its social consequences.

Children who are reluctant to go to school often face ongoing emotional distress, which can manifest as feelings of sadness or a persistent negative mood, especially when the

stress is related to school (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021). While staying home might temporarily ease their anxiety, it often leads to a pattern of avoidance that can spiral into ongoing emotional struggles (Zammit-Cutajar, 2021). This cycle can also deplete a child's confidence, making it harder for them to re-engage with school.

Beyond just the immediate feelings, avoiding school can have longer-term emotional impacts. Children may feel guilty about missing lessons, which increases their sense of withdrawal from friends and social activities (Kearney, 2008). Understanding these emotional layers is crucial to supporting children through their challenges. The emotional distress caused by school refusal may also heighten their concern about schoolwork, leading the child to approach school with apprehension, which can potentially worsen their refusal behaviours (Cunningham et al., 2022). As Prabhuswamy (2018) notes, the long-term emotional consequences of school refusal may lead to a persistent fear of failure, creating barriers to future learning and social relationships.

2.4.2 Parents' Views on the Potential Effects of School Refusal

Various studies suggest that parents of children who refuse to attend school may convey profound concern for their child's academic progress. They might explicitly express worry about their child's absenteeism, supporting Kearney's (2008) argument that school refusal can result in substantial consequences to the child's learning. Numerous parents express feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility to preserve their child's academic progress, worrying that lengthy absences may impede their child's educational development (Prabhuswamy, 2018). This issue may result in greater strain within the family, as parents

attempt to support their child emotionally while also claiming a sense of responsibility for their education (Cunningham et al., 2022).

Furthermore, parents may encounter challenges in maintaining their child's engagement with academic resources at home. Devenney and O'Toole (2021) indicate that parents sometimes try to offer educational assistance. Notwithstanding, lacking the structure and guidance of a school setting, many feel inadequately prepared to assist their children in effectively catching up. Hence, the absence of an organised learning environment can intensify frustration for both parents and children. This situation could lead to a sense of helplessness, as parents try to help their child but may lack clarity on how to promote learning beyond the classroom (Zammit Cutajar, 2021).

In addition, the emotional burden among parents may be too great, and most parents may even feel guilty about their child's school refusal and be convinced that they may have contributed to their refusal. According to Garfi (2018), this guilt may occasionally culminate in overprotective elements, wherein parents are excessively engaged in their child's learning. This may intensify the child's anxiety and make them more opposed to schooling. In order to overcome these difficulties, a collaborative approach is necessary, where parents turn to the support of educators and mental health professionals to successfully cope with their child's situation. In return, this may provide children with a better opportunity to attend school and achieve a better balance between academic work and emotional well-being.

From a social perspective, parents tend to notice that their children are more isolated due to school refusal. According to Kearney (2008), parents can be concerned that the child might be missing valuable socialisation experiences that help them with friendships, which are often formed in school. Social withdrawal is also a matter of concern that might result in loneliness and anxiety, as Cunningham et al. (2022) point out. Consequently, parents may be tempted to help their children reconnect with their peers. Moreover, other parents may find it challenging to deal with the prejudice of others who do not necessarily understand the situation of their child's unwillingness to attend school. Unfortunately, this type of social stigma may isolate parents even more as they fear being judged, which can seriously compromise their mental health as they may not reach out to share their experiences (Garfi, 2018; Zammit Cutajar, 2021).

Studies have also revealed that school refusal may have a considerable influence on the emotional development of a child. Parents frequently observe that their children are consumed with worry, and this prevents them from taking part in important learning activities (Devenney and O'Toole, 2021). Indicatively, Prabhuswamy (2018) observes that this may complicate children's ability to build resilience, as not experiencing challenging situations means the children are not provided with an opportunity to learn how to deal with challenges, which is a crucial part of emotional development.

In line with Prabhuswamy's (2018) research, parents express concerns about their child's self-esteem, indicating that frequent absences may result in their child comparing themselves with others who are progressing (Kearney, 2008). In fact, Garfi supports Kearney's (2018) research by claiming "parents will often report that their child becomes

overly concerned with what peers are thinking and saying about them and that they alternate between being tearful and angry” (p. 25). This harmful self-comparison can impede the child’s emotional development, thus complicating the child's ability to manage interpersonal relationships. Cunningham et al. (2022) also highlight that parents notice their child’s emotional difficulties at home, characterised by increased withdrawal and the reluctance to engage in discussions about school.

2.5 Overcoming School Refusal - Strategies for Parents and Professionals

Overcoming school refusal requires a joint effort between parents, educators, and the school psychosocial⁴ team, utilising various techniques that need to be suited to each child’s individual requirements (Maynard et al., 2018). Effective techniques can significantly increase attendance and reduce anxiety caused by school refusal.

2.5.1. Gradual Exposure

Gradual exposure is a popular technique for helping children slowly return to school without feeling overwhelmed by the demands (Kearney & Albano, 2007; Garfi, 2018). For example, parents may use this strategy by agreeing with the social worker and the school SMT to allow their child to visit the school for brief periods of time, such as visiting a couple of lessons and then getting picked up by parents. Over time, the duration of the child’s

⁴ The school psychosocial team usually includes the social workers, counsellors, guidance teachers, and school psychologists.

school day might be extended until the child is comfortable returning to school for the whole day. According to research, gradual exposure can significantly reduce anxiety symptoms while also helping children adjust to their surroundings (Kearney & Albano, 2018).

2.5.2 Positive Reinforcement

In addition, positive reinforcement may be another beneficial approach for encouraging students to attend school. This method provides rewards to children for attending school, thus building a positive relationship with school activities. In this case, parents can give children coupons for each day they attend school. After earning a set number of coupons, the child may receive a reward, such as engaging in a favourite activity. This strategy is consistent with operant conditioning principles, which state that activities associated with favourable results are more likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1953). Martinez-Torres et al. (2024) found that positive reinforcement can enhance school attendance and reduce anxiety over time.

2.5.3 Structured Routines

Ulas and Secer (2024) note that establishing a sense of structure in daily routines might provide children with a feeling of consistency when they refuse to attend school. For example, morning routines could include time for breakfast and getting ready for school. Similarly, teachers may create a predictable classroom environment by adhering to a consistent timetable and setting clear expectations. Kearney and Albano (2018) found that having these organised routines can help enhance the child's ability to control their

emotions, making it easier for them to cope with the demands of school.

2.5.4 Open Communication

Open communication between parents and educators is crucial for effectively handling school refusal. Regular meetings between teachers and parents can involve talks about the child's development and any new difficulties regarding school attendance. This cooperation enables an integrated approach to meeting the child's requirements. Garfi (2018) found that children benefit greatly when both parents and teachers actively address their educational and emotional issues.

2.5.5 Fostering Peer Relationships

Encouraging children to interact with their peers can be highly beneficial in helping them overcome school refusal. Parents can facilitate this by motivating their children to participate in extracurricular activities, which can provide them with diverse opportunities to promote their social skills and make friends outside of school. Teachers can also include these students in group activities, which can foster peer connections. According to Kearney and Albano (2018), positive social interactions with peers can act as a protective factor against school refusal, providing children with a sense of belonging.

2.5.6 Therapeutic Approaches and Early Interventions

Numerous research studies have made it clear that early intervention is crucial in addressing school refusal, as extended absences can quickly exacerbate the issue (González et al., 2021; Lewis-de los Angeles et al., 2023). The longer a child stays away from school, the more persistent their avoidance behaviours may become, potentially driven by negative reinforcement. The immediate relief from anxiety may strongly encourage the child to stay at home. This can create a vicious cycle, where the child struggles to keep up academically, and the anxiety about returning to school intensifies (Maynard et al., 2018). Therefore, early intervention is essential to interrupt this cycle before it solidifies (Kearney & Albano, 2018; Heyne & Sauter, 2013). A prompt response can really make a positive difference in helping children successfully return to school. Alongside this, using specific therapeutic techniques is crucial for addressing any underlying psychological factors that might be causing school refusal. There are many evidence-based therapies available that can effectively support children in managing their anxiety and help them feel more confident about returning to school.

2.5.7 Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is one of the most used treatment techniques for anxiety disorders and is found to be particularly effective for school refusal. CBT aims to identify and change maladaptive cognitive processes that lead to anxiety. For example, a child may believe that school is a place where others harshly criticise them or place unrealistic demands. CBT teaches children to confront these views and replace them with

more reasonable attitudes (Beck, 1976). In fact, CBT often involves exposure, which gradually introduces children to anxiety-inducing situations within a secure and supportive environment. A meta-analysis by James et al. (2015) discovered that CBT significantly decreases anxiety symptoms and increases school attendance in children, making it an important intervention in school refusal situations.

2.5.8 Family Therapy

Family therapy can be an effective method to address school refusal, as family dynamics often influence the child's concerns. These sessions focus on enhancing communication and support within the family, fostering emotional stability. For instance, it might explore how parental behaviours, such as inconsistent discipline, impact the child's attitude toward school. Carr (2019) highlights the importance of considering family factors when treating school refusal. Overall, family therapy aims to strengthen family relationships and improve problem-solving skills, which can lead to better school attendance.

2.5.9 Mindfulness and Relaxation Skills

Mindfulness practices, including meditation and deep breathing, can help children become increasingly aware of their thoughts and emotions (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Keng et al. (2011) concluded that mindfulness has a positive impact on improving emotional well-being and reducing anxiety levels among children and adolescents. Teachers and parents can incorporate a few minutes of mindfulness exercises into their daily school routines. This can be achieved through simple breathing strategies for children before they go to school, which

can help them stay calm. Mindfulness can also be applied in the classroom, such as by playing a video with relaxing sounds, which can help children feel more focused.

2.5.10 School-Based Interventions

Heyne et al. (2019) believe that schools can feel more welcoming with the help of interventions, such as anti-bullying campaigns, which will allow children to feel safer. These approaches will address the social causes that prompt school refusal and help children learn how to cope with them. Kearney and Graczyk (2020), along with numerous other researchers, attest that a positive school environment can alleviate the impact of school refusal.

2.5.11 Home-Based Schooling

Various studies consistently describe the use of home-based schooling as a temporary measure to manage school refusal. While this may provide a quick fix for families and reduce the child's short-term anxiety, it also presents complex challenges. On the one hand, offering learning at home can lessen the academic impact and prevent children from falling further behind, thus attenuating parental concerns about their children's educational progress (Berg et al., 1969). In contrast, Heyne et al. (2019) sustain that prolonged reliance on home-based schooling risks reinforcing avoidance behaviours by removing the very stimuli, including peer interaction and the classroom environment itself, that children need to face gradually.

In fact, Garfi (2018) highlights that avoidance, while initially reducing distress, eventually strengthens the underlying anxiety and makes reintegration into school even more difficult. Home-based learning is also a factor that does not serve as an incentive for the child to actively participate in the school's social environment, which is crucial for developing resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Havik & Ingul, 2021). Thus, while home-based schooling may be considered a supportive short-term strategy, especially in severe cases of school refusal, the literature emphasises that it should be implemented carefully, alongside a clear plan for a gradual return to school.

2.5.12 The Role of Pharmacotherapy in Psychosocial Treatment-Resistant Cases

While initial interventions for school refusal are typically psychosocial, Tobon et al. (2018) suggest that some cases may be resistant to these approaches. In these cases, school refusal might indicate underlying mental health issues (Walkup et al., 2008). According to Reinblatt and Riddle (2007), this is particularly relevant for children presenting with severe anxiety or depression. In these cases, symptoms may arise without an obvious precipitating social issue and can indicate challenges related to mental health.

For these individuals, medication can be a vital part of their treatment, serving as an essential tool to moderate severe symptoms so that the child can gain more from psychotherapeutic approaches (Compton et al., 2010). Notwithstanding, as various research studies claim, the goal of pharmacotherapy in such cases is not to medicate away the problem, but to reduce symptoms to a level that allows the child to effectively engage with cognitive and behavioural strategies (Kendall, 2006; Walkup et al., 2008).

Medication is primarily prescribed when severe symptoms of anxiety or depression persist despite ongoing non-medical interventions (Tobon et al., 2018; Strawn et al., 2020). Psychiatrists typically initiate pharmacotherapy following a thorough diagnostic assessment, which aims to distinguish situational distress from an underlying mental health issue (Strauss et al., 2021). Research indicates that Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are typically the primary pharmacological choice because of their proven effectiveness and fewer side effects compared to other antidepressants (Cipriani et al., 2016; Reinblatt & Riddle, 2007). Medications like fluoxetine and sertraline have proven to be effective in alleviating the core symptoms of anxiety and depression that contribute to school refusal behaviours, potentially helping to break the avoidance cycle (Reinblatt & Riddle, 2007; Walkup et al., 2008). These medications work by adjusting serotonin levels in the brain, which plays a key role in mood regulation and fear responses (Strawn et al., 2020).

In child and adolescent psychiatry, it is a fundamental principle that psychotropic medication is rarely, if ever, given on its own, but rather as one part of a wider therapeutic approach (Compton et al., 2010; Whittington et al., 2004). Its efficacy becomes apparent within a holistic treatment implementation, where its primary purpose is not to cure school refusal, but to lower the physiological barriers that impede a child's participation in psychosocial interventions (Walkup et al., 2008). This is achieved by alleviating the intense symptoms of anxiety, such as panic and somatic complaints, or the paralysing apathy of depression (Kendall, 2006). By doing so, pharmacotherapy provides the essential biochemical support that allows children to engage with therapeutic programmes (Kendall, 2006; Walkup et al., 2008).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter consistently emphasises the impact of school refusal on a child's learning experience. In summary, school refusal can increase anxiety and lower self-esteem, which may interfere with the child's ability to succeed at school. These challenges can also harm academic performance and relationships with peers and caregivers. Research underscores the importance of recognising that school refusal affects not only short-term educational results but can also have lasting effects on a child's overall learning development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore the various challenges children might face in their learning journey, specifically those brought about by their school refusal behaviour, as seen from professionals' and parents' perspectives. This research further aims to investigate the impact of school refusal on various aspects of a child's learning and how it may ultimately influence their educational process. This chapter begins by exploring the research questions and discussing the rationale behind the chosen research design, emphasising its suitability for the study's aims. The chapter then delves into the epistemological framework guiding this research, highlighting the thematic analysis approach. Then, the research participants and the recruitment process in general are discussed, along with the methodology used for data collection and analysis. Following this, the chapter also explores the credibility and reliability of the research, as well as reflexivity and ethical considerations for the study.

3.2 Research Questions and Rationale for Research Design

The research questions are;

- 1) *What is the current understanding of school refusal, and how do professionals and parents define it?*

This question is fundamental to this study because school refusal is a complex issue that could be defined differently by various stakeholders, including parents, schools, and

mental health professionals. Understanding how these groups conceptualise school refusal helps clarify its perceived causes and consequences, which is crucial for developing effective interventions. Research, including Kearney's (2008) study, emphasises the need for consistent definitions among stakeholders to ensure a cohesive approach to addressing school refusal.

2) *What are the perceived effects of school refusal on young children's holistic learning from professionals' and parents' perspectives?*

This question examines the multifaceted impact of school refusal, including academic, social, emotional, and developmental factors. Exploring these effects from diverse viewpoints enables a comprehensive understanding of how school refusal may negatively affect children's growth and learning processes. Studies like those by Heyne and Sauter (2013) show that school refusal can have long-term consequences, emphasising the need to capture both professional insights and parental experiences to develop effective interventions.

