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REVIEW PAPER

Understanding the Contextual Variables that Contribute to the School Refusal Behavior of Neurodivergent Adolescents: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

School refusal is one form of school non-attendance often categorized by emotional distress related to school. Emerging evidence suggests that neurodivergent learners disproportionately engage in school refusal behavior when compared to their neurotypical peers. Additionally, the importance of the school environment as a mitigating and contributing factor to school refusal is growing. This scoping review summarizes research on school-based barriers that may contribute to school refusal among neurodivergent adolescents. A search in May 2024 identified 18 relevant sources. The review examines participant details, diagnoses, research methods, and contextual challenges. Key factors such as sensory overload and relationships with peers and teachers were found to influence school refusal. Understanding these barriers can help inform targeted interventions and guide policy changes to support neurodivergent students' needs and encourage attendance. The review also highlights the complexities of school refusal research and suggests future research should more clearly define participant characteristics and better involve young people in studies to deepen insight into how school environments impact school refusal.

Keywords Neurodiversity · School refusal behavior · Autism spectrum disorder · Mainstream education · Scoping review · Contextual factors

Inclusive and equitable education is a fundamental human right for all children and young people. There is an established correlation between more frequent school attendance and higher academic achievement (Gottfried et al., 2019), stronger social relationships (Carroll, 2011), and a more secure sense of belonging and overall higher levels of well-being (Ulaş et al., 2024). In contrast, not attending school can have a profound and lasting impact on young people's lives, resulting in poorer academic attainment (Komakech, 2015), fewer future career prospects (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), increased social isolation (Leduc et al., 2024), and increased family conflict (Kearney, 2007). Despite the known implications of non-attendance, current school attendance rates are troubling and are trending downwards (e.g., Education Counts, The Ministry of Education, Aotearoa, 2024; Klein et al., 2024).

School non-attendance is heterogeneous and complex; not all non-attendance is the same, with four commonly recognized forms outlined by Kearney and Silverman (1996). The first is truancy, defined as child-motivated non-attendance, whereby the young person is typically engaged in an alternative and preferred activity (e.g., at the mall with peers), often without their caregiver's knowledge or consent. Second, school withdrawal is caregiver-mediated non-attendance whereby the caregiver provides permission, or even encourages, their young person's non-attendance, often for reasons such as supporting the family or caregiving. Third, school exclusion, refers to school-sanctioned non-attendance, whereby the young person cannot return to school because they have been excluded. Fourth, and the focus of this review, is *school refusal*, first defined by Berg et al. (1969) as *school phobia*. School refusal is

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child-motivated school non-attendance, coupled with indicators of distress (e.g., crying, psychosomatic complaints, negotiating with caregivers). The caregiver typically knows their child's whereabouts, and there is often an absence of antisocial behaviors. These core elements of school refusal remain consistent (Kearney, 2007), with parental desire for their child to be in school as an additional defining characteristic (Heyne et al., 2019).

While these forms are widely accepted, this review adopts a function-based perspective, focusing on the factors that contribute to and maintain school refusal behavior. Understanding the motivation behind school refusal is more important than simply categorizing its presentation. Kearney and Silverman (1993) first popularized this approach with the development of the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS), later revised (SRAS-r) by Kearney (2002) and Heyne et al. (2019). The SRAS assesses why a young person refuses school, assuming they do so for one or more of four reasons: 1) to avoid negative school experiences (e.g., sensory overload), 2) to escape social or evaluative situations (e.g., group projects), 3) to seek attention from others (e.g., spending time with a parent), or 4) to gain access to tangibles outside school (e.g., access to technology). Identifying the reason allows for targeted interventions. For instance, supporting a student with friendship challenges differs from helping one who prefers to stay home with parents. Although school refusal and avoidance are not synonymous, terms like *school avoidance* highlight the close connection between school refusal and escaping aversive situations at school.

School Refusal Risk Factors

As the link between school refusal and mental health conditions like anxiety and mood disorders, has been documented in the literature for many years, dating back to Broadwin's (1932) seminal paper, which linked school refusal and *neurosis*. Numerous studies have reinforced this relationship (e.g., Finning et al., 2020; Place et al., 2000). Research conducted with practitioners, parents, and teachers suggests anxiety is the most frequently identified factor contributing to a learner's school refusal behaviour (Bodycote, 2022; Finning et al., 2020). Accepting this as an explanation for why a learner may be refusing school situates the problem within the individual and does little to unpack what could be contributing to their school-based anxiety. It is important to consider that not all children and adolescents who are anxious engage in school refusal behavior. Therefore, while the presence of anxiety is a well-established risk factor for school refusal, there are additional factors, and/or barriers that could mediate its impact.

Other contributing factors include neurodivergence (Connolly et al., 2023), poor emotional regulation (Jones & Suveg, 2015), dysfunctional family environments, parental psychopathology, peer conflict, being a victim of bullying and authoritarian teaching styles (Leduc et al., 2024; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). The relationship between these variables, among others, is complex and multilayered. For example, neurodivergent learners are more likely to be victims of bullying, which is sometimes attributed to poorer social or conflict resolution skills (McClemont et al., 2021). Together, these factors highlight that school refusal behaviour is not the result of a single cause, but develops through the interaction of individual, interpersonal, and contextual influences.

