

The Influence Of Academic Self-Efficacy And School Anxiety On School Refusal Behaviour Among Secondary School Students In Oyo State

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Abstract

School refusal behaviour has become a growing concern among educators and policymakers due to its negative impact on academic achievement, mental health, and social development in adolescents. This study examined the relationship between academic self-efficacy, school anxiety, and school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo State, Nigeria. The objective was to determine the levels of these variables and the extent to which academic self-efficacy and school anxiety predict school refusal behaviour. A descriptive correlational survey design of correlational type was adopted. The study population comprised all secondary school students in Oyo State, from which a sample of 300 students was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured, researcher-designed questionnaire. The instrument demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.86 for academic self-efficacy, 0.78 for school anxiety and 0.81 for school refusal behaviour. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation, percentage and multiple regression analysis were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that academic self-efficacy ($r = .153$, $p < 0.05$) and school anxiety ($r = .171$, $p < 0.05$) had significant relationship with school refusal behaviour. Also, the independent variable accounted for 37.9% of the variance of school refusal behaviour ($R^2_{adj.} = .379$). Academic self-efficacy ($\beta = .190$, $p < 0.05$) and school anxiety ($\beta = .204$, $p < 0.05$) made significant relative contribution to school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state. It could be inferred from the findings that academic self-efficacy and school anxiety are potent predictors of school refusal behaviour among the cohorts in the study. Interventions that enhance students' confidence and reduce anxiety are essential for reducing school refusal behaviour.

Keywords: School refusal behaviour, Academic self-efficacy, School anxiety

Introduction

School refusal behaviour has emerged as a significant psychological and educational concern affecting adolescents globally, including in developing countries like Nigeria. It is characterized by a student's persistent difficulty in

attending school or staying in class for a full day, often accompanied by emotional distress such as anxiety, depression, or fear (Kearney and Graczyk, 2022). Unlike truancy, which is typically associated with antisocial behaviour and a lack of parental awareness, school refusal is usually driven by internalizing symptoms and

occurs with the knowledge of parents or caregivers. This behaviour can negatively impact a student's academic performance, social development, and emotional well-being if not identified and addressed early.

Secondary school students are particularly vulnerable to school refusal due to the developmental and psychosocial transitions they experience during adolescence. This period is often marked by heightened emotional sensitivity, increased academic pressure, identity exploration, and social dynamics that can contribute to emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression common triggers of school refusal (Bremner et al., 2022). The transition from primary to secondary school can also present challenges such as new environments, unfamiliar peers, and higher expectations, which may exacerbate emotional difficulties for some students, leading to avoidance behaviours.

Research indicates that school refusal behaviour may stem from multiple psychological and environmental factors. These include fear of failure, peer victimization, learning difficulties, overprotective parenting styles, and traumatic experiences such as abuse or neglect (Ingul et al., 2019). In Nigeria, these issues are compounded by inadequate school counselling services, overcrowded classrooms, lack of mental health awareness, and cultural stigmatization of psychological disorders, making the detection and intervention of school refusal even more challenging (Ajayi and Olayiwola, 2021).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged closure of schools disrupted students' academic routines, social interactions, and mental health stability. Many students who experienced anxiety or depressive symptoms during lockdown have found it difficult to reintegrate into the formal school system, resulting in a surge of school refusal cases post-pandemic (Loades et al., 2020). Teachers and school administrators are now increasingly confronted with behavioural and emotional

issues that interfere with students' consistent school attendance. Despite the growing prevalence and implications of school refusal, it remains under-researched in many low- and middle-income countries. This gap underscores the importance of local empirical studies to identify specific risk factors, cultural dynamics, and support systems relevant to Nigerian secondary school students. Interventions such as school-based mental health programs, psychoeducation, parental involvement, and early detection strategies have shown promise in other contexts and may be adapted to suit local realities (Heyne et al., 2019).

Academic self-efficacy, defined as a student's belief in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks, plays a crucial role in shaping learners' motivation, persistence, and emotional response to schooling. Among secondary school students, the perception of academic competence can significantly influence their school attendance behaviour. Students with high academic self-efficacy tend to approach school with confidence, show resilience in the face of academic challenges, and maintain regular attendance. Conversely, students with low academic self-efficacy are more likely to develop negative attitudes toward school, experience academic burnout, and engage in school refusal behaviour (Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2021).