The research adopts a qualitative design, which is particularly effective for exploring subjective experiences associated with school refusal (Creswell, 2014). This approach allows for a detailed understanding of participants' interpretations, thus providing meaningful data on school refusal that cannot be captured through quantitative research alone (Creswell, 2014). In fact, Queiros et al. (2017) state that qualitative methodology "intends to understand a complex reality and the meaning of actions in a given context" (pg. 369), thereby allowing participants to take an active role in the research process (Pathak et al.,

2013). School refusal is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, making a qualitative approach considerably valuable for recognising and understanding these dimensions (Creswell, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Additionally, qualitative research is particularly beneficial for exploring sensitive topics, such as school refusal, as it captures individual experiences and perspectives. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on measurable factors, qualitative research facilitates a thorough investigation into how participants perceive their experiences within their unique contexts (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). For example, when a parent describes the emotional impact of their child's school refusal, it may reveal anxiety and stress patterns that quantitative data could overlook. Furthermore, participants' insights on how school environments contribute to school refusal should be examined through open-ended questions, characteristic of qualitative research, to pinpoint systemic challenges.

For instance, research by Heyne and Sauter (2013) stresses the necessity of examining school refusal within its context, such as how children's emotional reactions to school refusal can be influenced by their parents' attitudes. By gathering in-depth perceptions from various participants, the study examines how these dynamics manifest in everyday situations, such as parents experiencing frustration while attempting to help their children reintegrate into school.

Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that a qualitative approach provides flexibility, allowing the researcher to modify questions and explore emerging themes in

detail during data collection. For example, if a parent mentions that they do not feel supported by the school, the researcher can explore this further to understand their expectations and experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that this adaptability is essential for exploring topics like school refusal, where unexpected themes may arise.

Thus, qualitative research sheds light on the realities faced by individuals experiencing school refusal. This is crucial, as school refusal often involves personal emotions that differ among families and individuals. Ugwu and Eze (2023) maintain that grasping these subjective experiences is fundamental for creating effective interventions, enabling researchers to determine the factors impacting the behaviour.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) assert that qualitative methods are essential for understanding the “why” and “how” of human behaviour, making them particularly suited for understanding concepts like school refusal. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that qualitative research is particularly effective at revealing the subtle ways participants perceive and react to difficult situations. According to Creswell (2007), “qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 37). Hence, thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate data analysis method for this study. This is because it seeks to interpret the meanings that participants assign to the research questions being investigated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This approach involves building, assigning, and understanding the meanings behind the data gathered from

the research topic. Additionally, thematic analysis is regarded as key for qualitative research, as “it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

3.3 Epistemological Reflexivity

Epistemological reflexivity refers to the researcher’s critical assessment of the assumptions regarding the reality that shapes the research design and methodology (Finlay, 2002). This study involved reflecting on how my beliefs about school refusal affected the questions I posed and the interpretations I made. This reflexivity was vital for maintaining transparency and ensuring the study adhered to its qualitative framework.

In this study, I adopted a social constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge as co-constructed through the interactions between the researcher and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This perspective acknowledges that the experiences of school refusal are subjective and shaped by the unique contexts of the individuals involved. Rather than pursuing an objective “truth”, the study aims to understand the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences, recognising that these meanings may vary among individuals.

For instance, some parents defined school refusal from an emotional standpoint, while professionals approached the issue from a behavioural or social perspective. Thus, epistemological reflexivity required acknowledging how my own background shaped the

interpretation of these perspectives. By doing so, I could critically evaluate how my assumptions influenced the study's design and findings.

Epistemological reflexivity also involves exploring existing literature to identify how other researchers have approached similar topics and how their epistemological stances have shaped their findings. For example, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that thematic analysis is flexible and can accommodate a range of epistemological positions. By choosing thematic analysis within a social constructivist framework, I aligned my methodology with the study's goal of exploring diverse subjective experiences of school refusal.

Hence, to ensure epistemological reflexivity throughout the research process, I consistently questioned how my assumptions about school refusal, shaped by prior reading and personal experiences, influenced the way I framed research questions and analysed data. I also incorporated multiple perspectives into the study, including parents and professionals, to challenge any preconceived notions that I might have had and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Lastly, throughout data collection and analysis, I took note of any instances where my biases may have been evident and took the necessary steps to correct this.

3.4 Research Participants

The study utilised purposive sampling⁵ to select participants who have direct experience with school refusal. This included parents of children who exhibited school refusal behaviours and educational professionals, including assistant heads and social workers, who work closely with affected children. The sample size for this study was nine participants: three social workers, three parents, and three assistant heads. As described earlier, a qualitative study aims to choose a small number of participants and receive a good amount of information to understand the topic in more detail.

I disseminated the permission letter and information letter (via email) to MEYR and the Secretariat for Catholic Education, to seek permission for recruiting participants from state and Church schools, respectively (this was done following FREC's approval of my ethics application). When the respective institutions granted me such permission, I then sent an email containing the information letter, consent form, and permission letters to the director of the National School Support Services (NSSS – Ms. Josanne Ghirxi), for dissemination of my study to the relevant Educational Officers (EOs). The EOs then circulated my email containing all the information necessary to school social workers and school counsellors. The social workers were asked (via email) if they would accept being my gatekeepers for the study. Then, if they accepted, they were required to choose a current or past case (or more than one if they wished) of a child aged 5-11 years who exhibited school refusal. Upon doing this,

⁵ Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where researchers intentionally choose participants with particular characteristics that fit the research goals (Patton, 2015).

the school social worker was asked to forward my email to the respective parents of the chosen child, containing the information letter and consent form, for prospective participants. When parents granted permission through the consent form to discuss their child's case with the researcher, then the respective school social worker (as the gatekeeper) returned such signed consent forms to the researcher, and hence the researcher could then contact the parents.

To recruit assistant heads from state and Church schools, MEYR and the Secretariat for Catholic Education were contacted again to request permission to recruit such participants from schools. Once I received an updated approval from the institutions, I then sent the permission letters (after approval of such letters by FREC) to the respective Heads of Schools. Once I received permission from the respective Heads of Schools, I sent an email to kindly ask them to disseminate the information letters and consent forms to the assistant heads. The interviews were held individually; hence, one case included three interviews (one with each of the social workers, assistant heads, and parents). The social workers and assistant heads were not asked any questions related to a specific school refusal case; therefore, they did not discuss any children.

The participants were given an information sheet about the study I will be conducting, and at the end, I asked the participants if they would like to participate in the study. The letter also included my contact details, so that prospective participants could contact me if they had not clearly understood the study or if they had further questions about it.

Participants were required to answer a series of questions through a semi-structured interview and provide as much information as possible in response to the open-ended questions, in order to help me gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to share detailed responses rather than limiting them to simple answers like “yes” or “no.” Each interview lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes.

3.5 Data Collection (Semi-Structured Interviews)

Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews, offering flexibility to explore participants’ experiences while covering essential topics (Kvale, 2007). This format supported a conversational style, encouraging participants to express their thoughts freely. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to gather detailed responses from participants’ perspectives on school refusal and its impact on children’s learning.

Participants were free to choose the date and time of the interview and could opt to conduct it online via Zoom. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants’ consent for subsequent transcription and analysis.

3.6 Pilot Interview

To refine the interview process and ensure that questions were clear, the first interview was piloted. Creswell and Poth (2018) claim that feedback from the pilot interview may inform any necessary adjustments to the interview question guide, including ensuring

that key themes are adequately addressed. Hence, conducting a pilot interview has the potential to enhance the overall reliability and validity of the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis serves as the core of this research's analytical approach. It provides a structured method for identifying and interpreting themes in the data, supporting a thorough understanding of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study employed a systematic thematic analysis framework, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to recognise, examine, and interpret significant patterns within the data. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and suitability in exploring participants' subjective experiences, enabling both an in-depth examination of individual narratives and the recognition of broader patterns that reflect shared phenomena between the participants. This method is especially relevant for understanding the complex experiences associated with school refusal.

The first step in thematic analysis involves the researcher orienting themselves with the data. This stage required deep familiarisation with the interview transcripts by reading and re-reading them to gain an overall understanding of participants' perspectives. This helped me immerse myself in the data and identify recurring ideas and patterns. As Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasise, this phase is essential for developing contextual awareness and forming initial thoughts about the data.

The next step in the process is generating initial codes for the data. This involved systematically labelling parts of the data with descriptive codes that highlight significant features relevant to the research questions. For instance, different codes were assigned to participants' descriptions of anxiety-related behaviours and those related to the school environment. These codes reflected important elements of participants' experiences and served as the foundation for the subsequent stages of analysis. According to Nowell et al. (2017), rigorous coding is essential for maintaining an evidence-based analysis, allowing the key aspects of participants' voices to emerge authentically.

Once the codes were generated, the next step involved identifying themes. During this phase, codes were reviewed and grouped into potential themes that represent larger patterns. For example, codes associated with "emotional distress" and "social isolation" were combined into a theme that highlights the psychosocial effects of school refusal. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that this phase is naturally interpretative. This is because it requires the researcher to investigate links between codes and evaluate how they come together to create meaningful themes.

The subsequent stage involved analysing the identified themes to ensure that they are relevant to the study. Each theme was evaluated in relation to the coded data and the whole dataset to determine whether it accurately represented participants' accounts. For instance, themes were checked against the original transcripts to ensure that they aligned with participants' narratives. Nowell et al. (2017) suggest that this process reinforces the themes and improves their ability to accurately represent the data. During this phase, some

themes were refined or combined according to the needs. Others were eliminated if they failed to reflect the essence of the data adequately.

The final stage of analysis involved defining the themes. Descriptive names were assigned to the themes, conveying their meaning and significance in relation to the research questions. This phase involved illustrating the role of each theme in improving the understanding of what is being examined. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of naming themes requires a careful balance between representing the richness of the data and maintaining clarity.

In essence, the thematic analysis process in this study identifies key themes that provide valuable insights into the participants' perspectives. By following established guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the study ensures a balance between the in-depth exploration of individual experiences and the identification of broader patterns across participants. This contributes to a better understanding of school refusal.

3.8 Credibility and Reliability

Credibility and reliability in qualitative research are essential for establishing the trustworthiness of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Nowell et al. (2017), credibility refers to how accurate the data and its interpretation are. Reliability, on the other hand, relates to the consistency throughout the research process. To improve both aspects, I adopted various strategies to ensure participants provided honest responses as much as possible. These included clarifying that participation is voluntary and allowing withdrawal at

any time, as well as refusal to answer questions without penalty. This likely encouraged genuine participation and honest answers. Additionally, I employed probing techniques during interviews, such as referring to earlier comments, to verify the consistency in the participants' responses.

Reliability was further reinforced by using a reflexive journal, in which I documented my assumptions throughout the study. This helped identify and address potential biases, thereby supporting transparency. I also utilised triangulation by gathering perspectives from both parents and professionals, thus adding depth to the findings and strengthening the study's credibility. Incorporating multiple sources of data prevents the researcher from relying on a single perspective (e.g., only parents), further enhancing the depth of the conclusions.

3.9 Reflexivity

As a student, I have always been intrigued by how individuals navigate challenges and grow through their experiences. This interest has intensified during my studies, especially in understanding how internal and external factors influence behaviour and learning. When I started researching school refusal, I quickly realised how complex the topic is. Recruiting participants, especially parents, has been challenging, but I approached it with a sense of commitment, which allowed me to engage deeply with the participant recruitment process.

This thesis aims to deepen my understanding of school refusal and broaden my perspective on child learning in education. The research process has highlighted the value of empathy and emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing such issues. It has made me reflect on the support systems available, individual differences, and the wider implications for educational policy and practice. Through this work, I aim to develop a better understanding of the experiences of individuals facing school refusal.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that participants were well-informed about the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including clear explanations about confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants were guaranteed that their identities would remain anonymous and that their data would be securely stored. Additionally, unconditional ethical approval from FREC was secured before initiating data collection. It is also important to note that both parents were encouraged to participate, as detailed in the information letter provided to them. This was particularly relevant for parents who were separated or undergoing separation. Furthermore, both parents were required to sign the consent form for one or both to take part in the study.

In addition, some social workers recommended that I, as the researcher, recruit assistant heads instead of teachers. This was because assistant heads are significantly more involved in school refusal cases, and thus, they could provide more insightful data about school refusal. Considering this, I informed FREC and the MTL Dissertations Board to request

a minor change in participant recruitment, to recruit assistant heads instead of teachers.

This request was duly approved by both FREC and the MTL Dissertations Board.

Moreover, to strengthen the ethical integrity of this research, the study incorporated measures to address cases of separated parents. By inviting both parents to participate, the study aims to capture a holistic understanding of the children's experiences and the dynamics within the family unit. I actively monitored the consent process to ensure that participants felt comfortable and were not pressured into participating. At the end of each interview, a brief debriefing was held with participants to discuss how they felt throughout the interview. This approach reinforced the commitment to ethical standards and participant well-being throughout the research process.

3.11 Conclusion

This methodology chapter has outlined the research questions, research design and rationale, and other procedures employed in this study exploring the perceived effects of school refusal on children's learning journeys. By using a qualitative research design and thematic analysis to analyse the data, the research aimed to provide rich insights into the participants' perspectives on school refusal. Through careful consideration of ethical issues, reflexivity, and data credibility, the study aspired to meaningfully contribute to the understanding of school refusal and its impacts, ultimately informing future practices and interventions.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from the data collected and organises them thematically to reflect the key patterns emerging from participant accounts. Using a qualitative approach, thematic analysis was conducted on data gathered through interviews with nine participants: three social workers, three assistant heads, and three parents. From this process, four major themes emerged: *What Lay Beneath: Interpretations of School Refusal*, *When Absence Becomes a Barrier: How Does School Refusal Impact Learning?*, *The Social and Emotional Ripple Effects of School Refusal*, and *Responses to School Refusal: Interventions and Strategies*. These themes are further broken down into specific sub-themes, which are outlined in the table below. Where relevant, each sub-theme draws on the perspectives of social workers, assistant heads, and parents to illustrate how school refusal is understood from different viewpoints.

4.2 Table of Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
4.3 What Lay Beneath: Interpretations of School Refusal	<i>4.3.1 School Refusal - a Symptom or the Problem?</i>
	<i>4.3.2 Spotting the Signs: How School Refusal is Identified in Practice</i>
4.4 When Absence Becomes a Barrier: How Does School Refusal Impact Learning?	<i>4.4.1 Learning on Pause: The Disruption of Daily Progress</i>
	<i>4.4.2 Falling Behind or Left Behind? The Long-Term Academic Repercussions</i>
4.5 The Social and Emotional Ripple Effects of School Refusal	<i>4.5.1 Heightened Anxiety and School-Related Fear</i>
	<i>4.5.2 Emotional Withdrawal and Strain on Family Relationships</i>
	<i>4.5.3 Peer Isolation and Breakdown of Social Connections</i>
4.6 Responding to School Refusal: Interventions and Strategies	<i>4.6.1 It Takes a Team: The Role of Schools, Parents, and Professionals</i>
	<i>4.6.2 Early Intervention and Personalised Approaches</i>

	<i>4.6.3 Parent Power: The Role and Reality of Parental Involvement</i>
	<i>4.6.4 Support Systems: A Way of Coping</i>
	<i>4.6.5 Need for Ongoing Professional Development</i>

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes

The interviewees are referred to in the table below:

Social Workers	SW 1/2/3
Assistant Heads	AH 1/2/3
Parents	Parent 1/2/3

Table 2: Interviewees

The 1/2/3 indicates the interview number. For instance, SW 1 would refer to the first social worker interview.