Neurodivergent learners have increasingly been the focus of school non-attendance research, particularly in recent years (Nordin et al., 2024). Neurodiversity refers to the range of ways in which people socialize, behave, and learn (Walker, 2014), encompassing neurodevelopmental differences like autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other diagnoses that affect functioning, such as brain injury (Dwyer, 2022). Studies show neurodivergent adolescents are more likely to engage in school refusal behavior than their neurotypical peers (Munkhaugen et al., 2017).

Kurita (1991) first identified a positive relationship between pervasive developmental delay (defined as autistic and/or intellectually disabled youth) and school refusal. This has since been confirmed with various neuro-differences, including sensory processing disorder (Connolly et al., 2023), learning disabilities (Jabeen & Rauf, 2023), ASD (Munkhaugen et al., 2017), and ADHD (Niemi et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature continues to pathologize students and position the difficulty within the individual. For example, Munkhaugen et al. (2017) found that autistic students who refused school were seen as less socially motivated and more withdrawn than their peers. Similarly, Granieri et al., (2023) concluded that the participants categorized as presenting with more severe ASD or ADHD traits, were also engaging in high rates of school refusal behaviour. Such findings emphasize correlations between individual characteristics and school refusal, but risk reinforcing the notion that school refusal stems primarily from deficits in individual capability.

The Role of School as a Context

The school environment can have a unique impact on neurodivergent learners and neurodivergence may alter how the school context affects attendance (Havik & Ingul, 2021). The focus on school as a protective factor against or contributing factor to school refusal is not a new concept. While the focus remained heavily on individual risk factors and

attachment theories to explain school refusal behaviour, in early work by Pilkington and Piersel (1991), they proposed that further attention should be given to the role of school in the development and maintenance of school refusal behaviour. They further suggested that school refusal could be a reasonable response to an unpleasant or harmful environment. More recently, many neurodivergent students and their parents report that school negatively affects their mental health, sometimes outweighing potential benefits (Connolly et al., 2022). By focusing on the school context, this review shifts away from blaming individuals and instead recognizes that avoidance behaviors are often in response to aversive or challenging environmental or contextual stimuli.

School refusal can occur at any age, but the contributing factors likely differ across primary, middle, and secondary school settings. Secondary school plays a significant role in identity formation (Verhoeven et al., 2019), sees increased mental health challenges (Axelson & Birmaher, 2001), and adolescents become more aware of neurodivergence and peer differences (McKinney et al., 2024). Secondary schools often have larger student populations, less individualized teacher relationships, and fewer resources and supports (Havik et al., 2014), with non-attendance also having greater impact on academic progress (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, factors contributing to school refusal in secondary students are more complex and nuanced, reflecting developmental stages and dynamic school environments, making this the focus of the review.

The Present Review

There has been growing interest in research exploring factors influencing school refusal in neurodivergent youth and thus warrants timely review to consolidate the most up-to-date research. Nordin et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review on school refusal behavior, specifically focusing on autistic young people. They dedicated a section of the findings of their scoping review to contextual risk factors. Social relationships (e.g., bullying, being isolated from peers), the learning environment (e.g., lack of competent staff, lack of support, and inflexibility with adaptations), and school placement were identified in the literature included as key contextual factors. Further, Ulaş and Seçer (2024) conducted a systematic review of school refusal behavior, which included all learners. They reported 'autism spectrum disorder' to be one of the most commonly occurring terms in recent school refusal literature, highlighting the strong relationship between school refusal and neurodivergence. Similarly, focusing on all learners, Leduc et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review and adopted an ecological approach to school refusal, identifying individual, school, family and distal (e.g., socioeconomic status, culture) factors. They concluded that practitioners should identify students with anxiety and students with diverse learning needs when preventing school refusal behavior, as two of the most well-established risk factors in literature.

The current review builds on existing reviews in two important ways. First, the current review takes a transdiagnostic approach (Astle et al., 2022), intentionally including sources with participants with a wider range of diagnostic labels and definitions of neurodiversity. We argue that by focusing on one diagnosis (e.g., ASD; Nordin et al., 2024), the generalizability of the conclusions is limited. The method section further outlines the process used to choose the terms included in this review. While it is beyond the scope of this review to attempt to define neurodiversity, emerging research aims to achieve this (e.g., Dwyer, 2022). Second, we focused on the contextual and school-based factors that exacerbate neurodivergent youth's school refusal behavior, as this is yet to be done. Therefore, the current review had two primary objectives. First, to understand whose voice has been heard in the research thus far and the methods used to collect these data. Second, to understand what school-based barriers or variables have already been identified as detrimental to neurodivergent young people attending school.

Methods

Design

We used the PRISMA-ScR framework (Tricco et al., 2018) to conduct the scoping review. This framework provides a checklist of key elements for the review based on the original PRISMA method for systematic reviews. These include constructing a title, clearly outlining eligibility criteria, searching and screening strategies, and synthesizing data related to the review objectives.

Search Strategy

In May of 2024, we conducted an electronic search using the following databases: Scopus, ERIC, ProQuest Education, ProQuest Social Science, ProQuest Health and Medical, ProQuest Psychology, ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, EBSCOhost – Education Resource Complete, and PsycINFO. An expert subject librarian supported database selection.