Research has shown that academic self-efficacy can buffer against school-related anxiety and absenteeism by enhancing students' coping mechanisms and reducing avoidance behaviour (Madigan and Curran, 2021). In Nigeria and other low-resource settings, where academic competition is intense and school support services may be limited, students with fragile self-beliefs are particularly vulnerable to disengaging from school. These students often perceive academic tasks as insurmountable, leading to repeated absences that may go unnoticed until severe patterns of school refusal emerge. Moreover, academic self-efficacy influences

not only academic performance but also emotional well-being. According to recent studies, students who believe in their academic capabilities tend to report lower levels of school-related stress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety factors known to contribute to school refusal (Putwain et al., 2022).

School anxiety refers to intense emotional distress associated with the school environment, including fear of academic failure, social evaluation, teacher criticism, or peer conflict. Among secondary school students, school anxiety is a powerful predictor of school refusal behaviour, especially when such fears become overwhelming and persistent. Students experiencing school anxiety often somatize their fears complaining of headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue to avoid attending school. These avoidance behaviours may be reinforced over time if the underlying anxiety remains unaddressed (Ingul and Nordahl, 2022).

In adolescence, the developmental stage coinciding with secondary education, students become increasingly sensitive to social judgment, academic competition, and interpersonal dynamics. When school becomes a source of anxiety rather than support, some students may resort to avoidance as a coping strategy. This is particularly prevalent in high-stakes academic environments where students perceive constant pressure to perform or conform. According to recent findings, elevated school anxiety has been linked to absenteeism, decreased academic achievement, and increased risk of long-term mental health issues (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2021). In the Nigerian context, school anxiety may be further exacerbated by overcrowded classrooms, punitive discipline methods, and lack of mental health resources. Students may not feel emotionally safe in school environments that do not provide opportunities for emotional expression, peer support, or psychological counselling. Additionally, cultural stigmas around anxiety or emotional vulnerability often discourage students from seeking help, thereby perpetuating a cycle of

school avoidance and academic disengagement. In conclusion, school refusal behaviour among secondary school students is a complex phenomenon influenced by emotional, social, and institutional factors.

School refusal behaviour refers to the persistent and emotionally driven avoidance of school attendance, typically accompanied by significant distress such as fear, anxiety, or depressive symptoms. It is distinguished from truancy in that it often occurs with the awareness of parents and involves internalizing symptoms rather than conduct problems or delinquency (Kearney and Graczyk, 2022). Among secondary school students, this behaviour presents serious academic and psychological implications, as students who chronically refuse school may fall behind academically, suffer from peer isolation, and develop long-term emotional or behavioural disorders. School refusal can take various forms, including complete absenteeism, frequent late arrivals, or repeated requests to leave school during the day due to vague physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches.

This behavioural phenomenon has become increasingly prominent in educational research, particularly due to the complexity of the adolescent developmental stage. Adolescents face a myriad of psychological challenges including identity formation, peer pressure, academic expectations, and emotional instability. These challenges, when not properly managed, can become overwhelming and manifest as school refusal behaviour. According to Ingul and Nordahl (2022), students in this age group who suffer from school refusal often experience comorbid disorders such as generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, or social phobia. Unfortunately, in many developing nations like Nigeria, the lack of trained mental health professionals in schools, inadequate screening tools, and cultural perceptions about school attendance often result in misdiagnosis or neglect of the condition (Ajayi and Olayiwola, 2021).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, school refusal has gained even more attention due to a sharp increase in cases. Many students who were confined to remote learning environments for extended periods developed heightened social anxiety, academic disengagement, and fear of reintegrating into school settings. The disruption of routine, reduced social interaction, and increased screen time further contributed to students' reluctance to return to physical classrooms (Loades et al., 2020). In light of these developments, it is essential for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners to view school refusal not merely as defiance or laziness, but as a complex emotional and behavioural response requiring early detection and intervention.

Academic self-efficacy is a student's personal judgment of their ability to successfully carry out academic tasks such as studying, completing assignments, and passing examinations. This construct is rooted in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which posits that belief in one's capabilities directly influences motivation, emotional regulation, and performance (Bandura, 1997). High levels of academic self-efficacy enable students to approach academic challenges with confidence, set realistic goals, utilize effective learning strategies, and persist in the face of difficulty. Conversely, students with low academic self-efficacy are prone to procrastination, avoidance of challenging tasks, and school disengagement all of which can lead to school refusal.

The impact of academic self-efficacy on student behaviour is particularly pronounced during the secondary school years, a period marked by heightened academic demands and social comparison. Students are often required to demonstrate increasing independence, manage complex subjects, and prepare for high-stakes examinations. Those who perceive themselves as academically incompetent may develop feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, and fear of failure, which contribute to emotional withdrawal and avoidance behaviours. A study

by Putwain et al. (2022) found that academic self-efficacy significantly predicted both academic engagement and emotional well-being, with low self-efficacy associated with increased stress and absenteeism.