4.3 What Lay Beneath: Interpretations of School Refusal

School refusal emerged as a persistent and complex issue across all interviews, encompassing the perspectives of social workers, assistant heads, and parents. Participants agreed that it was rarely simply a child's choice not to attend school. Instead, it was a

behaviour often indicating underlying difficulties. The data showed that school refusal served as both a warning signal and a coping mechanism, a way for children to respond to emotional, psychological, or social pressures they could not manage within the school. A social worker noted that the child's school refusal is rarely about the child not wanting to attend school because of school itself or factors involved within the school that are hindering the child's motivation to attend. Instead, she maintained that it usually involves difficulties in the home environment: "I think that children who refuse to attend school tend to have some problems, basically problems which they bring from home. I don't think that children refuse school just because they don't like school." (SW 1)

This perspective reflects a broader understanding among professionals that school refusal often has its roots in the child's home environment. It may suggest that the act of staying away from school is not usually motivated by not wanting to be there, but by the weight of the challenges faced at home. In fact, other social workers maintain that tensions in the family, among other possibilities, could create an environment in which attending school becomes secondary to managing emotional security. The result of this could be that children end up withdrawing from school: "What complicates matters is that these students, especially when there are difficulties in the dynamics of the family, withdraw." (SW 3)

Additionally, as other participants observe, withdrawal from school may be just one sign of a broader withdrawal from social life. For these children, refusing to attend school is not an isolated behaviour but part of a wider pattern of disengagement, which can affect friendships and even family relationships. Professionals and parents often regarded the refusal as a "signal", an outward sign that something in the child's life is going wrong and

needs attention. However, the views of professionals on this matter appeared to differ from those of parents.

4.3.1 School Refusal: A Symptom or the Problem?

Across all groups of participants, there was a shared understanding that school refusal is more often a symptom than a root problem. In many cases, it was described as the visible tip of a much larger iceberg. Social workers substantiated this point by referring to how family circumstances, such as being in a single-parent household or the presence of parental mental health challenges, can influence a child's willingness to attend school. They recounted situations in which the barrier to attendance was less about the school environment itself and more about difficulties within the home, including challenges in establishing consistent morning routines or a lack of emotional resilience to get the child ready for school.

SW 1: Sometimes we see that they don't come to school because there are some problems in the family which hinder children from attending, either they are single parents or there are mental health issues... and all these accumulate, and then children don't attend school.

SW 2: It's more of an issue where the parents, for example, have mental health issues and find it challenging to prepare their children for school in the morning, or they remain asleep, for example, rather than the child refusing to go to school because of school.

Moreover, mental health difficulties in children were also seen as a potentially significant risk factor for school refusal, with one participant noting that “in many cases, these children don’t attend because they have some mental health problems and they can’t focus or they take some medications which don’t let them function well at school” **(SW 1)**. Others highlighted that these difficulties may overlap with neglect, stressing that “one of the main reasons for school refusal is when there are mental health issues or issues of neglect; sometimes they are very related, mental health and neglect” **(SW 2)**.

This may illustrate how mental health problems or the absence of a supportive co-parenting structure can act as a blocking mechanism towards the child’s school attendance. In addition, it may also influence the family’s ability to support their child’s school attendance. Thus, in such cases, the refusal is not so much a child’s conscious rejection of education, but rather a result of external barriers that are outside the child’s control. When even the morning routine itself becomes a hurdle, with no one awake to prepare the child for school, it becomes very difficult for the child, who is still dependent on their caregivers, to wake up and go to school.

Furthermore, social workers also pointed out that school refusal could be a result of separation anxiety, where the child’s concern is not for themselves but for the safety or well-being of a parent left at home: “Perhaps they are afraid to leave their mother alone at home, and so they won’t come to school because they will think of her all the time.” **(SW 1)**. Another social worker agreed with this and explained how separation anxiety may result from the child being afraid that something bad will happen at home.

SW 2: If they are fearing that something will happen to their mother, for example, or their parents will get into a fight and something will happen, they are refusing to come to school, for example, to protect their parents, their mother.

This interpretation emphasises how some children assume a protective role within their families. Instead of viewing school as a safe environment, they might consider being at home as crucial to maintaining their parents' emotional well-being. In this context, missing school is not an act of rebellion but a reflection of fear and a sense of responsibility that surpasses their age.

In contrast to professionals' perspectives, parents mainly pointed to the school environment itself as the source of the problem for their child's school refusal. Bullying was mentioned repeatedly as a factor that pushed the child towards missing school. In fact, a parent spoke about how she was noticing that her child did not want to attend school at any cost, and upon asking him to see if anything was bothering him at school, he decided to open up:

Parent 1: At first, he was not telling me what was going on at school, and then I asked him, 'Is there anything that is bothering you at school?' and he told me that his peers were picking on him, calling him names, and telling him that he couldn't do the same activities as them.

For this parent, the refusal was rooted in the child's experience of hostility and exclusion in the classroom. The refusal to attend became a way to avoid repeated exposure to these negative interactions with other peers. The same parent continued to argue that

this led to her child wanting to be as far away from the school environment as possible: “My child did not want to go to school, it’s like they distanced themselves from school” (**Parent 1**). One of the first things that children look for in their lives is safety, and without this, their attendance at school is highly likely to be compromised. As Parent 3 continued to assert, her child, who also went through bullying at school, could not manage to focus during lessons: “She couldn’t understand the lessons because she couldn’t focus, apart from also going through bullying at that time” (**Parent 3**). Thus, parents’ perspectives reveal that when bullying damages a child’s feeling of safety, it can also weaken their ability to learn. The mix of emotional distress and academic difficulties may make the idea of going back to school feel too much.

Furthermore, another parent (**Parent 2**) also mentioned how her child encountered social issues, particularly in communicating with others, which later professionals diagnosed as social anxiety. The parent spoke about how talking to other peers is an important factor in developing peer relationships in primary school, and she felt that this was missing in her child’s school experience. Notably, parent 2 attributed her child’s school refusal primarily to social anxiety. Unlike the experiences described by other parents, she did not believe bullying played a role: “My child does not like talking to others, he finds it challenging when it comes to social environments, he will not want to mix with the other children” (**Parent 2**)

Parent 2: When it comes to bullying or other children picking on him, my child never had any such experiences, as I used to ask on Parents’ Day, and even the child used to tell me that that’s not the reason why he doesn’t want to attend.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that school refusal is a multifaceted phenomenon. It can be an expression of distress rooted in family instability, a reaction to hostile peer environments, or a manifestation of internal struggles such as anxiety. What unites these perspectives is that school refusal is never about simply not liking school, but about a behavioural response to complex and often overlapping challenges in the child's world.

4.3.2 Spotting the Signs: How School Refusal is Identified in Practice

Participants identified various indicators that suggest a child may be refusing school. These signals go beyond absenteeism and often indicate a broader form of withdrawal from daily life. Insights from social workers, assistant heads, and parents suggest that school refusal involves more than just staying home. It is usually related to changes in the child's behaviour and emotional well-being.

Several professionals observed that children who refuse to attend school typically disengage from more than just classroom activities. Social workers indicate that these children may become isolated from friends and family and resist daily routines such as eating and maintaining hygiene. Instead, they may spend more time alone, often gaming, thus neglecting other responsibilities: "Normally when a child refuses to attend school, he also refuses to go out... they refuse even to wash or eat because of their addiction to the games, the pc games" (**SW 1**). Other social workers' perspectives align with this argument, claiming that these gaming habits may take over a child's life.

SW 3: They spend a lot of time playing on the computer or PlayStation, and that becomes their world... signs that are shown are feeling overwhelmed with the amount of work... And I think a bit of withdrawal from peers.

These observations portray gaming not as harmless hobbies but as coping mechanisms that can deepen the avoidance cycle. Instead of school serving as the centre of a child's daily routine, an alternative "world" develops in which schoolwork is replaced by activities that offer a distraction from reality. In these cases, the avoidance of school becomes intertwined with the avoidance of social interaction and other daily responsibilities.

In addition, assistant heads echoed these worries, indicating that children might realise that with each day they miss, the work accumulates, potentially leading to a loss of hope in ever catching up. "It's like perhaps they become overwhelmed with the fact that perhaps they cannot keep up with the work, and they, you know, start losing interest in attending school" (**AH 2**). Consequently, this accumulation of work could potentially reinforce the child's refusal to attend school. Furthermore, Assistant Head 3 described how these children often indicate they don't want to be at school, for example, by avoiding participation in school or classroom activities, refusing to cooperate with the teacher or other school-based staff, and not completing their work.

AH 3: Although they come physically to school, they are obviously mentally or emotionally or socially not engaged... If they refuse to cooperate at school, like sometimes being a bit defiant... signs that show you that the student doesn't want to be there.

This might imply that the problem is not limited to absenteeism and that a child may be indirectly showing signs of school refusal by being physically present but emotionally detached. Thus, it is worth noting that school refusal can manifest in both overt (easily observable) and subtle (less easily observable) forms. These perspectives underline the importance of recognising that attendance does not always equate to genuine engagement.

Conversely, parents offered their own perspective on how school refusal manifests at home, often through intense emotional reactions or physical symptoms that appear before or during attempts to attend school. One parent mentioned how it was always a struggle in the morning, especially when trying to get the child ready for school: “He was always crying, always going into school crying... He used to lock himself in his room, red-faced, telling me that he had a stomach-ache, that he was going to throw up... He wouldn’t let me dress him up” (**Parent 2**). This may suggest that the child’s anxiety about attending school was expressed through such psychosomatic symptoms. Another parent substantiates this view and claims that her child also presented with somatic complaints before going to school: “She used to tell me that she had a stomach-ache, and that she didn’t want to go because of this” (**Parent 3**).

Overall, the parents explained how refusal can manifest as emotional outbursts, physical complaints, and resistance to routine tasks, such as getting dressed for school. The symptoms may often be real to the child, even if they have no medical basis, and may reflect the physical expression of emotional distress. Thus, the professional and parental perspectives highlight the range of signs that can indicate school refusal, from subtle

disengagement in the classroom to complete withdrawal at home. They also show how recognising these early signs requires cooperation between schools and families, as each party sees different parts of the child's experience.

4.4 When Absence Becomes a Barrier: How Does School Refusal Impact Learning?

Participants described school refusal as more than just a matter of missed attendance. They viewed it as a barrier that hinders both academic progress and other essential aspects of learning. Several noted that when children faced challenges outside of school, these often spilt over into the classroom, making it harder to focus. As one assistant head explained, "Learning obviously doesn't happen when many other things are going on in the student's life. They do not engage in what is happening at school, because for them, school is not something that they enjoy" **(AH 3)**.

Such perspectives introduced a recurring theme in the data, which is that learning is closely tied to the emotional readiness to learn. Without these elements, the purpose of school becomes harder to fulfil, and absence can reinforce a cycle where returning to learning feels increasingly challenging. The following sub-themes explore how participants described this process, from disruptions to daily learning to the long-term, holistic repercussions of sustained absence.

4.4.1 Learning on Pause: The Disruption of Daily Progress

One of the most mentioned effects of school refusal was the disruption of daily routines. Social workers insisted that when the child refuses to go to school, it disrupts their learning by removing the structure and discipline of the classroom. One explained that without the school routine, habits like keeping time and following rules fade, making it harder for the child to stay on track.

SW 1: Even the daily routine is shuffled because at school, you have a routine, you come on time, you have to obey rules, you have to eat at a particular time, and when they are at home, their routine is something else. Even when we go on home visits at 10 in the morning, we find parents who are still asleep.

Thus, the absence from school not only removes the child from the academic environment but also disrupts their learning rhythm. In fact, professionals continue to argue that a lack of structure at home can reinforce avoidance patterns, making it harder for the child to transition back into the routine of a school day. This effect reflects a fundamental shift in how time is valued and used. Over time, as the child gets used to the lack of routines, the thought of returning to a stricter schedule can further provoke resistance.

Moreover, participants described additional ways in which school refusal can disrupt children's learning. Several noted that even short absences could have a significant impact, particularly for children already facing academic challenges. Social worker 2 explained that for students with learning difficulties, the gap created by only a few missed days could already feel unmanageable: "If I miss 3 days of school, and I have learning difficulties, to turn

back to school and make up for what I have lost, and get back on track with all the homework, it becomes too overwhelming” **(SW 2)**.

This sense of falling behind is not limited to ongoing absence, and in fact, certain assistant heads observed that absences were sometimes planned to avoid certain academic tasks. They described how some pupils would plan to miss school on days when tests or other assessments were scheduled: “Some would know that they have an assessment coming up, the teacher will tell them, ‘next Friday, we have a maths test’, then the children would do everything they can to invent an excuse so that Friday they don’t attend” **(AH 2)**. From the perspective of these assistant heads, this pattern formed part of a wider school refusal behaviour, where pupils deliberately removed themselves from situations in school that they perceived as overwhelming.

Notwithstanding, some parents commented on the difficulty of maintaining learning progress when additional support was delayed. This parent recounted how this had affected their child’s education: “My child has autism, and I had to ask for a home tutor before Easter, and this home tutor came in the last month of school, which meant my child fell behind significantly” **(Parent 3)**. This meant that by the time support was in place, the child had already missed a substantial amount of content from the school year.

In addition, even when schools attempted to bridge the gap by sending work home, parents emphasised that the absence of in-person teaching limited the effectiveness of this approach. Parent 1 explained the challenge of supporting their child with unfamiliar material:

Even though he was absent, he still used to do his work; they (teachers) used to send it to me. But not being in class, not hearing the teacher explaining, and not knowing how I should explain it to him, that affects a lot. Even though you're doing it, you're not doing it correctly **(Parent 1)**.

Across these perspectives, participants described a typical pattern in which time away from school created a learning gap that was difficult to close. While the reasons for absence varied, the outcome, as described by both professionals and parents, was a loss of momentum in the child's education.

4.4.2 Falling Behind or Left Behind? The Long-Term Academic Repercussions

Participants described how sustained absence from school can lead to lasting academic gaps, often making it difficult for children to catch up, even if they can do so. Social workers and assistant heads explained that while some children have the potential to succeed, prolonged absence can make academic recovery unlikely due to the sequential design of learning:

Academically, they would fall behind many times. In the long term, then, if there are a lot of days of missing school, even if they have potential, it would be too much. You can't expect academic attainment, improvement without the well-being, because it's the most important thing **(SW 2)**.

Catching up on work becomes very difficult because then everything seems like a mountain. So, they would start moving away, start withdrawing, on many levels,

particularly in terms of the amount of work they present. I mean, most subjects build on each other, so they are losing blocks. Then, academically, you are going to keep going down **(SW 3)**.

They end up missing a lot of work because, as you know, a lot of work is done in a month. When they come back to school, then we see a big gap, a big academic gap. And usually, they don't catch up with the others **(AH 1)**.

Thus, professionals observed that the cumulative effect of missing school may result not only in the loss of academic progress but also in the breakdown of confidence needed to re-engage with learning. While most professionals emphasised a decline in academics, some parents described instances where their children were able to keep pace, at least temporarily, despite missing a lot of school.

He used to take his exams and performed well in maths, Maltese, and English, despite not attending school. When I say 'good', I don't mean the 90s, but for him, the fact that he attended and sat for his exams was a success **(Parent 1)**.

Parent 2 described a similar experience with her child: "When he was younger, he used to do well. For example, his teacher would tell me, "Even though he misses school, he still manages to catch up with others, and does well" **(Parent 2)**. These examples of short-term academic success, however, were consistently described as exceptions. Parents added that even when their children managed to achieve this level of performance for short periods, maintaining it became harder as the curriculum expanded, leading to worries about their future. Indeed, Parent 2 spoke about a growing fear: "In today's world, you can say that

even if you are highly educated, it is still challenging to find a job, let alone having missed so much schooling” (**Parent 2**).