We engaged in preliminary information-gathering to determine the relevant search terms to include in the literature searches on the key topics – school refusal and neurodiversity. First, two separate Google Scholar searches using the broad terms (i.e., 'Neurodivergence' and school refusal)

were conducted to inform the initial search terms for each topic. During these preliminary searches, we scanned the sources for any terms to include in the final search strings for the review. All relevant terms were documented. Following this, we did an informal Google search for websites related to these topics to ensure frequently used terms from websites related to this review were included (e.g., The Neurodiversity Education Project and The International Network for School Attendance). Last, field experts and academic colleagues from both education and psychology reviewed the terms. A complete list of search terms is in Table 1.

Eligibility Criteria

The review was limited to sources with participants enrolled in general (e.g., state or private schools that provide inclusive frameworks for all students) or alternative educational (e.g., specialist education providers who offer an alternate pathway to general education) settings. As this scoping review is focused on the barriers to attendance for secondary school age students, at least one participant had to be between 13 and 18 when the research was conducted. Sources that used quantitative methods had to include a neurodivergent comparison group. For qualitative methods, 50% or more of the participants had to be neurodivergent, as defined in Table 1. Sources needed to report on contextual variables (i.e., variables that are outside of the person) concerning school refusal, with data collected either directly (i.e., the young person themselves) or indirectly (i.e., via parents and/or caregivers or school personnel). school refusal. School refusal had to be outlined in either the method (as a measure) or result sections (as a finding or outcome) of the sources eligible for inclusion in this scoping review. We included all quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research studies and theses. There was no date restriction on the literature searched, and we only included English sources (or sources that had been translated into English). To capture all relevant and emerging literature, published (journal articles) and unpublished (Masters's thesis and doctoral dissertations) sources were included.

Table 1 Search terms used for school refusal and neurodivergence in the literature search

School refusal	Neurodivergence
School avoidance	Autism / ASD
School phobia	Aspergers
School resistance	Sensory processing disorder / SPD
School distress	Specific learning disorders (e.g., Dyslexia,
School can't	Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia)
School absence	Attention deficit hyperactive disorder / ADHD
Emotional based	Attention deficit disorder / ADD
school absence	Auditory processing disorder / APD
School attendance	Speech difficulties / Communication difficulties
problems	Gifted
	Intellectual disability / ID
	Learning disability
	Neurodevelopmental disorder
	Developmental disorder
	Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder / FASD

Screening Strategy

The first author conducted the initial digital search and yielded 2,962 records (see Fig. 1). We exported the titles and abstracts of these sources to Zotero, and duplicates were removed ($n=500$). We then screened the remaining 2,462 unique sources by title and abstract to determine eligibility for inclusion. Of these, an independent researcher screened 10% (246 sources); there were no disagreements. Following title and abstract screening, we screened 55 sources by full text (10% by an independent researcher), and 42 sources were excluded. The rationale for any excluded data was documented and is in Fig. 1. Following these exclusions, we had 13 agreed sources to be included in the review. Last, we completed backward citation chasing of the final 13 sources, locating five additional sources, which yielded 18 records. All authors agreed upon the inclusion of the remaining articles.

Data Extraction

The first author created a list of data that was extracted from the final 18 sources. The second and third authors agreed. We charted these data in a customized Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet. The data extracted included publication information (e.g., authors, title, date of publication, journal of publication), research information (e.g., research aim or objectives, data collection and analysis method, sample size, country, funding), concept information (e.g., definition of school refusal), demographic information (e.g., number of participants, diagnoses, age, gender, ethnicity), key findings (e.g., barriers or contextual factors identified), and limitations or key considerations identified by the author(s).

Results

Research Characteristics

Of the 18 included sources, 12 were journal articles, and six were research theses (Fig. 2). All six of the included theses were conducted in the UK. The remaining research was conducted in Australia ($n=5$), the United Kingdom ($n=3$), the United States ($n=2$), Northern Ireland ($n=1$), and Japan ($n=1$). Three sources (Bitsika et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b) were conducted by the same first author in Australia.