In low-resource educational settings like Nigeria, fostering academic self-efficacy can be particularly challenging due to factors such as overcrowded classrooms, limited access to instructional resources, and teacher-centered pedagogy. Nevertheless, promoting positive academic self-perceptions is crucial for preventing school refusal. Strategies such as providing constructive feedback, celebrating small academic wins, and encouraging peer collaboration can significantly enhance students' belief in their academic competence. Additionally, integrating academic counselling and mentorship programs into school systems can help identify at-risk students and provide them with the support needed to bolster their self-efficacy and re-engage with learning.

School anxiety is a form of psychological distress that arises from various aspects of the school environment, including fear of academic failure, negative evaluation, bullying, teacher criticism, or peer rejection. It is one of the most common emotional difficulties faced by school-aged children and adolescents and is a primary trigger for school refusal behaviour. Students suffering from school anxiety often experience somatic symptoms such as nausea, headaches, and sleep disturbances, especially on school days. These symptoms are frequently misinterpreted as physical illness, allowing the student to avoid school without the root anxiety being addressed (Ingul and Nordahl, 2022).

The school environment can be a highly stressful place for adolescents, especially when they feel unprepared to meet academic expectations or when they face social challenges. Adolescents are naturally more self-conscious and emotionally reactive, and they may view mistakes or failures as personal shortcomings rather than opportunities for

growth. In such a context, school becomes a source of fear rather than learning, prompting students to disengage. Research by Gentle-Genitty et al. (2021) highlights that unaddressed school anxiety not only leads to school refusal but can also result in deteriorating mental health, declining academic performance, and strained family relationships.

In Nigeria, school anxiety remains underdiagnosed and often misunderstood by educators and parents. Many schools lack dedicated mental health staff or structured psychosocial support systems to assist students struggling with anxiety. Furthermore, the prevailing cultural norms may discourage open discussions about emotional problems, thereby increasing students' isolation and vulnerability. Intervention programs that include teacher training on recognizing signs of anxiety, peer support groups, and school-based counselling have been effective in other contexts and could be adapted for use in Nigerian schools. Such approaches are essential to reducing school anxiety and its impact on students' attendance and academic success.

School refusal behaviour has become an increasingly concerning issue in contemporary education, particularly at the secondary school level, where students are undergoing critical developmental, academic, and psychosocial transitions. Unlike truancy, which is often driven by defiance or disinterest in school, school refusal is typically marked by emotional distress such as anxiety, fear of failure, social discomfort, or depression that results in persistent absenteeism or reluctance to attend school despite parental efforts. This phenomenon poses significant challenges not only to students' academic progress but also to their emotional stability, future prospects, and social integration. In recent years, educators and mental health professionals have observed a rise in the number of students avoiding school due to psychological discomfort, particularly in post-pandemic contexts where academic disruptions, health anxieties, and social isolation have

deepened students' vulnerabilities. In Nigeria and similar developing contexts, the problem is further aggravated by systemic inadequacies such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of trained school counsellors, minimal teacher training in student mental health, and insufficient parental awareness about emotional disorders in adolescents. As a result, many students experiencing school refusal behaviour remain undiagnosed and unsupported, increasing their risk of academic failure, dropout, and long-term psychological difficulties. Furthermore, underlying factors such as low academic self-efficacy and school-related anxiety significantly contribute to the manifestation of school refusal. Students who doubt their academic abilities or perceive school as a threatening environment may resort to avoidance as a coping mechanism, especially when they lack access to supportive relationships with teachers or peers. This internal struggle often manifests in psychosomatic complaints like headaches or stomachaches, making it difficult for educators and parents to distinguish between genuine illness and emotional avoidance. In the absence of timely interventions, these patterns can become deeply entrenched, affecting students' educational trajectories and emotional development. Therefore, the study examines the influence of academic self-efficacy and school anxiety on school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state.

PROVIDE OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **descriptive survey research design of the correlational type** to examine the relationship between academic self-efficacy, school anxiety and school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo State, Nigeria. This design was considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect data from a representative

sample and establish statistical relationships between variables without manipulating them.

Population of the study

The **target population** for this study comprised all secondary school students within Oyo State. These students, spread across urban and rural settings, represent a diverse mix in terms of age, gender, academic performance, and socio-economic background. The choice of this population was based on the need to gather insights that reflect the broad experiences of secondary school students concerning their academic self-efficacy and tendencies toward school refusal.