Drawing on the participants’ perspectives, prolonged absence was seen as a significant risk factor for long-term academic disadvantage. The immediate impact of missed lessons could grow into a larger gap, making later catch-up with academic work far more challenging. In some cases, participants reported that the educational gap became a permanent barrier, shaping not only the child’s school experience but also limiting opportunities beyond compulsory education.

4.5 The Social and Emotional Ripple Effects of School Refusal

Participants expressed considerable concern about the ways school refusal reverberates throughout a child’s life. They described its effects as spreading outwards, touching not only academic learning but also emotional well-being and self-perception. Many stressed that rebuilding the social and emotional ground lost during prolonged absence is often very challenging. It was emphasised that school is a space where children learn more about conflict resolution. Hence, missing out on these experiences was seen as a loss that could have lifelong consequences.

SW 1: The long ones (long school refusals) are difficult, because school is not only academic; school involves a lot of other things, the social aspect, you socialise, you learn how to get along with your peers, how you interact, how you do other things.

This observation highlights an important distinction, shared by many participants. Education is not confined to the curriculum. It is equally about becoming socially competent, meaning learning how to share, wait your turn and manage disagreements with others. For children experiencing school refusal, this informal yet essential form of learning is interrupted. Over time, they may become less adept at reading social situations, which in turn can encourage them to avoid social spaces like school.

Furthermore, assistant heads argue that absence often meant children's friendship groups were very small or non-existent, leaving them with fewer sources of emotional support during the school day. "These students don't have a big circle of friends. Obviously, they might trust one or two friends. They don't involve themselves in playing time" **(AH 3)**. For some, this sense of exclusion may be more distressing than falling behind academically.

4.5.1 Heightened Anxiety and School-Related Fear

A recurring theme across interviews was the relationship between school refusal and anxiety. Participants described anxiety not just as a contributing factor to the refusal but as something that evolves once school absence begins, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Thus, once absences become frequent, the fear of returning becomes greater. As this social worker explains, "When they are missing a lot of school, then it becomes an anxiety problem... what others will think of me... sometimes even when children come late to school, they are disoriented, let alone missing many days of school" **(SW 2)**.

This captures that anxiety is not only about the original cause, but also about the imagined judgment from others. Children may begin to imagine their peers talking about their absence or feeling embarrassed about not knowing what is going on in class. When they return, they might feel exposed and closely evaluated. Assistant heads took it a step further, noting that anxiety can persist even in the presence of support:

AH 3: Coming to school, even though they might be with a good teacher or a good LSE or have a good friend or two, school is not somewhere that they would like to be. You find students who close up and don't want to talk.

In such cases, the school environment itself may become symbolically linked with discomfort, and the child's instinctive response is to shut down communication as a protective measure.

Parents often linked their children's anxiety to sustained negative experiences at school, particularly related to bullying or peer conflict. Parent 1 described how this continued to affect her child's willingness to attend: "The fact that someone was picking on him at school stayed in his mind... when there was someone there with him (a school professional), he used to go as long as he didn't make any contact with children" **(Parent 1)**. She explained that this avoidance of peers extended to the classroom, with her child resisting attendance altogether if there was any possibility of seeing the other children. Similarly, Parent 2 shared that the difficulties often began before the school day had even started: "When there was a time that he knew he had to wake up and go to school, he used to throw a lot of tantrums, and the school bus used to pass by without him getting on it" **(Parent 2)**.

Thus, across participants, anxiety was described as both a cause and a consequence of school refusal. Social workers noted that frequent absences could lead to new anxieties about returning, including concerns about being judged by peers and teachers. Assistant heads reported that this anxiety sometimes persisted even when supportive staff or peers were present, with students remaining withdrawn. In contrast, parents often traced their children's anxiety to specific incidents at school, particularly bullying or peer conflict, describing behaviours such as avoiding classmates entirely or refusing to leave home when school transport arrived, aspects which significantly affected their children's openness to learn.

4.5.2 Emotional Withdrawal and Strain on Family Relationships

Participants described how the child's school refusal often becomes visible at home. The same emotional withdrawal that is visible in the classroom is frequently mirrored at home. What begins as a reluctance to participate in school activities can evolve into a broader reluctance to participate in any shared family experiences. Social workers noted that one of the earliest signs of this withdrawal is a decrease in interest, not just towards schoolwork but towards life in general. "It might be a case of isolation, feeling a bit isolated, even the fact that you are missing activities in class, that you are finding it difficult to get back on track and catch up" (**SW 2**).

Here, the initial trigger may be academic, but the consequence quickly becomes emotional. The child not only struggles to reintegrate academically but also loses confidence in their ability to reconnect socially, leading to self-imposed isolation. This withdrawal from

the classroom environment can make the home feel like a safe haven, but it also reinforces avoidance patterns. Another social worker identifies with this: “I think a part of what creates school refusal is the amount of academic material there is, where some students become overwhelmed and say ‘I cannot do this. I’d rather stay home’” **(SW 3)**.

This underlines how emotional withdrawal can be rooted in feelings of overwhelm. When the number of demands feels unmanageable, opting out may seem like the only way to regain a sense of control. Unfortunately, staying home often reduces stimulation, which can further diminish the child’s readiness to re-engage in learning.

Assistant heads remarked that children who refuse to attend school may not only be physically absent but also emotionally absent when they do attend. “They would not want to play with their friends during break times, or they don’t want to participate in classroom activities” **(AH 1)**. This reflects how withdrawal can manifest quietly, in that a child may be physically present, but their reluctance to interact means they are socially absent. In some cases, the same pattern carries into family life, with children avoiding speaking even with those closest to them.

In fact, a parent described how her child preferred to stay socially disengaged when he attended school: “He used to go alone for break, not with other children, the more he used to be alone the better” **(Parent 1)**. Solitude becomes not just a consequence but a preference. The child’s comfort zone narrows until being alone feels safer than engaging with others. For parents, this was seen as deeply concerning, as the home gradually becomes the child’s only trusted environment.

Other parents explained how their child's school refusal greatly impacted the relationships within the family: "We were at a point where my children did not want to leave our home... we were sleep deprived because our children couldn't sleep... we became socially isolated without us wanting" (**Parent 3**). This highlights how school refusal can ripple outwards, affecting not only the child but also the entire household. Over time, the family may become inadvertently complicit in the isolation, adjusting their lives to accommodate the child's boundaries rather than challenging them.

These observations indicate that the child's emotional disengagement is not simply a lack of emotion but rather an active choice to avoid stressors and, at times, affection. The child's decision to emotionally withdraw is a pattern which may shape the child's and the family's daily life and, therefore, make the child's return to school difficult to accomplish.

4.5.3 Peer Isolation and Breakdown of Social Connections

When a child refuses to go to school for a long time, peer relationships become one of the most vulnerable aspects of their learning journey. Participants mentioned that friendships, typically integral to a child's sense of belonging, can quickly deteriorate in the child's absence. Unlike academic work, which can sometimes be caught up on with extra support, friendships are maintained through ongoing contact. When that contact is interrupted, children risk losing their place in the school's social network.

Social workers emphasised that re-entering established peer groups after a long absence is rarely straightforward: "People form other friendships... so that person now has

to enter a different space” **(SW 3)**. This brings up two challenges for children, which include keeping old friends and making new ones. Peer groups may have changed for a child who is not there, with new connections forming in their absence.

SW 2: If they miss a lot of school, to fit in, it would be more difficult when you’re not present on a regular basis, because even if you have very close friends, if they see that you’re missing on many days, they might be forming other groups, other friendships.

This isn’t necessarily due to rejection, but rather the natural tendency of children to bond with those with whom they spend the most time. In fact, assistant head 1 also mentions a similar point: “Because then children, they make friends with those children that are always or most times present” **(AH 1)**. For the absent child, this gradual distancing can feel like a betrayal, reinforcing their perception that school is a place where they no longer belong. Moreover, other assistant heads note that social integration is not something the child would be interested in during school refusal: “Socially, they don’t want to engage, or in class, the student sort of doesn’t want to engage” **(AH 3)**. These observations underline that even when children return after absences, if they are unwilling to participate, they may remain socially marginalised. In other words, presence is necessary, but not sufficient, and active engagement is what keeps a child anchored in a peer group.

Parents described a similar pattern during their child’s absence from school: “He will not initiate a conversation or the sort, it’s like you need to talk to him first” **(Parent 2)**. In this case, the hesitance to initiate contact meant that following periods of absence, the child relied on others to re-establish connections, a dynamic that rarely occurred. This ended up

deepening his reluctance to attend school. Parent 3 also reflected on the fragility of her children's social ties:

Parent 3: I always noticed that my children used to have only one friend, and once they had any issues with their friend, it was difficult for them to make new friends. So, it's as if they always felt socially marginalised.

This reliance on a single friendship created a heightened vulnerability. This is because when that relationship broke down, the absence of other connections left the children feeling socially adrift, making the prospect of returning to school even more isolating.

Collectively, participants viewed absence as disrupting the daily interactions that sustain friendships. Even when they returned, re-establishing these connections was often tricky, particularly if they had become reluctant to engage or were reliant on a single friendship for social support. Thus, participants claim that without being consistently present and actively participating, many children may find themselves socially marginalised, making school attendance feel even less appealing.

4.6 Responding to School Refusal: Interventions and Strategies

Although the consequences of school refusal were emphasised clearly, participants shared various strategies that one can utilise to address it. It was highlighted among many that there is no single solution, and that potential success relied on strategies which explicitly focused on the child and their family's needs. These interventions must be supported through effective communication among all parties involved. Importantly, participants emphasised that responses should not be reactive only after the problem has

worsened. Instead, identifying it early and addressing the emotional drivers of school refusal were seen as central to preventing long-term school refusal.

4.6.1 It Takes a Team: The Role of Schools, Parents, and Professionals

Social workers explained that the process of recognising and addressing school refusal typically starts with school staff, such as teachers and assistant heads, monitoring attendance sheets. When teachers or assistant heads observe frequent absences, they can notify the head of school. The head of school then verifies the situation and, if necessary, can refer the student to a social worker for further assistance. Moreover, social workers noted that they also have an internal system that allows them to review attendance sheets and identify potential cases that require attention.

SW 1: We identify cases either through a referral from the head of school or through our internal referral system, where, by the end of each month, we review the attendance list of schools and extract the names of those who appear most absent.

These practices highlight the importance of recognising patterns early, thus noticing not only clear absences but also irregular attendance. Early recognition allows for earlier communication with families and other professionals before the refusal becomes a rigid habit. Once a potential case is identified, contact with parents is prioritised.

SW 1: We start by contacting them (the parents) by phone... then we have a meeting with the school, we see what's happening at school, we have a meeting with the parents, and we check if other professionals are working with the child.

This illustrates that intervention is a coordinated process rather than a series of isolated steps, and that these meetings serve to align the understanding of the child's situation between schools, parents, and external professionals.

Assistant heads added that detecting school refusal is not only about checking the attendance, but also about noticing absences during school assembly or other activities: "Sometimes, I notice that some kids are missing repeatedly... we notice during the school assembly or teachers report that some kids are missing school frequently" **(AH 2)**. Even more so, assistant head 3 emphasised how important it is for them as the SLT (Senior Leadership Team) to observe changes in the child's behaviour that may signal avoidance: "We always address behaviour, because school refusal comes out through behaviour. Behaviour is something that needs to be understood rather than managed or before it is managed" **(AH 3)**. This shift, from seeing behaviour as a problem to be managed to seeing it as a message to be understood, was seen as critical to early intervention.

Several parents reflected on how school refusal was not immediately apparent but gradually revealed itself through repeated patterns of absence. Parent 3 explained: "Initially, I didn't think it was a problem as I thought perhaps it's true that she has a stomach-ache, but over time I noticed that there was a pattern" **(Parent 3)**. Other parents described similar experiences, noting that at first they dismissed their child's reluctance to attend as a temporary illness. Still, over time, it became clear that the behaviour was consistent and intentional. This gradual recognition highlights how school refusal often emerges subtly, making it challenging for families to identify it early. Hence, there needs to be more

awareness of school refusal, so that such instances can alert parents to seek the necessary support from the school without unnecessary delay.

4.6.2 Early Intervention and Personalised Approaches

There was a strong consensus that the sooner support is given, the greater the chances of the child returning to school. Social workers described tailoring interventions to the child's needs, sometimes beginning with changes in the home environment before attempting to rebuild school attendance. As Social Worker 2 explained, "It's important to start from the parents... sometimes, we do even suggest family therapy... when there are anxiety issues, we do try to work with the child and if needs be, we refer to therapy" **(SW 2)**. This suggests that while the symptom may be school refusal, its roots may lie within the home environment. Addressing this first can make later strategies more effective: "You create more stability in the family, and the child feels safer" **(SW 3)**.

Gradual reintroduction to school is a common strategy used, aimed at reducing the child's anxiety associated with a full-day return: "When we have a child who is absent for a long time, then we start by coming back gradually... perhaps we will choose Monday, Wednesday, and Friday... from 10 am to 12 pm, for example" **(SW 1)**. This approach is essential for children as it involves a series of achievable steps rather than an overwhelming return where the child stays at school for the whole day. Schools also implement support within the school itself to try to ease the transition: "We try and work with the buddy system... we also have a magic room where we have cushions and a sofa to try and calm

them down” **(AH 1)**. By providing both a peer companion and a safe physical space, the school attempts to address both the social and emotional dimensions of refusal.

Other initiatives were also described, aimed at addressing the emotional side of school refusal, recognising that children often need support to feel calm and safe before they can re-engage with learning. Assistant head 1 reflected on one such initiative:

We were conducting well-being sessions for both students and parents because we wanted to integrate a sense of well-being into our school. We started with breathing exercises that we found worked well with children, and then repeated these sessions for adults. **(AH 1)**

4.6.3 Parent Power: The Role and Reality of Parental Involvement

One of the most striking points that emerged from the interviews was the degree to which parental cooperation determines the success of interventions. As a social worker puts it: “It’s what makes or breaks it. If we don’t have the cooperation of the parents, every intervention is practically pointless” **(SW 2)**. Another professional substantiated this: “The parents have to be involved right from the beginning because it’s something that they are facing as well at home as well” **(AH 3)**.

Without parental involvement, children may quickly revert to avoidance behaviours the moment they leave school. Conversely, when parents work in partnership with the school and other professionals, the progress is more sustainable. As several noted, the issue

of school refusal is not limited to the classroom but deeply embedded in family routines and relationships, making parental involvement a central pillar of any effective intervention.

4.6.4 Support Systems: A Way of Coping

Participants described a range of support systems that become available once a case of school refusal is identified. These typically include access to psychological services, counselling, and guidance for both children and parents, often coordinated through a multi-disciplinary approach. As one social worker explained: “We offer our support... we have the psychologist and the counsellor... and we discuss what’s best to be done with this child” (**SW 1**). Assistant heads echoed this, noting the involvement of guidance teachers who can also extend support to parents: “In most cases, we get the guidance teachers in because they offer support for parents as well” (**AH 2**).

Some parents also reflected on the importance of providing children with skills that could prevent school refusal from escalating in the first place. Parent 3 emphasised the role of equipping children at home and school with coping strategies, noting: “I would say that from a young age, we give children emotional regulation skills” (**Parent 3**). This perspective highlights how parents recognise the value in using proactive strategies to build the child’s resilience before difficulties with school refusal become more severe.