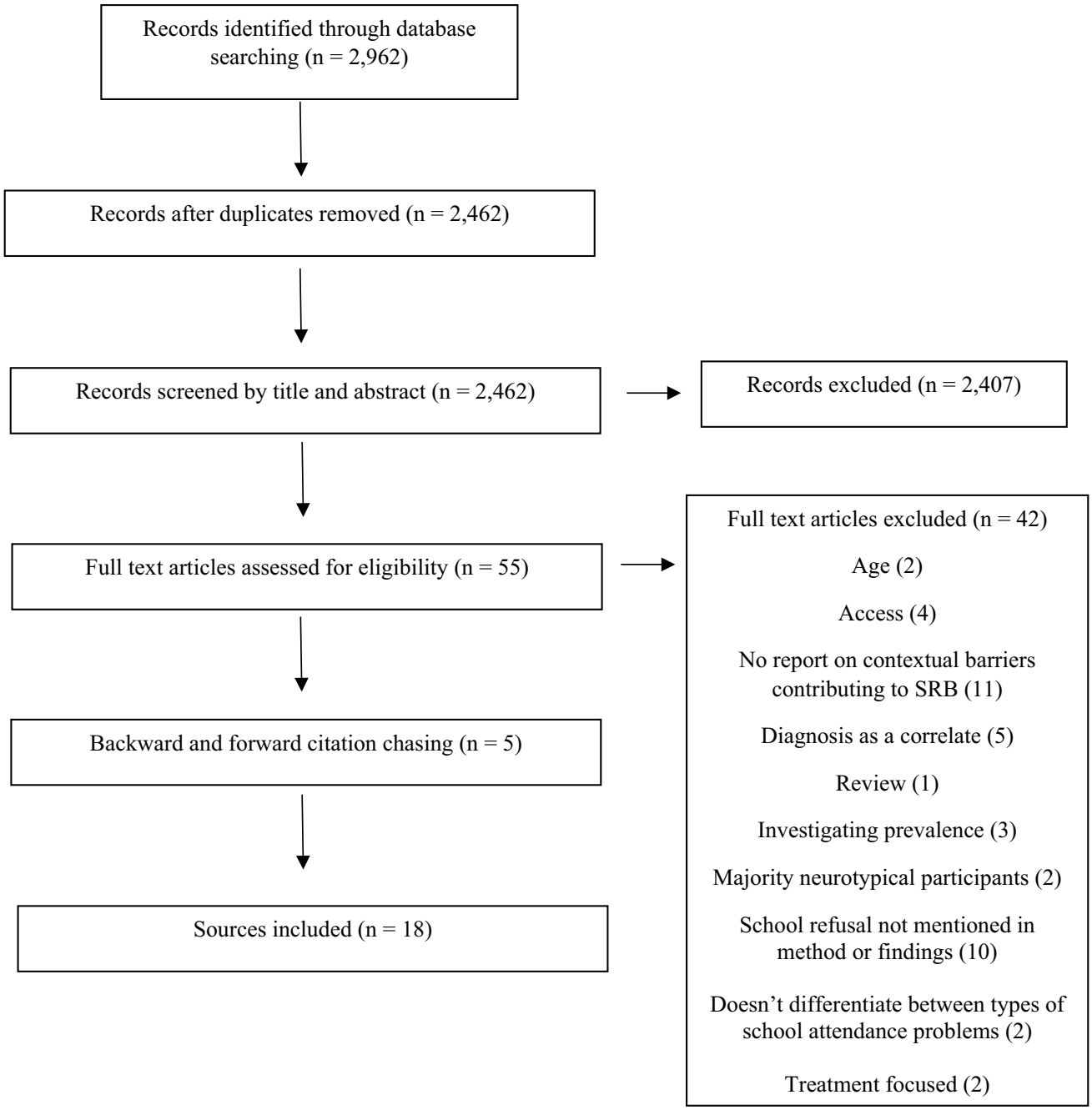


Fig. 1 The screening process and the number of sources at each stage of the screening process

Almost all sources were published within the past five years (i.e., since 2020; $n=16$). The author(s) employed primarily quantitative ($n=6$), primarily qualitative ($n=10$), and mixed methods ($n=2$). All theses utilised solely qualitative methods.

Participant Characteristics

Twelve of the sources focused on collecting data from one participant population, with six sources primarily collecting their data from young people directly, and a further six primarily collecting their data from caregivers. Three sources included young people and their caregivers in the data collection. The final three sources collected a triad of information by interviewing the young person, their parent, and another significant adult (e.g., teacher, psychologist) (Gray et al., 2023; Menzies, 2013; O'Hagan et al., 2024).

Across all 18 sources, data were reported for 2,418 young people. Participants per source ranged from just two young people (e.g., Want, 2020) to 1,076 young people (e.g.,