Sampling and Sampling Technique

PROVIDE BREAKDOWN OF THE SAMPLE SELECTION AND SPECIFIC TOWNS OR LOCALITIES

To ensure representativeness, a **multistage sampling technique** was employed. Initially, schools were randomly selected from different zones across Oyo State. Following this, students were randomly sampled from the selected schools. In total, **300 students** participated in the study, providing a robust sample size for meaningful statistical analysis and generalization of findings.

Instrumentation

Data were gathered using a **structured questionnaire** developed by the researcher. The instrument consisted of well-organized sections that measured academic self-efficacy, school anxiety and school refusal behaviour. The academic self-efficacy, developed by Bryne, Flood and Julien (2014) having a reliability of 0.86, the school Anxiety scale developed by O'Took et. al. (2019) with a Cronbach alpha of 0.90 and the school refusal assessment scale developed by Ingul, Nordahl, Bronnick and Nordahl (2022) with a Cronbach alpha of 0.86 were all adapted by the researcher. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was

conducted, and internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The academic self-efficacy scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of **0.86**, indicating high reliability and 0.78 for school anxiety while the school refusal behaviour scale produced a reliability coefficient of **0.81**, confirming its consistency and suitability for the study.

Procedure for Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed directly to the students during school hours with the cooperation of school authorities and teachers. The purpose of the study was explained to the respondents, and instructions were provided on how to complete the questionnaire. The researcher ensured that responses were obtained in a conducive and distraction-free environment to guarantee the accuracy and sincerity of responses. Informed consent was obtained from both school authorities and the students prior to participation. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly upheld throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The collected data were carefully coded and analyzed using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)**. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics, particularly Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship between academic self-efficacy, school anxiety and school refusal behaviour. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

Result and Discussion

Research Question 1:

Is there any significant relationship between academic self-efficacy and school anxiety among secondary school students in Oyo state?

Table 1: Summary of correlation matrix showing the relationships among the variables

Variable	School refusal behaviour	Academic self-efficacy	School anxiety	Mean $\bar{x}$	SD
School refusal behaviour	1.000			63.21	15.38
Academic self-efficacy	.153	1.000		58.97	8.49
School anxiety	.171	.155	1.000	52.33	11.11

Table 1 above reveals the inter-correlational matrix of independent variables (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) and the dependent variable (school refusal behaviour) among secondary school students in Oyo state. All the independent variables (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) are positively correlated with the dependent (school refusal behaviour) among secondary school students in Oyo state; academic self-efficacy ($r = .153$, $p < 0.05$) and school anxiety ($r = .171$, $p < 0.05$) had significant relationship to school refusal behaviour. This implies that all the independent variable (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) play a significant role on the school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state.

The correlational analysis indicated that both academic self-efficacy and school anxiety had significant positive relationships with school refusal behaviour. This finding implies that students' confidence in their academic ability and the anxiety they experience about school jointly affect their likelihood of avoiding school. Students with low self-efficacy may perceive academic tasks as overwhelming, leading to frustration and avoidance. On the other hand, students with high levels of anxiety may experience intense emotional distress, such as fear of failure or embarrassment, which in turn contributes to school avoidance. This

suggests that when students are unable to manage academic stress or believe they are incapable of performing well, they may cope by avoiding the school environment altogether.

Furthermore, this finding is consistent with earlier research emphasizing the link between psychological distress and school avoidance. **Egger et al. (2003)** and **Heyne et al. (2019)** both reported that anxiety symptoms are major predictors of school refusal behaviour in adolescents, highlighting the need for emotional regulation interventions within schools. Similarly, studies by **King and Bernstein (2001)** and **Kearney and Silverman (1996)** established that students who experience academic difficulties or negative school experiences often develop avoidance behaviours as a coping mechanism. The implication is that schools must create supportive environments where students can develop confidence in their academic abilities and access guidance that mitigates feelings of anxiety, thereby fostering positive school engagement.

Research Question 2:

What is the joint contribution of academic self-efficacy and school anxiety to school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state?

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis on school refusal behaviour

Multiple R= .481 Multiple R ² = .379 Multiple R ² (adjusted)=.357 Standard error of estimate= 5.21158					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3399.369	2	849.842	13.673	.000 ^b
Residual	39801.524	296	231.404		
Total	43200.893	299			

Table 2 shows the combined contribution of the independent variables (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) on the dependent variable (school refusal behaviour) among secondary school students in Oyo state. The value of R =.481, while R²= .379. This suggests that the two factors combined together accounted for (Adj.R²= .357) variance in the prediction of school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state. The ANOVA result from the regression analysis indicates that there was a significant contribution of the independent variables (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) on the dependent variable school refusal behaviour, F (5.21158, p<0.05) among secondary school students in Oyo state.