4.6.5 Need for Ongoing Professional Development

Finally, some participants reflected on the training and resources available related to school refusal, identifying specific gaps:

I don't think that we are properly trained and equipped to actually work with children who are refusing school... for example, therapy like CBT...it would work much better because when it's an acute problem of school refusal, then we would need to work in steps, therapeutically. Here, in Malta, we are not equipped to do that **(SW 2)**.

Professionals acknowledged that while they have numerous professional development days during the school year, these rarely address school refusal directly. As one social worker explained when asked about their training: "We don't have, trainings are more of other nature, I wish that we could have some training purely on school refusal, but unfortunately we don't" **(SW 1)**. This highlights a clear gap in the professional training currently available to those working with children experiencing school refusal, and that further investment could strengthen existing practices used to tackle it.

Parents, too, recognised the value of timely interventions, with one parent reflecting: "The earlier you address the problem and work on it, the better, as you will avoid a lot of hassle afterwards... the more awareness there is... the more help and support there will be" **(Parent 3)**. Thus, parents' testimonies stress that the longer school refusal patterns go unaddressed, the harder they are to reverse. Thus, without sufficient training for staff and

early diagnostic processes, interventions may risk being too little, too late. Thus, investing in training and early detection is as important as the interventions themselves.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that school refusal can have a negative impact on children's learning journeys in ways that go beyond academic progress. Participants described how an extended absence interrupts daily routines, blocks the learning momentum, and creates gaps that become harder to close over time. At the same time, school refusal may hinder the social and emotional aspects of learning, such as children withdrawing from peers and experiencing higher levels of anxiety. Importantly, participants emphasised that effective responses to school refusal require early identification, parental involvement, and a higher level of professional training. Taken together, the findings underline that school refusal is not just a barrier to attendance but a challenge that can significantly affect a child's learning journey, with potential long-term consequences if left unaddressed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the key themes emerging from interviews with social workers, parents, and assistant heads on school refusal. The discussion connects these findings with existing research to highlight how school refusal extends far beyond the classroom. By integrating stakeholder perspectives with relevant literature, the chapter aims to refine the understanding of how school refusal is identified and experienced, while raising awareness of its root causes and consequences. The discussion follows the same thematic structure presented in Chapter 4, beginning with how participants conceptualise school refusal, then examining its impact on children's educational journeys. The chapter then proceeds to consider interventions and strategies, making reference to common and distinctive insights from professionals and parents.

5.1 School Refusal: A Symptom or the Problem?

Many participants argued that school refusal should never be seen as a general disinterest in attending school. In fact, it was consistently viewed as a sign of deeper issues. This is consistent with the perspective of Kearney and Albano (2007), who point out that when children refuse to go to school, they are usually experiencing high levels of stress. This viewpoint is also supported by other research studies on school refusal, which describe this issue as a child's inability to attend school because of emotional difficulties (Havik & Ingul, 2021). Thus, seeing it as a symptom shifts the focus from wanting the child to return to school to understanding other critical factors influencing their reluctance to attend.

Participants also identified how a child's mental health challenges can impact the occurrence of school refusal. These results were consistent with the research by Egger et al. (2003), who found that depression in children was commonly expressed through a decreased level of energy, concentration difficulties, and overwhelm in completing the school day. The work of Kossowsky et al. (2011) also suggested that school refusal may result from children's worries about going to school and interacting with others. Therefore, the children's own mental health issues may contribute significantly to the onset and maintenance of school refusal.

Moreover, the professionals in this study frequently linked school refusal to problems at home, echoing Havik and Ingul's (2021) finding that children in families experiencing conflict are more vulnerable to persistent school absence. From this perspective, school refusal becomes a signal of issues within the family unit, which might imply that the child's behaviour of not wanting to attend school is less about school itself. In fact, Silverman and Ollendick (2005) describe this as an adaptive response to underlying stressors that disrupt the family's capacity to support their child's regular attendance at school.

Furthermore, separation anxiety was identified as a possible factor in school refusal, corresponding with Kossowsky et al.'s (2011) research that shows many children refusing school feel distressed when separated from their caregivers, often driven by a desire to protect them from perceived danger. This also supports Karlovec et al.'s (2008) reports that 75% and 80% of children with school refusal also experience separation anxiety, which could suggest that children at this age feel the need to care for their caregivers, on whom they are ultimately dependent.

However, parents often spoke about factors related to the school environment, in particular bullying, which is consistent with studies suggesting that bullying increases the risk of school avoidance (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Monks & Coyne, 2011). This variation between professional and parental interpretations is substantial, as it reflects not only different originating causes of school refusal but also the possibility that multiple causes can co-occur. For these children, absence may be used as a way of protecting themselves against perceived threats within the social environment that the school presents.

In addition to bullying, social anxiety emerged as another relevant factor for certain parents. Unlike bullying, Heyne et al. (2015) argue that social anxiety is internally driven and can persist even in supportive environments. This distinction is important, as it may suggest that while interventions targeting bullying may focus on promoting empathy and inclusion, supporting socially anxious children requires addressing internal emotional processes, described in Kearney's (2002) functional models of school refusal. Hence, if children with social anxiety are recognised late, as some parents suggested, then they may face a cascade of negative outcomes that impact their whole learning journey.

Research by Kearney et al. (2004) indicates that early identification and intervention for social anxiety disorders (SAD) can significantly improve a child's overall well-being. However, as Heyne et al. (2019) posit, delays in recognising these symptoms often lead to chronic patterns of avoidance. These can then further strengthen feelings of fear, particularly in school environments. As a result, children may increasingly withdraw from school activities, thereby missing out on crucial learning experiences that are essential for their development.

Thus, the participants' perspectives indicate that school refusal is not attributable to a single cause. Instead, it occurs due to multiple factors, including family life, peer dynamics, and emotional distress. This complexity aligns with functional models of school refusal (Kearney & Albano, 2007), which view the behaviour as embedded in a network of interacting factors. Gaining insight into these connections is crucial for addressing school refusal comprehensively and recognising it as a sign of underlying social and emotional challenges.

5.2 Spotting the Signs: How School Refusal is Identified in Practice

Several participants outlined how children who refuse school often detach from much more than just the classroom. Social workers noted that some children may create a digital world for themselves, turning to gaming as a way of regulating their emotions or as a distraction from the pressures of schooling. These concerns about the overlap between school refusal and problematic gaming use are echoed by King and Delfabbro (2014), who argue that while playing games may initially serve as a coping strategy, it can also strengthen the pattern of avoidance and reduce a child's motivation to re-engage with learning. Moreover, this is also consistent with Kearney's (2002) study on pull factors, which explains that school refusal is often reinforced by avoidance behaviours (such as gaming) that provide temporary relief but maintain disengagement (encourage them to stay away from school).

Social workers also pointed out that the level of withdrawal can sometimes extend to basic self-care, where children do not eat or wash. They add that this pattern of self-neglect is often accompanied by withdrawal from peers and family, creating a sense of isolation

caused by avoidance. This aligns with Cunningham et al.'s (2022) observations. In addition, these patterns echo Kearney et al.'s (2004) findings that school refusal affects multiple areas of the child's life. In some cases, the inability to maintain self-care routines may even be an early warning sign, signalling that the difficulties extend into the child's overall psychological and social functioning (Zammit Cutajar, 2021).

Assistant heads provided further insight from within the school setting. They argued that attendance alone is not an adequate measure of school engagement, as children might be physically present yet emotionally detached from participation. Prabhuswamy (2018) similarly noted that internalised distress can result in passive school refusal, where children attend but are not “mentally” there. These perspectives show how internalised and externalised behaviours, as Garfi (2018) suggests, may both serve as indicators of school refusal.

Parents, on the other hand, mentioned that their children used to consistently present with psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and nausea. Egger et al. (2003) assert that these perspectives are consistent with findings highlighting the link between anxiety and school refusal. Moreover, Dabkowska et al. (2011) and Kossowsky et al. (2011) further illustrate the relationship between psychosomatic symptoms and school refusal. They suggest that these manifestations tend to mask the child's internal stress.

Hence, these perspectives demonstrate the various ways in which school refusal can present itself. While assistant heads use systems like MySchool and physical observations to

monitor absenteeism, social workers rely on referrals (detailed in *section 4.6.1*). In contrast, parents can notice their children's behavioural and emotional challenges at home. This combination of viewpoints aligns with Lyon and Cotler (2007), who insist that successfully identifying school refusal depends on the level of collaboration between home and school.

5.3 Learning on Pause: The Disruption of Daily Progress

Participants described how prolonged absence from school often hinders the daily habits that sustain learning. Social workers highlighted how routines such as punctuality and regular break times can collapse when children are out of school for long periods. Central to this argument is how even adhering to rules becomes a challenging task for the child. This is correlated by Havik et al. (2015) and Kearney (2008), who note that the lack of predictable routines can make the return to school even more complicated. Without the structure that school presents, children's days may become fragmented. This can include children waking up late and spending more time on activities not related to school. Murray et al. (2009) similarly emphasise that inconsistent routines (or lack thereof) may heighten the child's feelings of insecurity, which strongly reflects these findings.

Various professionals further noted that academic recovery is quite challenging for school refusers, and even more so for students with learning difficulties. In line with this finding, Cunningham et al. (2022) claim that missing even a few days from school can create gaps that feel overwhelming, particularly due to the cumulative nature of learning. This is consistent with what psychology refers to as the academic "snowball effect" (Guy-Evans, 2023). In this case, gaps in learning continue to grow at a fast rate until they become too

much for the child to catch up on. Important assessments and vast amounts of work can then further amplify anxiety, strengthening what Woods and Scott (2016) call negative reinforcement. This term refers to instances where staying at home leads to the avoidance of aversive events, and thus, this reinforces the child's behaviour.

Interestingly, parents also mentioned these concerns, noting that while teachers may send work home via Teams, the lack of explicit instruction limits its effectiveness. In fact, studies suggest that understanding complex material can become very challenging without real-time feedback, which can only be provided in class (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021; Zammit Cutajar, 2021). This finding challenges Berg et al.'s (1969) suggestion that having access to materials at home can initially help with maintaining academic progress. It also highlights the distinction between school-based and home-based learning, where the absence of in-class support can potentially amplify misconceptions and reduce the child's motivation to learn (Heyne et al., 2019).

While both parents and professionals acknowledged the academic decline, their focuses differed slightly. Parents tended to emphasise how challenging it was for their children to keep up after absences, aligning with Prabhuswamy's (2018) findings. Conversely, professionals emphasised the cumulative aspect of learning and the lack of routines, a view supported by both Garfi (2018) and Prabhuswamy (2018).

5.4 Falling Behind or Left Behind? The Long-Term Academic Repercussions

The real academic repercussion, participants stressed, is that absenteeism fragments the learning process itself. The classroom moves forward as a group, building new concepts on the ones introduced the day before. This supports the cumulative learning model described by Kearney (2008) and Garfi (2018), where missed foundational concepts make it much more difficult to understand more advanced material. This suggests that once these “building blocks” are missing, the gap often widens regardless of the child’s innate academic ability.

Professionals observed that when a frequently absent student does return, they often face a mountain of missed work. This can feel so overwhelming that it triggers a cycle of anxiety, and the child starts missing again. Unfortunately, even support from a Learning Support Educator (LSE) loses its effectiveness when a student's presence in class is unpredictable. In other words, it is like developing the famous "one step forward, two steps back" dynamic.

Moreover, some parents noted that their children initially performed decently on exams despite prolonged absences. However, they also expressed doubts about whether these results could be sustained, recognising that academic success involves more than just passing exams. They added that it includes developing broader skills learnt through consistent attendance (Prabhuswamy, 2018). This finding is reflective of various research

studies that view education as involving much more than measurable assessment tasks (Garfi, 2018; Prabhuswamy, 2018).

A key difference between the participants' perspectives seemed to lie in the extent to which school refusal impedes the child's future. Even though professionals claimed that school absence has the potential to greatly affect future educational attainment regardless of current academic ability, parents sometimes remained hopeful based on their children's short-term successes. This reflects Garfi's (2018) observation that parents may initially underestimate the global implications of school refusal and may instead focus on their child's relief from school. However, research consistently highlights that persistent absence can lead to significant gaps in knowledge (Kearney, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2022). In turn, parents may overlook the long-term consequences of school refusal. This could prove to be detrimental to the child's future career, particularly in today's competitive educational and employment world (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

These findings reinforce the argument that the academic impact of school refusal has a lasting effect on the child's learning. As Prabhuswamy (2018) highlights, children who fall behind may experience significant frustration when they try to return to the classroom. Eventually, this can further perpetuate their avoidance. Garfi (2018) stresses that school refusal also wears down the child's confidence, which reduces their motivation to do anything related to school. This supports participants' concerns that, without the necessary intervention, the initial academic setbacks associated with school refusal may escalate into lasting educational barriers with profound implications for the child's future learning.

5.5 Heightened Anxiety and School-Related Fear

In several interviews, it was noted that anxiety creates a cycle in which absence amplifies fear, and fear reinforces absence. Professionals noted that children tend to worry about how their peers will perceive them upon their return. This reflects Heyne's (2018) findings that school refusal is often rooted in social anxiety, which becomes more pronounced the longer a child remains away from school (Kearney & Albano, 2004).

Moreover, parents were more specific when talking about these fears, often linking them to school-related factors such as bullying (Garfi, 2018). In these cases, school may become associated with threat rather than safety. Thus, returning to school would mean that the child has to manage not only academic expectations but also persistent social fears. This is congruent with various research studies, which indicate that hostile peer interactions significantly increase avoidance behaviours (Garfi, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

A notable difference between parents and professionals was in how they saw the origin of this anxiety. While professionals often traced it to home-based or psychological causes, parents were more inclined to see it as related to the school environment. Both perspectives are grounded in the ecological model of school refusal (Kearney & Albano, 2007). This model understands behaviour as the result of a complex interplay between a child's individual vulnerabilities and the surrounding environmental factors. This suggests that anxiety should not be viewed as an internal state alone, but rather as something influenced by its context (Garfi, 2018; Prabhuswamy, 2018).

Both the data and literature suggest that addressing the child's underlying cognitive and emotional processes is essential to prevent short-term improvements in attendance from masking unresolved distress (Heyne et al., 2019). Recognising the link between emotional experience and school refusal is essential, as it frames anxiety not just as a symptom but as a fundamental factor sustaining the cycle of refusal (Durlak et al., 2011).

5.6 Emotional Withdrawal and Strain on Family Relationships

A consistent feature mentioned among the participants was emotional withdrawal. It was suggested that this affects not only the child's school experience but also their relationships within the family. Professionals described how disengagement from the classroom often paralleled disengagement at home, with children preferring solitary activities and avoiding social contact altogether (Kearney, 2008). This dual withdrawal corroborates Havik et al.'s (2015) observation that absenteeism is frequently accompanied by a lack of social interaction and disinterest in the family.

Parents highlighted the emotional toll this took on their household, including daily morning challenges to get to school and a lack of sleep, which created an atmosphere of tension. This encapsulates how school refusal can strain familial relationships for both children and caregivers (Garfi, 2018). Research aligns with these lived experiences, showing that school refusal is frequently linked to family stress and a decline in well-being (Heyne & Sauter, 2018). Furthermore, the Family Stress Model highlights how child behavioural difficulties can increase parental stress (Masarik & Conger, 2017), which in turn can maintain or worsen school refusal. In Malta, a study by Cefai and Cooper (2010) emphasises the

importance of the family context in understanding absenteeism. This might suggest that emotional distress within the family can contribute significantly to school refusal.