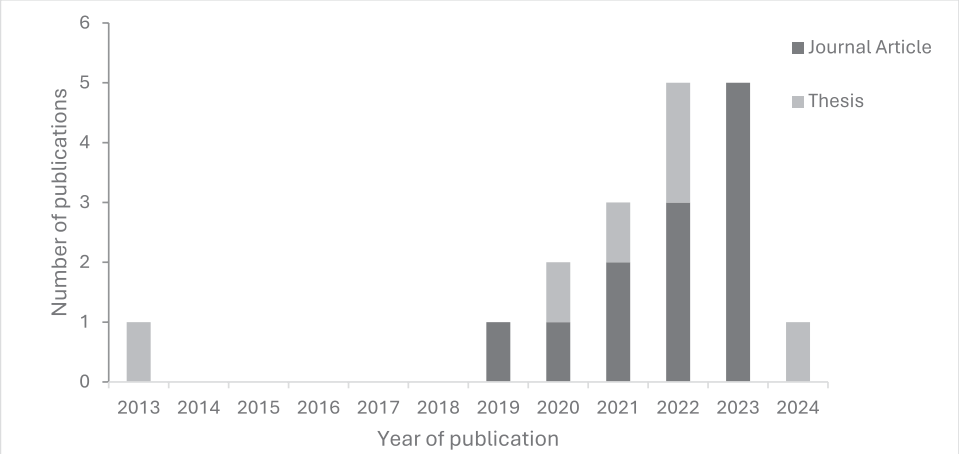


Fig. 2 Journal article and thesis publications by year

Totsika et al., 2024). Gender was reported for 1,761 (73%) of the participants. For the sources that reported gender, males were disproportionately represented (87%) compared to females (13%). One participant identified as non-binary, while two chose not to disclose their gender. Four of the sources did not provide comprehensive gender data and instead only stated participant numbers for one gender (e.g., Adams et al., 2022; Granieri et al., 2023; McClemont et al., 2021; Totsika et al., 2024), the gender of the remaining participants was not assumed and therefore not included in the above data. Only one study reported gender outside of the dichotomy of male and female (Fielding et al., 2024). Granieri et al. (2023) did report that 10% of their participants were LGBTQIA+but provided no further information on whether this pertained to gender identity or sexual orientation. Ethnicity data were inconsistently reported; only eight sources (44%) recorded the ethnicity of their participants, providing ethnicity data for just 58% of all participants (Table 2). One study (Granieri et al., 2023) reported 168 or 33% of their participants were BIPOC, requiring the reader to infer the ethnicity of the remaining participants.

Table 2 Ethnicity of participating young people

Ethnicity	Number of participants
White / White British	1,096
BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)	168
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups	66
Asian or Asian British	29
Hispanic	23
Other	14
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	8
American Indian / Alaska native	3
Asian / Pacific Islander	2
Black / African American	2
White Irish	2
Iraqi British	1

The terms reported in Table 2 use the exact language and groupings provided in the sources

Neurodiversity

Table 3 includes the primary and co-occurring diagnoses of the participants. Eight of the 18 included sources did not report on co-occurring diagnoses; the remaining 10 reported a range of co-occurring neurodevelopmental and mental health diagnoses. For ease of interpretation, all anxiety disorders (e.g., obsessive–compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety, and mutism) are collapsed into one construct, and depression and mood disorder are reported as a second mental health construct in this review. ASD accounted for more than half of the primary diagnosis (52.42%), followed by ADHD (16.17%) and intellectual disability; ID, 12.48%). The most common co-occurring diagnosis was anxiety, reported in 163 cases, and depression, reported in 99 cases. In all but one source (e.g., Ochi et al., 2020), the diagnosis was parent-reported, and in some sources, confirmed by a medical professional (e.g., Bitsika et al., 2021) or revision of medical information (e.g., Goodall, 2019).

All 18 sources required formal diagnosis for inclusion, be it a report provided and/or confirmed by a medical professional or parent report, with minor exceptions in Fielding et al. (2024), who included eight participants in the process of gaining a diagnosis and Gray et al. (2023) who included one participant without a formal autism diagnosis. Fourteen sources had specific diagnoses that were the focus of their research, 13 of which were ASD, and the remaining one was dyslexia. Four sources included 'neurodivergent' participants, capturing a broader range of diagnosis (Bodycote, 2022; Fielding, 2024; Granieri et al., 2023; Totsika et al., 2024). Lastly, Want (2020) did not focus on neurodivergent young people, yet both of their participants were neurodivergent (e.g., ASD and ODD and, ASD and ADHD).

Table 3 Reported primary and co-occurring diagnoses

Diagnosis	Reported as primary diagnosis	Reported as secondary diagnosis
Autism	52.42% (1731)	4.85% (23)
ADHD	16.17% (534)	14.98% (71)
ID	12.48% (412)	1.90% (9)
Communication / speech disorders	7.42% (245)	7.17% (34)
Specific Learning Disorder	6.30% (208)	2.74% (11)
Motor disorders / Dyspraxia	2.94% (97)	3.80% (18)
Cerebral palsy	0.70% (23)	-
Dyslexia	0.70% (23)	1.27% (6)
FASD	0.42% (14)	-
SPD / APD	0.18% (6)	2.74% (13)
Tourette's syndrome / Tic disorder	0.09% (3)	1.05% (5)
PDA	0.06% (2)	0.21% (1)
Gifted	0.06% (2)	-
ODD	0.03% (1)	-
Brain Injury	0.03% (1)	0.21% (1)
Anxiety disorder(s)	-	34.39% (163)
Depression	-	20.89% (99)
Disruptive behavior disorder	-	2.11% (10)
Other mental health condition	-	1.48% (7)

PDA = Pathological demand avoidance, ODD = Oppositional defiant disorder. In many cases it was not clear if more than one primary diagnosis was provided for each participant. Therefore, all diagnoses were input as independent data. For example, Totsika et al. (2024) reported the number of times each diagnosis was reported as a primary diagnosis (e.g., ASD, ADHD, ID), but when added together these numbers exceeded the total number of participants, indicating there were several participants with multiple primary diagnosis

School Refusal

School refusal was the most used term employed in 12 sources. A range of other terms were used interchangeably, including school distress ($n=1$), emotional based school non-attendance ($n=1$), emotionally based school avoidance ($n=2$), school non-attendance ($n=1$) school attendance problems ($n=1$). All but two of the journal articles used the term school refusal, while all but two theses used a term other than school refusal. Nine sources did not provide definition or inclusion criteria for school refusal, while the remaining nine provided a range of definitions. Examples of these included one instance of asking to stay home (e.g., Bitsika et al., 2021), more than 30 days per year of absence due to school refusal (e.g., Ochi, 2020), and the young person identifying that attending school is difficult due to emotional reasons (e.g., Higgins, 2022). The terminology used is in Table 4.