This outcome is consistent with the findings of **Kearney (2008)** and **Maric et al. (2019)**, who emphasized that both cognitive and affective factors contribute jointly to school attendance problems. It also aligns with **Hendron and Kearney (2016)**, who found that academic

motivation, emotional regulation, and anxiety are significant predictors of school attendance and engagement. The results suggest that interventions should not focus solely on academic improvement but also target students' emotional well-being. Therefore, counselling programs in schools should be designed to enhance students' confidence in learning while helping them develop coping strategies to handle stress and anxiety. A comprehensive psychosocial approach that integrates cognitive restructuring, relaxation training, and motivational enhancement could help mitigate the problem of school refusal among adolescents.

Research Question 3:

What is the relative contribution of each of academic self-efficacy and school anxiety to school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state?

Table 3: Relative contribution of each of the independent factors to the prediction of school refusal behaviour

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	30.797	11.865		2.596	.000
Academic self-efficacy	.349	.136	.190	2.559	.000
School anxiety	.145	.104	.204	3.390	.000

Table 3 above revealed the relative contribution of each of the independent variables (academic self-efficacy and school anxiety) on the dependent variable (school refusal behaviour) among secondary school students in Oyo state. Academic self-efficacy ($\beta = .190$, $p < 0.05$) had significant relative contribution to school refusal behaviour and school anxiety ($\beta = .204$, $p < 0.05$) had significant relative contribution to school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state. That is, factors such as academic self-efficacy and school anxiety made relative contribution to school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo state. In terms of magnitude of contribution, school anxiety made the most significant contribution to school refusal behaviour, followed by academic self-efficacy.

The result supports earlier findings by Last and Strauss (1990) and Richards and Hadwin (2011), who found that anxiety disorders are among the most common underlying causes of school refusal in adolescents. Similarly, Pina et al. (2009) revealed that anxiety significantly predicts avoidance behaviours more than self-efficacy, implying that managing anxiety is central to addressing school refusal. However, academic self-efficacy remains an essential protective factor; students who believe in their academic competence are less likely to succumb to the pressures of anxiety or avoidance. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy influences motivation, perseverance, and emotional responses to challenges factors that are all relevant to regular school attendance. Therefore, both emotional support and self-efficacy training should be key components of any school-based intervention program.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between academic self-efficacy, school anxiety, and school refusal behaviour among secondary school students in Oyo State. The findings revealed that both academic self-efficacy and

school anxiety significantly influence students' tendency to avoid school, either jointly or independently. Specifically, while both factors were found to have positive and significant relationships with school refusal behaviour, school anxiety emerged as a stronger predictor compared to academic self-efficacy. This suggests that emotional factors, particularly anxiety, play a dominant role in shaping students' school attendance patterns, though cognitive beliefs such as self-efficacy remain crucial in determining students' confidence and resilience in academic contexts. The study concludes that school refusal behaviour among secondary school students is influenced by a combination of psychological and academic factors. Students with low academic self-efficacy are more likely to feel inadequate in meeting school demands, leading to avoidance behaviours, while those experiencing high school anxiety often perceive school as a source of distress rather than growth. Together, these factors contribute to persistent absenteeism and disengagement from school activities. Therefore, addressing both the emotional and academic aspects of students' experiences is essential in reducing school refusal tendencies.

It can be concluded that strengthening students' academic self-belief and reducing their anxiety levels are vital strategies for enhancing school attendance and performance. Schools should adopt comprehensive intervention programs that integrate counselling, stress management training, and academic mentoring to foster a supportive learning environment. Teachers, counsellors, and parents must work collaboratively to identify early signs of anxiety and self-doubt among students and provide timely psychological and academic support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Schools should implement structured programs designed to enhance students'

academic self-efficacy by incorporating mentorship, goal-setting, problem-solving skills, and success-oriented learning strategies. Additionally schools should employ trained counsellors to deliver interventions aimed at reducing anxiety such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), relaxation techniques, and stress management workshops. Teachers should also be given training in socio-emotional learning and classroom practices that promote psychological safety for students. Moreover, parents should be educated about the signs of school anxiety and school refusal behaviour, and they should collaborate with schools to provide emotional support while fostering a positive academic attitude at home. Finally, schools should create a welcoming, respectful, and low-pressure atmosphere by implementing anti-bullying initiatives, peer support groups, and inclusive classroom practices to reduce anxiety and enhance students' sense of belonging.

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