Furthermore, the child's emotional withdrawal can also affect how families communicate with schools, as this can sometimes create barriers to effective collaboration. Parents may feel overwhelmed, as their children's resistance to attending school can lead to frustration at home (Egger et al., 2003). Moreover, while some professionals linked this withdrawal to overwhelming school demands, parents more often attributed it to negative experiences within the school environment. This contrast highlights the importance of considering multiple influences rather than attributing withdrawal to a single cause.

These perspectives suggest that emotional withdrawal may serve a functional purpose for the child, providing a temporary sense of safety. However, it also risks reinforcing patterns of avoidance that make reintegration more difficult (Garfi, 2018). Without specific strategies to adequately tackle the issue, the child's emotional withdrawal can become self-sustaining, which further limits the development of social skills (Garfi, 2018; Devenney & O'Toole, 2021; Kearney, 2008).

Thus, it can be concluded that participants remarked on a reciprocal dynamic in which school refusal may contribute to family stress, and family stress, in turn, can perpetuate school refusal. This underlines how crucial it is to understand the context in which a child's behaviour happens. Supporting their learning is about caring for their social-emotional needs and considering the well-being of their family. By seeing the child as a whole person within their surrounding environment, we can better support their growth.

5.7 Peer Isolation and Breakdown of Social Connections

Substantial data from the interviews implied that school refusal can interfere with a child's ability to maintain friendships (Baker & Bishop, 2015). According to Cunningham et al. (2022), this likely occurs due to missing daily interactions that are vital for forming peer relationships. In fact, various interviewees emphasised that these ongoing social exchanges are crucial for creating and maintaining a sense of belonging among children. When this social contact is interrupted, rebuilding friendships can become increasingly challenging, since friendships evolve during the child's absence. This is congruent with Kljakovic et al.'s study (2021).

Professionals argued that even children with close friends may struggle to maintain those connections if they are absent frequently. In addition, peers naturally form new groups with those who are present, which can leave returning students feeling excluded. This finding is consistent with Gottfried's (2014) research, which suggests that absenteeism can change a child's position in the social hierarchy as a result of evolving friendships. For instance, for children who are already prone to social anxiety, losing their social status can drive them further away from school.

Nonetheless, parents described how these situations often resulted in their child's reluctance to speak in class or being dependent on a single friend for support. While these strategies might reduce the immediate fear of rejection, Kearney (2008) suggests they can further limit social opportunities. In some cases, as some parents discussed, relying on a

single friendship meant that any conflict in that relationship left the child without a social safety net, thereby increasing feelings of loneliness (Garfi, 2018).

Hence, addressing attendance alone is insufficient, and efforts to rebuild a sense of community are essential. In fact, some assistant heads reflected that some of the interventions they carried out, aimed at rebuilding social connections, such as buddy systems, had been helpful. However, this was seen as effective when combined with efforts to address the underlying emotional barriers to participation. Ultimately, without adequate support, initial fractures in peer relationships could lead to lasting impacts on children's social confidence.

5.8 It Takes a Team: The Role of Schools, Parents, and Professionals

Participants argue that managing school refusal requires extensive teamwork between schools, families, and also external professionals when necessary, aligning with Maynard et al.'s research (2018). The process typically begins with teachers and the Senior Management Team (SMT) monitoring attendance. Then, upon identifying patterns of frequent absenteeism, the head of school can refer the student to the school social workers for investigation.

Hence, professionals assert that schools often act as the first point of detection, whether through formal attendance systems (such as *MySchool*) or informal observations from teachers, SMT, or other staff members. This emphasises how important it is to stay alert during the school day, such as noticing when someone's behaviour changes, which

could indicate underlying problems (Garfi, 2018). However, as Kearney (2008) points out, simply noticing these signs is just the beginning. To truly make a difference, everyone needs to work together and communicate with the SMT or head of school when necessary.

In addition, participants highlighted that interpreting behaviour is more crucial than just managing it. Seeing withdrawal as a sign of distress marks a move away from punitive methods and focuses on the student's needs. Various research studies support this idea that strategies targeting behaviour are most effective when combined with an understanding of the underlying causes (Garfi, 2018; Kearney, 2008; Prabhuswamy, 2018). It was consistently mentioned that parents play a crucial role in this process, given their influence over the child's daily routines. In fact, Garfi (2018) argues that without their active cooperation, even carefully designed strategies may fail. However, Prabhuswamy (2018) maintains that the benefits of parental involvement can be limited by their own mental health issues or a lack of understanding of school refusal. Thus, this highlights the need for professionals to approach families with empathy and offer practical guidance rather than solely expecting them to comply.

Through an evaluative lens, approaches to dealing with school refusal are most effective when all members involved maintain open communication. This is supported by Heyne et al. (2019), who found that multidisciplinary collaboration on school refusal significantly improves the outcomes for the child's return to school.

5.9 Early Intervention and Personalised Approaches

A recurring theme in the data was that, when it comes to interventions, timing is critical, and that school refusal is easier to address when it is dealt with early. Many professionals and parents agree that delaying help can lead to absenteeism becoming a persistent problem. Research by Heyne and Sauter (2013) supports this, showing that early intervention can prevent short-term absences from developing into long-term issues.

Participants also stressed that a one-size-fits-all approach is never practical. Instead, strategies must be tailored to the individual needs of each child, considering both the root causes and the individual context. For some, the underlying issues may be linked to family conflict, making it essential to work with parents alongside the child. This reflects Heyne et al.'s (2019) argument that the home environment is often a decisive factor in whether interventions succeed, especially when family dynamics contribute to the child's distress.

A gradual return to school emerged as a commonly used strategy, particularly for children who have been absent for a long time or have a high level of anxiety. This finding is strongly consistent with Kearney and Albano's research (2018). By starting with fewer days per week and building up attendance over time, the transition becomes more manageable (Garfi, 2018). This mirrors the graded exposure principles used in cognitive-behavioural therapy (Chand et al., 2023), which aim to reduce avoidance behaviours by breaking the process into small steps. However, a downside to this strategy is that partial attendance can inadvertently become a long-term avoidance pattern rather than a stepping stone to full reintegration (Maeda & Heyne, 2019).

Assistant heads also mentioned other beneficial interventions, such as creating welcoming environments within the school, including buddy systems or calm spaces. These are designed to ease children back into the school setting. These approaches align with research on protective factors, which indicates that emotionally supportive environments can reduce the perceived threat of relapse (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). However, care must be taken because if the safe space becomes a permanent refuge, it may reinforce avoidance rather than encourage participation.

Other interventions mentioned by assistant heads included sending work home via Teams so that at least the child would have the opportunity to follow from home. This was also considered important in preventing students from falling too far behind, although it may not mean that the child is doing the work. In fact, Fredricks et al. (2004) posit that sending work on online platforms is insufficient if social reintegration is not addressed in parallel.

Overall, all the participants agree that early intervention is most effective when it is sensitive to the child's context and targets both the emotional and academic aspects of school refusal. Although personalised strategies require more planning and coordination, they are much more likely to disrupt the cycle of absence compared to rigid methods.

5.10 Parent Power: The Role and Reality of Parental Involvement

The findings clearly indicate that parental involvement is often the decisive factor in whether school refusal improves or persists. Parents set expectations for their children and directly influence how consistently a child attends school. As previously mentioned, without their active cooperation, the interventions become useless. This echoes Heyne et al.'s (2019) conclusion that parental engagement is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes in school refusal cases.

Social workers argue that cooperating with parents is not always easy. Parents may be dealing with their own mental health difficulties, which can limit their ability to support their children's attendance. Hence, when parents are provided with emotional support and practical strategies that can be used, they are better positioned to respond to their child's needs (Carr, 2019). In my view, this partnership is crucial for fostering consistency between home and school, and is one of the key pillars necessary for the child's successful return to school.

The data also reflects the importance of involving parents early in the process. When parents are involved from the outset, there is a greater opportunity to create effective strategies. Conversely, if parents feel excluded or blamed, they may become more resistant to professional advice, thus inhibiting the child's progress. This reflects findings by Havik et al. (2015), who emphasise that collaborative communication between parents and schools is crucial in addressing school refusal.

5.11 Support Systems: A Way of Coping

Managing school refusal often depends on a mixture of formal and informal support systems. These systems aim to address both the practical barriers to attendance and the emotional distress present. Multi-disciplinary professionals (including psychologists, counsellors, guidance teachers, social workers and other key staff) are key in this process as they allow different aspects of the problem to be addressed at once. This aligns with the recommendations of Prabhuswamy (2018), who argues that school refusal rarely has a single cause and thus requires a coordinated response.

Importantly, these strategies do not just target the child. Parents may also benefit from practical guidance, especially when they are unsure how to respond to their child's resistance. This aligns with Garfi's research (2018), who insists that the parents' capability in handling their children's behaviours is crucial to sustaining school attendance. In practice, school professionals are expected to support the child directly and equip parents with the tools to reinforce attendance at home.

A recurring message in both professional and parental interviews is that, as mentioned previously, timing matters. However, this is only possible if staff are trained to recognise the warning signs and feel confident in raising concerns before absence becomes way more challenging to overcome. Furthermore, the data also suggests that raising awareness within the school community can strengthen these systems. When teachers, parents, and even peers (where possible and age-dependent) understand that school refusal

is a complex emotional and behavioural issue, not simply “skipping school”, stigma is reduced.

This may suggest that while multi-disciplinary teams are needed to tackle school refusal, their effectiveness depends on more than just having different professionals working on the same issue. There must be consistent sharing of information and a shared commitment to the same goals. Ultimately, seamless teamwork by designated college and school staff and designated medical professionals should characterise the school’s approach to school refusal.

5.12 Need for Ongoing Professional Development

While many participants are aware of the challenges posed by school refusal, some professionals do not feel fully equipped to address them effectively. The lack of specialised training, particularly in evidence-based therapeutic approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which Heyne et al. (2015) argue is one of the primary evidence-based interventions used to treat school refusal, emerged as a recurring concern. This echoes Heyne and Rollings (2002), who argue that without targeted psychological training, staff are more likely to rely on generic behaviour management strategies, which may fail to address the underlying emotions.

Without the skills and tools to respond appropriately, early signs of school refusal may be overlooked or misinterpreted. As Egger et al. (2003) highlight, school refusal is a

multi-layered problem that requires both behavioural insight and clinical sensitivity, making cross-training between education and mental health sectors essential.

In fact, some parents strengthened the cost of this gap, describing how long delays in receiving the necessary help meant that opportunities for early intervention were missed. This supports Havik et al.'s (2015) finding that the longer school refusal persists without support, the worse it becomes. Moreover, the absence of appropriate training may also lead to an over-reliance on external mental health services, which, in Malta, are overstretched. This dependency creates delays, as children can wait months before receiving suitable interventions, during which time their disengagement from school may worsen.

It is worth noting that professional development training in schools tends to prioritise curriculum delivery over training in emotional and behavioural difficulties. This risks undermining the very conditions required for learning. Cooper and Cefai (2010) argue that well-being and a successful learning journey are inseparable. As such, training in emotional and behavioural support should not be treated as an option but as a core professional competence.

5.13 Conclusion

The findings discussed in this chapter make clear that school refusal cannot be reduced to a question of whether a child “wants” to attend school. It results from a complex interaction of psychological well-being, family issues, peer relationships, and school environments. Participants’ perspectives reinforce the view in the literature that early

identification and understanding the context in which the behaviour occurs are essential to addressing it effectively (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008).

In essence, school refusal affects not only academic achievement but also socioemotional development. This is seen in the emotional withdrawal that children may exhibit, which can extend beyond the school years. Furthermore, gaps in professional training reveal an urgent need to enhance the capacity to identify and address the root causes of refusal. Overall, the chapter emphasises that understanding and addressing school refusal requires a comprehensive perspective on its origins and effects.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter aims to consolidate the key findings of the study and consider their broader importance. After examining how school refusal is understood and its influence on children's learning experiences, this chapter brings together the insights gathered into a concluding discussion. It achieves this by summarising the study and identifying its main limitations. It also evaluates its practical relevance and includes recommendations for future research. In doing so, the chapter not only seeks to conclude the study but also to emphasise its contribution to understanding school refusal and its implications for children's education.

6.1 Summary of the Study

This study reviewed school refusal as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends far beyond the child's absence from school. It may originate from anxiety, emotional distress, and difficulties in the home or school environment. The research set out to explore school refusal in depth by investigating how professionals and parents understand it, what interventions are implemented to address it and how it affects young children's educational journeys. Drawing on the perspectives of social workers, assistant heads, and parents, the study provided a multifaceted view of school refusal. The impact on academic progress, emotional well-being and social development was frequently highlighted. Furthermore, the obstacles to daily learning and the longer-term consequences can hinder a child's development and future opportunities.

Parents highlighted how their child's school refusal often started lightly, with their children complaining of illness and not wanting to go to school. These were at first dismissed as temporary issues, but parents later noticed that such behaviours were consistent avoidance patterns. They also described how withdrawal from their friends and family heavily impacted their children's opportunities to learn social and emotional skills that are integral to their overall learning journey. In addition, social workers spoke about how school refusal can negatively affect the structure of daily learning. They substantiate this by arguing that what may end up happening is that routines are replaced with avoidance patterns (such as gaming) that actually drive them further away from school. In line with these perspectives, assistant heads shared other general observations on how challenging it can be for these students to return to school and sustain their attendance. They note that absences not only interrupt the child's academic progress but may also affect various facets of the child's learning.

Furthermore, four key themes emerged from the findings. The first, *"What Lay Beneath: Interpretations of School Refusal"*, focused on the underlying meanings and triggers of school refusal. The second theme, *"When Absence Becomes a Barrier: How Does School Refusal Impact Learning?"* highlighted how continuous absence from school may disrupt daily routines and potentially lead to long-term academic gaps. The third and most prominent theme, *"The Social and Emotional Ripple Effects of School Refusal"*, revealed the profound impact of school refusal on children's well-being. Participants repeatedly emphasised how school refusal amplifies anxiety and impedes children's social circle. Finally, *"Responses to School Refusal: Interventions and Strategies"* highlighted the importance of parental cooperation and the implementation of holistic strategies. The theme also identifies

gaps in professional training on school refusal for school staff. Collectively, these findings confirm that school refusal is not just about attendance but about children's whole learning journey.

6.2 Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has its limitations. One limitation relates to the size and scope of the sample. The study involved a small number of parents, social workers, and assistant heads, which means the findings cannot be generalised to all children experiencing school refusal. However, the richness of the data lies in the recurring patterns, which highlight themes highly relevant to practice and future inquiry.

A second limitation is the absence of children's voices. While parents and professionals gave detailed accounts of how school refusal manifests and potentially affects the child's learning, the direct experiences of children themselves were omitted. This leaves a potentially significant gap, as school refusal is first and foremost a lived experience for children. Their perspectives could have offered a deeper insight into the emotions and strategies behind their refusal, complementing the adult perspectives presented here. This omission was due to ethical reasons and the possibility of causing emotional harm to the children involved.

Finally, the study was conducted within the Maltese context, where certain cultural and institutional factors may differ from those in other countries. For example, the resources available for interventions are specific to Malta. This contextual focus means that the

findings are useful locally, but they may not fully relate to other educational systems. Nonetheless, factors such as interruption to learning, social isolation, and parental involvement are all likely to resonate widely across various contexts. Despite these limitations, the study makes a significant contribution by demonstrating how school refusal impacts learning journeys and thus raises awareness about this complex issue.

6.3 Usefulness

This research study is especially valuable because it offers a clear understanding of school refusal and what it means for students, parents, and schools. It highlights how complex this issue is and shares insights that can help improve classroom practices and support parents better. Moreover, the study clarifies the effects of school refusal on learning by gathering perspectives from parents and professionals. It shows that school refusal is not solely an attendance issue, but a disruption of learning in multiple ways, affecting not only academic attainment but also socialisation and emotional growth. This holistic understanding of school refusal encourages schools and families to address it promptly and adopt interventions that target its multifaceted nature.