Methods of Included Sources

The methods and modalities of data collection varied widely. Five sources were quantitative and involved the caregivers and/or young person completing questionnaires and rating scales (e.g., Bitsika et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Granieri et al., 2023; McClemont et al., 2021) or retrospectively evaluating referral information (e.g., Ochi et al., 2020). All five sources investigated the relationship between bullying and school refusal or found bullying to be the only significantly correlated variable in their research.

The remaining 12 sources (See Table 4) used one or a combination of three modalities: 1:1 interview, sorting tasks, and the 'draw my ideal school' task. Semi-structured and formal interviews were the dominant tool for the qualitative sources. These were delivered in different and creative ways. Bodycote (2022) employed email interviews, which they argued provided the caregivers (their interviewees) time to provide thoughtful and rich responses to the question prompts provided by the researcher. Reed (2021) used parent-mediated interviews, in which parents interviewed their own children. They argued that parents (or caregivers) would acquire more authentic and honest responses from their young person than the researcher. Sorting activities and the 'draw my ideal school' task were used to compliment or guide semi-structured interviews. For example, Menzies (2013) used 'card sort' exercises to guide question-asking throughout the interview.

Contextual Factors

Five sources (Bitsika et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b; McClemont et al., 2021; Ochi et al., 2020) explored the relationship between bullying as a specific factor contributing to school refusal, while a further source (Granieri et al., 2023) explored a range of variables but only found bullying as a significant barrier. Five of these six sources accounted for all the quantitative publications in this review.

Of the remaining 12 sources not focused on bullying, three (Goodall, 2019; Menzies, 2013; Wilmot et al., 2023) explored the educational experiences of neurodivergent young people. In the exploration, school refusal was cited as an outcome for some participants. The remaining nine sources (Adams et al., 2022; Bodycote, 2022; Fielding et al., 2024; Gray et al., 2023, Higgins, 2022; O'Hagan et al., 2024; Reed, 2021; Totsika et al., 2024; Want, 2020) used a range of qualitative and mixed methods specifically to gain an in-depth understanding of the educational experiences of neurodivergent young people who engaged is school refusal.

The most common factor identified in the sources was sensory input, specifically sensory overwhelm. Similarly, peer relationships were identified as a barrier to school attendance; this included victimization, peer conflict, and/or lack of close friendships. Participants also mentioned teacher relationships and school ethos as barriers, this included punitive consequences for behaviors, lack of understanding of

Table 4 Individual source methods and summary of findings

Source	Definition of school refusal	Data collection method	Summarized barriers or factors
Adams et al. (2022)	Parents completed the school refusal assessment scale revised—parent version (SRAS-R-P)	Mixed methods: Parents completed a questionnaire including multi-choice and open-ended questions	Sensory/school environment, school knowledge of autism and child-teacher relationship, academic demands (too high or low), available supports and how safe the child feels at school, bullying and social issues
Bodycote (2022) [a]	Parents were members of a Facebook group 'Not Fine in School' – a support group for parents of children experiencing significant school attendance difficulties	Qualitative: Parents completed email interviews	Sensory overwhelm, bullying, 'school climate' (e.g., academic pressure, punitive responses)
Bitsika et al. (2021)	Young people were asked whether they asked their parents if they could stay home from school the next day because of being bullied	Quantitative: Young people completed screening questionnaires and rating scales	Bullying
Bitsika et al. (2022a)	Young people were asked whether they asked their parents if they could stay home from school the next day because of being bullied	Quantitative: Young people completed screening questionnaires and rating scales	Bullying
Bitsika et al. (2022b)	Young people were asked whether they asked their parents if they could stay home from school the next day because of being bullied	Quantitative: Young people completed screening questionnaires and rating scales	Bullying
Fielding (2024) [a]	Six participants were 'long term absent', no further information is provided for the remaining 24 participants	Qualitative: Young people completed interviews	School environment, socialization, change, sensory overwhelm, lack of understanding/support
Goodall (2019)	Included in a quote in the results. "… which in turn resulted in school refusal" (p.22)	Qualitative: Young people completed interviews, 'Draw my ideal school' activity and statement sorting activities	Overwhelming environment, curriculum and homework, bullying, unsupportive teachers
Granieri et al. (2023)	Parents were asked to report frequency of school refusal in the past year on 1 – 7 Likert scale		
Gray et al. (2023)	"… persistent, problematic attendance and experience of leaving a mainstream setting due to unmet needs" (p. 3)	Qualitative: Young people, caregivers, a member of school staff and local authority professionals completed their own interviews	Academic (e.g., homework), social (e.g., bullying, peer conflict) and sensory (e.g., loud classrooms, bright lights) overwhelm, teachers lack of understanding and support (e.g., disciplinary approaches to behaviour, lack of structure), use of restraint or unsafe practices
Higgins (2022) [a]	"Young person to identify themselves as finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons." (p. 67)	Qualitative: Young people completed interviews and 'Draw my ideal school' activity	Lack of control over day-to-day decisions, inflexible or rigid school context, poor peer and teacher relationships, uncomfortable school environment, lack of individualization
McClemont et al. (2021)	Parents were asked "Has your child ever refused to go to school due to bullying?"		
Menzies (2013) [a]	Included in a quote in the results. "I mean school refusal … he would try and avoid going to school" (p. 22)	Qualitative: Young people, caregivers, and a member of school staff completed interviews and card sort activities	Change in routine, environment and sensory overwhelm, academic expectations, social pressures, poor peer relationships
O'Hagan et al. (2024)	Must have a period of emotional-based school absence (EBSA) with a decrease in attendance. Missing 10% or more of possible sessions was used as a broad cut-off	Qualitative: Young people, caregivers, and a member of school staff completed interviews	Loud sensory environment, socialization, bullying, punitive consequences
Ochi et al. (2020)	According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) definition: more than 30 days per year	Quantitative: Review of historic records	Bullying
Reed (2021) [a]	"Participants need to be able to explain why they were unable to attend school so must have had a period of school refusal. The duration and time of that refusal is not important." (p. 140)	Qualitative: Parent–child interview	School environment (e.g., sensory environment, school curriculum), peer relationships (e.g., bullying, lack of friendships), teacher relationships (e.g., teacher understanding, being listened to and heard by teachers, teacher-student power dynamics)