The study also highlights parental involvement as central to effective interventions. The findings made clear that parental cooperation “makes or breaks” the process of returning to school. Hence, without consistent parental engagement, any efforts often fail to succeed. This recognition shifts the focus to a more collaborative approach, where parents are supported and seen as a significant part of the process.

Identifying gaps in professional training and intervention is also another essential insight. Some professionals acknowledged that they lack specific training related to school refusal, which means they must adapt their work and learn through experience alone. This means that while school staff are often on the front line of school refusal, they may not be adequately prepared for its unique challenges. This finding is useful for policymakers and training providers, as it highlights an area where specific school refusal training could directly improve children's educational outcomes. In these ways, the study contributes to the growing recognition of school refusal as a multidimensional issue, providing both practical insights for educational practitioners and a foundation for further academic exploration.

6.4 Recommendations

The findings suggest several important directions for future research, three of which stand out as particularly important. The first concerns the need for studies that focus on the early identification of school refusal. While this study highlighted that parents and professionals may initially underestimate the problem, more research is needed to examine the early indicators of school refusal and how they evolve into persistent patterns. For instance, longitudinal studies could track the progression from occasional absences to persistent refusal, offering valuable insights into the warning signs that teachers, parents, and other staff should be aware of. Such research could also explore whether children, for example, those with learning difficulties, are more vulnerable to school refusal.

A further recommendation is to expand research into professional knowledge and training specific to school refusal. For example, future research could perhaps investigate the effectiveness of providing school staff with training on cognitive behavioural strategies and family-based interventions, which have been consistently identified as crucial when dealing with school refusal cases. Moreover, comparative studies across different educational systems would also be valuable, shedding light on how different approaches to training impact the support available to children and families.

A factor that also seems to be less studied is the family's role in school refusal. Parents played a central role in this study's findings, being that they were the first to witness signs of refusal and as key partners in the intervention. Future research should explore in more depth how families experience school refusal and the strategies they use at home. Perhaps one could also ask about the kinds of support they find most effective. Research that includes these perspectives could enhance the understanding of school refusal as a lived experience and highlight areas where families require additional support.

Overall, these recommendations emphasise the importance of preventive and collaborative research. By being attentive to the early signs of school refusal and listening to the experiences of families, future studies can build on what we already know and help develop more effective interventions.

6.5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that school refusal can have a profound impact on children's learning experiences. It affects far more than just academics, often impacting friendships and family life. As a result, this can create patterns of detachment that become harder to break over time. By incorporating the perspectives of parents, social workers, and assistant heads, the study demonstrates that school refusal is an intricate phenomenon. The study also found that early recognition, proper training for professionals, and parental cooperation are all key factors in effectively addressing school refusal. Ultimately, the research confirms that schools are not just places where knowledge is gained but also environments where children build their identity. Therefore, supporting children who refuse to attend school to re-engage is not only an educational concern but also a developmental necessity.

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Appendix A

Interview Question Guide 1

For School Counsellors/Social Workers

- 1) School refusal is seen as a common issue in children aged between 5-11 years. How would you define school refusal based on your professional experience dealing with school refusal cases?

- 2) What do you believe are the most common causes of school refusal among young children?

- 3) How do you identify and assess cases of school refusal in children?

- 4) From your experience, what are the short-term and long-term effects of school refusal on a child's academic performance and learning development?

- 5) How does school refusal affect a child's emotional well-being and social interactions?

- 6) How does school refusal affect a child's behavioural patterns at school?

- 7) What interventions do you find most effective in addressing school refusal?

- 8) How do you collaborate with teachers to support children who refuse to attend school?

- 9) How important is parental involvement in managing school refusal, and how may parents be included in this process?
- 10) What are the main challenges you face when dealing with school refusal cases?
- 11) What kind of support systems or resources are available for children who refuse to attend school?
- 12) Can you share any successful stories where interventions have significantly helped a child overcome school refusal?
- 13) What kind of professional development training do you think is necessary for effectively handling school refusal?
- 14) Who should be involved in diagnosing and dealing with school refusal?
- 15) Are there any other issues you would like to discuss?

Interview Question Guide 2

For Assistant Heads

- 1) How often do you encounter school refusal in class, and how do you recognise it?
- 2) What impact does school refusal have on a child's academic progress and classroom participation?
- 3) What behavioural signs do you observe in children who are prone to school refusal?
- 4) What strategies have you found effective in working with students who refuse to attend school?
- 5) How do you work with parents to address their child's school refusal?
- 6) How do you collaborate with social workers and/or school counsellors to support these students? Any other people you collaborate with?
- 7) How does school refusal affect the dynamics of the classroom environment?
- 8) How do you manage and support the academic performance of students who have high absenteeism due to school refusal?
- 9) What impact does school refusal have on the child's relationships with their peers?

- 10) What challenges do you face when trying to address school refusal in class?

- 11) What type of professional development training do you think you need to better handle cases of school refusal?

- 12) How do parents typically respond when informed about their child's potential school refusal, and how do you manage these interactions?

- 13) Without any direct reference to personal data or traceable information, can you share any examples where a student successfully overcame school refusal with your support?

- 14) Are there any other issues you would like to discuss?

Interview Question Guide 3

For Parents (English Version)

- 1) When did you first notice signs of potential school refusal in your child?
- 2) What did you do about them?
- 3) Who did you consult first?
- 4) Who else did you consult, if any?
- 5) What do you believe are the underlying reasons for a child's school refusal?
- 6) How has school refusal affected your child's academic progress?
- 7) How has school refusal impacted your child's emotional well-being and social development?
- 8) How did you initially react to your child's refusal to attend school, and what steps did you take to try and mitigate this?
- 9) What strategies have you implemented at home to encourage your child to attend school?
- 10) How effective has communication with the school been in addressing your child's school refusal?
- 11) What challenges have you faced in managing your child's school refusal?

- 12) How has your child's school refusal affected your family life?

- 13) Have you found any particular strategies that have been successful in helping your child return to school?

- 14) What do you expect from the school in terms of support and intervention for your child's school refusal?

- 15) What are your concerns regarding the long-term impact of school refusal on your child's education?

- 16) Are there any other issues you would like to discuss?

Għall-Ġenituri (Verżjoni bil-Malti)

- 1) Meta bdejt tinnota potenzjalment l-ewwel sinjali ta' *school refusal* fit-tifel jew tifla tiegħek?
- 2) X'għamilt meta nnotajt dawn is-sinjali?
- 3) Lil min ikkonsultajt l-ewwel?
- 4) Lil min ikkonsultajt iktar, jekk kien hemm?
- 5) Liema taħseb huma r-raġunijiet principali għala t-tfal juru *school refusal*?
- 6) X'effett kella *school refusal* fuq il-progress akkademiku tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
- 7) X'effett kella *school refusal* fuq is-saħħa emozzjonali u l-iżvilupp soċjali tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
- 8) Kif irreaġixxejt inizjalment meta t-tifel/tifla tiegħek ma ridtx/riditx j/tattendi skola, u x'passi ħadt biex tipprova tirrangà dan?
- 9) Xi strategiji implimentajt id-dar biex tipprova tteġġeg lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek j/tattendi l-iskola?
- 10) Kemm kienet effettiva l-komunikazzjoni tiegħek mal-iskola waqt l-indirizzar tas-*school refusal* tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
- 11) Xi sfidi ltqajt magħhom biex timmanigġa is-*school refusal* tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
- 12) Kif taħseb li affetwat ir-rabta ta' bejn il-familja din is-sitwazzjoni?

13) Taħseb li sibt xi strategiji partikolari li servew ta' suċċess sabiex jgħinu it-tifel/tifla tiegħek j/tirritorna l-iskola?

14) X'tistenna mill-iskola rigward għajnuna u interventzjoni fuq *school refusal* tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?

15) X'inhuma t-tħassib tiegħek rigward l-impatt fit-tul ta' *school refusal* fuq l-edukazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?

16) Hemm xi affarijiet oħra li tixtieq tiddiskuti?

Appendix B

Consent Form 1 – Social Workers

Participant's Consent Form

The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Owen Dean Calleja. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I will be asked to get into contact with parents and teachers of any school refusal case, who can provide general data which is essential for the researcher's dissertation. I am aware that the researcher will be sending an email to the counsellors/social workers asking to recruit parents and teachers, to which I can accept or decline. I may also choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask open-ended questions to explore the holistic learning experiences and challenges that children (from 5-11 years), who exhibit school refusal, are faced with during the course of their primary education - from professionals' and parents' perspectives. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by providing more current and insightful data that can be used for further research on the topic.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, after completion of the study and following publication of results.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
 - I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.
10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
 11. I am aware that should the interview be held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. The researcher will only audio record the session.
 12. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher, academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study.

13. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher: Owen Dean Calleja

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Consent Form 2 – Assistant Heads

Participant's Consent Form

The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Owen Dean Calleja. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form. I understand that any data related to this research cannot be used in public space, and thus complete confidentiality is maintained. This is limited to data collected from the research interview.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask open-ended questions to explore the holistic learning experiences and challenges that children (from 5-11 years), who exhibit school refusal, are faced with during the course of their primary education - from professionals' and parents' perspectives. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by providing more current and insightful data that can be used for further research on the topic.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, after completion of the study and following publication of results.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
 - I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.
10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
 11. I am aware that should the interview be held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. The researcher will only audio record the session.
 12. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher, academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study.

13. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher: Owen Dean Calleja

Email: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Office number: +356 2340 2938

Formola ta' Kunsens tal-Parteċipant/a

The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.

Jiena, hawn taht iffirmat/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju ta' Owen Dean Calleja. Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Inghatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt tweġiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ingabret mingħandi tithassar dment li jkun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinzamm anonima. Nifhem li kwalunkwè dejta relatata ma' din ir-riċerka ma tistax tintuża f'postijiet pubbliċi, u għalhekk tinzamm kunfidenzjalità assoluta. Din hija limitata għad-dejta miġbura mill-intervista ta' din ir-riċerka.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden/mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista u l-persuna li qed tagħmel ir-riċerka se jsaqsi mistoqsijiet miftuħa biex jesplora l-esperjenzi u l-isfidi tat-tgħalim li t-tfal żgħar (bejn 5 u 11-il sena), li esperjenzaw jew qegħdin jesperjenzaw "school refusal", jiġu ffaċċjati bihom matul l-edukazzjoni primarja tagħhom - mill-perspettivi tal-professjonisti u ġenituri. Jiena konxju/a li l-intervista se ddum bejn wieħed u ieħor siegħa u nofs. Nifhem li l-intervista se ssir f'post u f'ħin li huma komdi għalija.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.
5. Nifhem li bil-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalija. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka jaf tkun ta' benefiċċju għall-oħrajn għax kapaċi tipprovdi dejta aktar kurrenti u profonda li tista' tintuża għal aktar riċerka dwar is-sugġett.
6. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġislazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani tithassar.

7. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se titħassar fil-25 ta' Lulju 2026, meta jintemm l-istudju u joħroġu r-riżultati.
8. Inghatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.
9. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taht, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo u maqluba f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).

IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA

- Naqbel li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
 - Ma naqbilx li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
10. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. parteċipant A].
 11. Jiena naf li jekk l-intervista ssir onlajn, r-riċerkatur se juża Zoom u se jattiva l-għażla tar-*Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323*. Ir-riċerkatur se jirrekordja d-diskors biss ta' waqt is-sessjoni, mingħajr filmat.
 12. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titniżżel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'fajl kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatur, protetti b'*password*, u r-riċerkatur, it-tutor akkademiku, u l-eżaminaturi biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur sakemm isir l-istudju.
 13. Konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati f'xi pubblikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tista' toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka.

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteeipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

Riceratur: Owen Dean Calleja

Supervizur: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Indirizz elettroniku: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Numbru tal-ufficċju: +356 2340 2938

Consent Form 3 – Parents

Participant's Consent Form

The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Owen Dean Calleja. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form. I understand that any data related to this research cannot be used in public space, and thus complete confidentiality is maintained. This is limited to data collected from the research interview.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask open-ended questions to explore the holistic learning experiences and challenges that children (from 5-11 years), who exhibit school refusal, are faced with during the course of their primary education - from professionals' and parents' perspectives. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by providing more current and insightful data that can be used for further research on the topic.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, after completion of the study and following publication of results.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
 - I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.
10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
 11. I am aware that should the interview be held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. The researcher will only audio record the session.
 12. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher, academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study.

13. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher: Owen Dean Calleja

Email: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Office number: +356 2340 2938

Formola ta' Kunsens tal-Parteċipant/a

The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.

Jiena, hawn taht iffirmat/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju ta' Owen Dean Calleja. Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Inghatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt tweġiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeciedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqgħet ingabret mingħandi titħassar dment li jkun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkun jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinzamm anonima. Nifhem li kwalunkwè dejta relatata ma' din ir-riċerka ma tistax tintuża f'postijiet pubbliċi, u għalhekk tinzamm kunfidenzjalità assoluta. Din hija limitata għad-dejta miġbura mill-intervista ta' din ir-riċerka.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden/mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista u l-persuna li qed tagħmel ir-riċerka se jsaqsi mistoqsijiet miftuħa biex jesplora l-esperjenzi u l-isfidi tat-tgħalim li t-tfal żgħar (bejn 5 u 11-il sena), li esperjenzaw jew qegħdin jesperjenzaw "school refusal", jiġu ffaċċjati bihom matul l-edukazzjoni primarja tagħhom - mill-perspettivi tal-professjonisti u ġenituri. Jiena konxju/a li l-intervista se ddum bejn wieħed u ieħor siegħa u nofs. Nifhem li l-intervista se ssir f'post u f'ħin li huma komdi għaliha.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.
5. Nifhem li bil-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għaliha. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka jaf tkun ta' benefiċċju għall-oħrajn għax kapaċi tipprovdi dejta aktar kurrenti u profonda li tista' tintuża għal aktar riċerka dwar is-sugġett.

6. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-legiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani tithassar.
7. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha migbura se tithassar fil-25 ta' Lulju 2026, meta jintemm l-istudju u joħroġu r-riżultati.
8. Ingħatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.
9. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taħt, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo u maqluba f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).

IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA

- Naqbel li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
 - Ma naqbilx li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
10. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. partecipant A].
 11. Jiena naf li jekk l-intervista ssir onlajn, r-riċerkatur se juża Zoom u se jattiva l-għażla tar-*Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323*. Ir-riċerkatur se jirrekordja d-diskors biss ta' waqt is-sessjoni, mingħajr filmat.
 12. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titniżżel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'fajl kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatur, protetti b'*password*, u r-riċerkatur, it-tutor akkademiku, u l-eżaminaturi biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala partecipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur sakemm isir l-istudju.
 13. Konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati f'xi pubblikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tista' toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka.

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-partecipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

Riċerkatur: Owen Dean Calleja

Supervizur: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Indirizz elettroniku: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Numbru tal-uffiċċju: +356 2340 2938

Appendix C

Information Letter 1 – Social Workers

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Owen Dean Calleja, a student at the University of Malta, pursuing an MTL in Early Childhood and Primary Education. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children’s Learning Journey – Professionals’ and Parents’ Perspective”. This study is significant as it aims to shed light on the effects of school refusal on young children's learning journey, a topic that has not been extensively explored. Prof. Victor Martinelli is supervising this. I invite you to participate in this study, and below, you will find detailed information about the research and your potential involvement.

My study aims to investigate school refusal and its impact on the learning journey of 5-11-year-old primary school children. This study will explore the predictable academic effects of school refusal and other effects, such as emotional, social, and behavioural issues that ultimately all form part of the child’s education. Only the school social workers and/or school counsellors (professionals) will be able to disseminate the information letter and consent form to prospective parents for participation in my research study. Thus, should you decide to participate, you would kindly be asked to get in contact with parents and teachers of any school refusal case, who can then provide general data which is essential for the dissertation. Your participation in this study is crucial as it would help better understand school refusal and its effects on the child’s learning journey from a holistic perspective. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of questions through a semi-structured interview. These questions are designed to gather your unique insights and experiences. You will also be able to provide as much information as possible through the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions aim to draw participants away from a static response such as “yes” or “no” but allow them to share as much detail as they wish. The duration of each interview will be approximately 1 hour.

The data collected will be handled with the utmost confidentiality, ensuring your privacy and security. Your identity will not be linked to any transcripts or notes from the interview. Instead,

a unique code will be assigned (e.g., Participant A) to ensure anonymity. Only the researcher (I), academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information, further ensuring the privacy and security of your data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate without giving a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Your decision will be respected. Should you cancel, any data collected from your interview will be erased if this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published).

If you choose to participate, please note that you will not receive any direct benefits and that your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify, and, where applicable, ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, one year after the study's completion and after the publication of results, as it is envisaged that some aspects of the dissertation may be published in academic journals.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 2340 2938 or via email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Owen Dean Calleja

owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Office Number: +356 2340 2938

Information Letter 2 – Assistant Heads

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Owen Dean Calleja, a student at the University of Malta, pursuing an MTL in Early Childhood and Primary Education. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children’s Learning Journey – Professionals’ and Parents’ Perspective”. This study is significant as it aims to shed light on the effects of school refusal on young children’s learning journey, a topic that has not been extensively explored. Prof. Victor Martinelli is supervising this. I invite you to participate in this study, and below, you will find detailed information about the research and your potential involvement.

My study aims to investigate school refusal and its impact on the learning journey of 5-11-year-old primary school children. This study will explore the predictable academic effects of school refusal and other effects, such as emotional, social, and behavioural issues that ultimately all form part of the child’s education. Only the school social workers and/or school counsellors (professionals) will be able to disseminate the information letter and consent form to prospective parents for participation in my research study. Your participation in this study is crucial as it would help better understand school refusal and its effects on the child’s learning journey from a holistic perspective. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of questions through a semi-structured interview. These questions are designed to gather your unique insights and experiences. You will also be able to provide as much information as possible through the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions aim to draw participants away from a static response such as “yes” or “no” but allow them to share as much detail as they wish. The duration of each interview will be approximately 1 hour.

The data collected will be handled with the utmost confidentiality, ensuring your privacy and security. Your identity will not be linked to any transcripts or notes from the interview. Instead, a unique code will be assigned (e.g., Participant A) to ensure anonymity. Only the researcher (I), academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information, further ensuring the privacy and security of your data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate without giving a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any

time without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Your decision will be respected. Should you cancel, any data collected from your interview will be erased if this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published).

If you choose to participate, please note that you will not receive any direct benefits and that your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify, and, where applicable, ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, one year after the study's completion and after the publication of results, as it is envisaged that some aspects of the dissertation may be published in academic journals.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 2340 2938 or via email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Owen Dean Calleja

owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Office Number: +356 2340 2938

Information Letter 3 – Parents

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Owen Dean Calleja, a student at the University of Malta, pursuing an MTL in Early Childhood and Primary Education. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children’s Learning Journey – Professionals’ and Parents’ Perspective”. This study is significant as it aims to shed light on the effects of school refusal on young children's learning journey, a topic that has not been extensively explored. Prof. Victor Martinelli is supervising this. I invite you to participate in this study, and below, you will find detailed information about the research and your potential involvement.

My study aims to investigate school refusal and its impact on the learning journey of 5-11-year-old primary school children. This study will explore the predictable academic effects of school refusal and other effects, such as emotional, social, and behavioural issues that ultimately all form part of the child’s education. Only the school social workers and/or school counsellors (professionals) will be able to disseminate the information letter and consent form to prospective parents for participation in my research study. Your participation in this study is crucial as it would help better understand school refusal and its effects on the child’s learning journey from a holistic perspective. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of questions through a semi-structured interview. These questions are designed to gather your unique insights and experiences. You will also be able to provide as much information as possible through the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions aim to draw participants away from a static response such as “yes” or “no” but allow them to share as much detail as they wish. The duration of each interview will be approximately 1 hour. Both parents will be invited to participate, and the interviews may be held separately with each parent.

The data collected will be handled with the utmost confidentiality, ensuring your privacy and security. Your identity will not be linked to any transcripts or notes from the interview. Instead, a unique code will be assigned (e.g., Participant A) to ensure anonymity. Only the researcher (I), academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this information, further ensuring the privacy and security of your data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate without giving a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Your decision will be respected. Should you cancel, any data collected from your interview will be erased if this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published).

If you choose to participate, please note that you will not receive any direct benefits and that your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify, and, where applicable, ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased on the 25th of July 2026, one year after the study's completion and after the publication of results, as it is envisaged that some aspects of the dissertation may be published in academic journals.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 2340 2938 or via email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Owen Dean Calleja

owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli

Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Office Number: +356 2340 2938

Ittra ta' Tagħrif

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Owen Dean Calleja, student fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi l-kors ta' *MTL* fl-edukazzjoni primarja kif ukoll bikrija. Ir-riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi jismha: *"The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective"*. Dan l-istudju huwa sinifikanti hekk kif l-għan tiegħu huwa li jesplora l-effetti ta' *school refusal* fuq it-tagħlim tat-tfal zgħar, sugġett li għadu ma ġiex esplorat b'mod estensiv. It-tutor tiegħi hu Prof. Victor Martinelli. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka, u hawn taħt, issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involvement tiegħek jekk tiddeciedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li ninvestiga dwar *"school refusal"*, u kif din taffetwa l-proċess tat-tagħlim tat-tfal bejn 5 u 11-il sena, fl-edukazzjoni primarja tagħhom. Dan l-istudju se jesplora mhux biss l-effetti akkademiċi ta' *"school refusal"*, imma wkoll effetti oħra, bħal dawk emozzjonali, soċjali, kif ukoll l-imġieba, li fl-aħħar mill-aħħar kollha jagħmlu parti mill-edukazzjoni tat-tfal. Il-haddiema soċjali tal-iskola u/jew il-kunsilliera tal-iskola biss (professjonisti) se jkun jistgħu jxerrdu l-ittra ta' informazzjoni u l-formola tal-kunsens lill-ġenituri prospettivi għall-partecipazzjoni fl-istudju tiegħi. Sehemek jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar *"school refusal"*, u b'hekk fuq l-effetti ta' din fuq it-tagħlim ħolistiku tat-tfal. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, tintalab tiegħu sehem f'intervista semi-strutturata miegħi nnifsi. L-intervista se jkun fiha mistoqsijiet miftuħa b'tul ta' bejn wieħed u ieħor siegħa. Iż-żewġ ġenituri se jiġu nvitati biex jipparteċipaw, u l-intervisti jistgħu jsiru ma' kull ġenitur separatament. Il-mistoqsijiet li jsiru waqt l-intervista se jkun relatati mat-topik ta' *"school refusal"*, u fuq l-effetti perċepiti ta' dan fuq it-tagħlim tat-tfal fl-edukazzjoni primarja. L-intervista se tkun irrekordjata b'apparat awdjo u dan ir-rekording se jiġi merfuh f'*encrypted storage device* li jkolli aċċess għalih jien biss. Ir-rekording se jiġi transkritt, u biċċiet relevanti għar-riċerka ser ikunu qegħdin jintuzaw fit-teżi.

L-informazzjoni miġbura se tiġi trattata b'kunfidenzjalità assoluta, b'hekk tassigura l-privatezza u s-sigurta tiegħek. L-identità tiegħek mhux se tkun marbuta ma l-ebda transkritti jew noti mill-intervista. Minflok, se jiġu assenjati kodiċi uniċi (e.ż., Partecipant A) biex tassigura l-anonimità tiegħek. Minbarra jien stess bħala r-riċerkatur, is-supervizur tiegħi u l-eżaminaturi biss se jkollhom aċċess għad-dejta.

Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju tkun għalkollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. F'dan il-każ, id-deċiżjoni tiegħek tiġi rrispettata. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ittieħdet fl-intervista miegħek titħassar jekk dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata).

Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.

Bħala partecipant/a, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak titħassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fl-istudju se titħassar fil-25 ta' Lulju 2026, meta jintemm l-istudju u wara li joħorġu r-riżultati, minħabba li xi aspetti mit-teżi jistgħu jiġu ppubblikati f'gurnali akkademiċi.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt; tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutor tiegħi fuq: +356 2340 2938 jew elettronikament fuq: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt.

Tislijiet,

Owen Dean Calleja

owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Prof. Victor Martinelli

victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt

Numru tal-uffiċċju: +356 2340 2938

Appendix D - Final Ethical Approval



L-Università
ta' Malta

Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

30th June 2025

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2024-00812 Owen Dean Calleja

Dear Owen Dean Calleja,

With reference to your application EDUC-2024-00812 Owen Dean Calleja for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Gravina', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Appendix E – Institutional & Gatekeeper Permissions

MEYR (1st Permission)



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT,
YOUTH, RESEARCH & INNOVATION
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

Tel: 25982743

rsird.meyr@gov.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 27th November 2024

Ref: R10-2024 2084

To: Director – National School Support Services

From: Director – Research and School Internal Review Directorate

Title of Research Study: *The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.*

The Research and School Internal Review Directorate, within the Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department, would like to inform that approval is granted to **Mr Owen Dean Calleja**, to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo MA Ed
Research and School Internal Review Directorate
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

f/Dr Anthony Sammut
Director
Research and School Internal Review Directorate
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

MEYR (Updated Permission)



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT,
YOUTH, RESEARCH & INNOVATION
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

Tel: 25982743

rsird.meyr@gov.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 17th June 2025

Ref: R10-2024 2084

To: Head of School – [REDACTED]
From: Director – Research and School Internal Review Directorate

Title of Research Study: *The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children's Learning Journey – Professionals' and Parents' Perspective.*

The Research and School Internal Review Directorate, within the Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department, would like to inform that approval is granted to **Mr Owen Dean Calleja**, to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo MA Ed
Research and School Internal Review Directorate
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

f/Dr Anthony Sammut
Director
Research and School Internal Review Directorate
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

Secretariat for Catholic Education (1st Permission)



**SECRETARIAT FOR
CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

16, The Mall, Floriana FRN1472, Malta
Tel. +356 27790060
www.csm.edu.mt

Ms Marjoe Abela
Director – Student Services
Secretariat for Catholic Education

3rd December 2024

Mr Owen Dean Calleja, currently reading for a Masters Degree in Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Education at the University of Malta, requests permission to conduct audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with Psychologists and Social Workers at the above mentioned organization.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Mr Owen Dean Calleja, to carry out the stated exercise subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the organization concerned.



Dr Ian Mifsud
Director General
Secretariat for Catholic Education

Secretariat for Catholic Education (Updated Permission)



16, The Mall, Floriana FRN1472, Malta
Tel. +356 27790060
www.csm.edu.mt



18th June 2025

Mr Owen Dean Calleja, currently reading for a Masters Degree in Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Education at the University of Malta, requests permission to conduct audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with Assistant Heads and Pastoral Care Coordinators at the above mentioned school.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Mr Owen Dean Calleja, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the school concerned.



Dr Ian Mifsud
Director General
Secretariat for Catholic Education

Gatekeepers

NSSS



Josanne Ghirxi <josanne.ghirxi@ilearn.edu.mt>
to me, Ghirxi ▾

Wed, 11 Dec 2024, 16:08 ☆ ↶ ⋮



Dear Mr Calleja

Received with thanks - will circulate with the counsellors/ social workers

Best regards

Dr Josanne Ghirxi
Director
National School Support Services



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT, YOUTH,
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
Fra Gaetano Pace Forno Street Hamrun

e: josanne.ghirxi@ilearn.edu.mt | www.education.gov.mt

SW

Hi Owen,

Thanks for your email.

I am confirming that I will be recruiting participants (teachers and parents of school refusal cases) and that I will be contacting the participants myself while sending them the necessary information letter and consent forms.

Appendix F – Permission Request Letter to Heads of Schools

To: Head of School

10/06/2025

Request for permission to recruit assistant heads

Dear Head of School,

My name is Owen Dean Calleja and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a MTL in Early Childhood and Primary Education. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “The Perceived Effects of School Refusal on Young Children’s Learning Journey – Professionals’ and Parents’ Perspective”. This study aims to shed light on the critical issue of school refusal, and its impact on the learning journey of five- to 11-year-olds in primary school. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Prof. Victor Martinelli.

I am hereby seeking your permission to recruit assistant heads from your school to take part in my study. My data collection methods will involve semi-structured interviews, where participants will be required to answer a series of questions and provide as much information as possible through the open-ended questions asked in order to help me gain a deeper understanding into the topic.

Participation will be entirely voluntary and participants will be free to withdraw at any point, without any repercussions. Data collected will be pseudonymized, meaning the participants’ identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from the interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link the data to the participants’ identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher’s password-protected computer. Only the researcher (myself), academic supervisor, and examiners will have access to this data.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor; both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Researcher: Owen Dean Calleja
Email: owen.calleja.18@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Prof. Victor Martinelli
Email: victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt
Office Number: +356 2340 2938

Appendix G – Excerpt from Interview Transcript

R - Researcher

P - Participant

Analysis	Transcript (SW 1)	Themes & Sub-Themes
<p>The social worker speaks about how children who refuse to go to school usually have other issues going on in their lives. Sometimes these are family issues or even challenges related to mental health.</p>	<p>R: Ok, that's good. Ok, so starting off with the first question, so school refusal is seen as a common issue in children aged between 5 and 11 years, how would you define school refusal based on your professional experience dealing with school refusal cases?</p> <p>P: I think that children who refuse to attend school, emm, tend to have some problems, basically problems which they bring from home. I don't think that children refuse school just because they don't like school. Sometimes we see that they don't come to school because their parents don't value school or else there are some problems in the family which hinder children to attend, either they are single parents or there are mental health issues or substance abuse and all these accumulate and then children don't attend school.</p>	<p>What Lay Beneath: Interpretations of School Refusal</p> <p>School Refusal: A Symptom or the Problem?</p>
	<p>R: I see, so it's like, from what you're saying, it's not just the children not wanting to</p>	

<p>It is made clear that school refusal is not the problem but a symptom of other causes. Such causes are then potentially exacerbated by school refusal.</p> <p>Medication can negatively affect children's concentration levels and motivation. Notwithstanding, the topic of medication has not been extensively explored with regard to its potential benefits for children with school refusal.</p>	<p>attend, but there's always something...</p> <p>P: No, No, it's very rarely that children just wake up in the morning and say I don't want to come to school. In many cases they will have other hidden agendas and they don't attend school, emm, perhaps they are afraid to leave their mother alone at home, and so they won't come to school because they will think of her all the time, or they have some mental health problems which they don't, they can't focus or they take some medications which doesn't let them function well at school, some of these problems.</p>	<p>School Refusal: A Symptom or the Problem?</p> <p>Spotting the Signs: How School Refusal is Identified in Practice.</p>
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