Table 4 (continued)

Source	Definition of school refusal	Data collection method	Summarized barriers or factors
Totsika et al. (2024)	Parents completed the School Non-Attendance CheckKlist (SNACK) for one month for their child's attendance	Mixed methods: Parents completed a questionnaire including multi-choice and open-ended questions	Lack of differentiation and support, unresolved bullying, poor teacher relationships and understanding, sensory overwhelm, changes in routine
Want (2020) [a]	"Pupils who currently have missed 10% or more of their school sessions and have an emotional reason for their absence." (p. 66)	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews with caregivers and young people	Poor peer and teacher relationships, school policy and 'connectedness', academic expectations, lack of resources and accommodation, sensory overwhelm
Wilmot et al. (2023)	Included in a quote in the results. "expressed her view that her son's school refusal and lowering self-worth may be linked to…" (p. 46)	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews with caregivers and young people	Academic overwhelm (e.g., pace of the learning, content being taught, workload), poor teacher understanding

[a] Unpublished work (i.e., doctoral dissertation, Master's thesis or manuscript in preprint)

neurodivergence, and inflexibility by teachers and schools. Academic overwhelm was also cited by the interviewees as a contributing barrier to school attendance. A summary of the barriers identified in these sources is in Table 4.

Discussion

This scoping review is the first to provide an overview of research conducted to better understand the contextual variables contributing to school refusal for neurodivergent adolescents. We identified and reviewed 18 articles published between 2013 and 2024 and found that, except for one, all were published after 2019. These data reflect a rapid increase in interest in school refusal for neurodivergent youth and a shift in interest in the risk factors associated with school refusal from within-person (i.e., individual) to their environment. The included sources provide a gateway for further research to be conducted with neurodivergent young people, their caregivers, and schools to better understand school-related variables to change to foster attendance for this population.

Participant Characteristics – Whose Voice is Represented in the Existing Literature

The sources conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders (e.g., young people, caregivers, teachers, psychologists), each telling a different lived experience or sharing a unique perspective. As school refusal is a complex challenge affecting those across contexts (i.e., home and school), multiple perspectives should be sought. Interviewing young people, their support at home (e.g., caregivers), and their support at school (e.g., teachers) ensures a holistic understanding of the young person's experience of school refusal and reduces the likelihood of finger-pointing or attribution of blame to one stakeholder (Adams et al., 2022). Instead, this approach gains an understanding from all three parties actively involved in and invested in the young person's education, leading to more thorough understanding and effective intervention.

The sources included a range of diagnoses, but many were diagnosis-specific (e.g., just included autistic young people). Whether or not to focus on a specific diagnosis is determined by a range of factors such as author expertise and interest, participant sampling, and funding. However, to avoid under- or over-representing specific diagnosis (e.g., ASD), risking haphazard generalisation to the lived experiences of other neurodivergent young people, we encourage researchers to consider the inclusion of a broader range of neurodivergent young people in their research. A shift in research with neurodivergent young people, more broadly, adopting a transdiagnostic approach (Astle et al., 2022) is more congruent to the social model of disability or an approach that reduces blame on the individual (Allen et al., 2024) or assume homogeneity based on diagnosis By including a range of young people who have differences in the way they socialize, learn, and behave, we can better understand the unmet needs in classrooms, schools, and educational systems for a broader student population. Further, as research emerges suggesting the significant co-occurrence of neurodevelopmental diagnosis (e.g., ASD and ADHD; Connolly et al., 2023), a pattern that is also evident for the participants in the included sources of this review, it may become less appropriate or even possible for researchers to separate these diagnoses from one another. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to broaden their inclusion criteria to more accurately capture the diversity in the classroom today (Alcorn et al., 2024).

We found that males were disproportionately represented, and only one source reported gender outside of the dichotomy of male and female. These data present two issues. The first is the over-representation of male voices and lived experiences in the existing literature. The sources included in this review represented male participants on a ratio of approximately 6:1 compared to female participants. Comparative to the most conservative estimates of gender disparity in neurodiversity, this is an over-representation

of males, with more recent estimates suggesting the clinical ratios to be closer to 4:1 (Bougeard et al., 2024). Second, 17 sources reported statistics as a gender dichotomy (i.e., male and female) or just reported data for one gender, requiring readers to make assumptions about gender information for the remaining participants (e.g., McClemont et al., 2021). Poor reporting of gender is a significant oversight in research focused on neurodivergent adolescents as there is growing evidence that neurodivergent young people are more likely to be gender-nonconforming than their neurotypical peers (Glidden et al., 2016). Therefore, by providing gender information as binary, there is the potential to miss an entire portion of the participant's identity. This is especially important when considering the idiosyncratic lived experiences of young people with diverse intersecting identities. For example, the educational experience of gender diverse neurodivergent young people is likely to be further confounded due to increased susceptibility to harassment and violence from peers (Wyss, 2004). Therefore, research focusing on neurodivergent populations should strive to be inclusive of gender identities to ensure intersecting identities are accurately reported and represented in literature.

Similarly, there is poor and inconsistent reporting of ethnicity in the included sources, with over half of the sources not including ethnicity information in their research. Of the sources that did include ethnicity data, it was unclear in most cases how this information was collected (e.g., self-report, parent-report), if the participants had the option to select more than one ethnicity, and/or the results required the reader to infer information about ethnicity. Poor reporting of ethnicity is an ongoing concern in education research, and researchers have been urged to be more intentional in reporting this in their publications (Gaias et al., 2020) and strive for culturally responsive research (Trainor & Bal., 2014). Specific to the sources in this review, many elements may be influenced by the culture of participants (both ethnicity and the country that someone is attending school), including the perceptions of neurodiversity (Cascio, 2015), perceptions of mental health (Young Minds, 2023), inequities in health and education systems (Shim et al., 2018) and what it means to belong in school (Bolton, 2017). Therefore, ethnicity, as a key characteristic of the participant's identity, should be considered and carefully reported, particularly when understanding and generalizing the findings of the sources included in this review.

Research Methods – How Has the Information Been Sourced

The authors in the included sources employed various methods to collect data. The six solely quantitative sources focused on specific school refusal correlates and found bullying the strongest predictor. The remaining 12 sources utilized a structured or semi-structured interview to elicit data. Notably, interviews in the included sources were conducted in various novel ways, including email interviews, parent-mediated interviews (parents interviewed their own children), card-sorting techniques, and drawing tasks. The variety of strategies used to collect qualitative data demonstrates the researchers understanding of novel methods that enhance youth participation and engagement, particularly among seldom-heard groups (Lewis et al., 2024). Future research should consider co-design and participatory methods in research development to further engage young people. Participatory methods allow marginalized groups more autonomy over how research is designed and implemented and the data analyzed (Freire et al., 2022). Alternatively, to promote youth engagement and autonomy, researchers should consider offering young people choices among the data collection methods, such as how the interviews are conducted, where they are conducted and who is present for the interview.

Variability in Language – What is Reported in the Existing Literature

While not directly pertinent to the objectives of the current review, variability in the language used when discussing, defining and conceptualizing school refusal is both a clinical and research challenge, and added considerable complexity to conducting this review. Aligned with previous research (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2003, 2008), the results of this review indicate that this area of research has significant inconsistencies in language used and definitions or parameters placed around school refusal as a concept (e.g., what constitutes school refusal for a specific study). Some examples from the 18 included articles are asking to stay home from school on one occasion (e.g., Bitsika et al., 2021; McClemont et al., 2021), parents reporting school non-attendance across the past year (e.g., Granieri et al., 2023), or parents self-identifying that their child as a 'school refuser' via their alignment with support groups on Facebook (e.g., Bodycote, 2022). Authors repeatedly reported this as a limitation to their work (e.g., Bitsika et al., 2022a, 2022b; Heyne et al., 2019). The inconsistencies in defining school refusal complicates synthesizing the literature. For example, the implications, causes and potential treatments of requesting to stay home on one occasion will likely differ for those who have missed a large proportion of school across weeks or months. Providing a definition that binds school refusal to a period (e.g., days or weeks) returns the focus to the form of the behavior (i.e., its presentation). In line with Heyne (2019), we argue that understanding the function or motivation for the behavior (e.g., why a young

person does not or cannot attend school) will lead to the most appropriate support for positive behavioral change. Thus, future researchers and clinicians should be informed not just by what the behavior looks like (e.g., number of days off, reporting of psychosomatic symptoms) but also by what might motivate these behaviors (e.g., bullying, teacher-student relationships).

Similarly, the terms used to describe school refusal also varied. Although *school refusal* was adopted for this review, and the most used term in the included sources, other terms such as school distress, emotional-based school non-attendance, school attendance problems, and emotionally based school avoidance were also used. This reflects varied language used in both research and clinical contexts, where a range of terms have been used interchangeably with school refusal both before and after Kearney and Silverman's (1996) distinction. This variability reflects the cross-contextual nature of the challenge, which spans schools, homes, and mental health services. Different disciplines draw on their own theoretical frameworks, which shapes their preferred terminology. For example, the education sector may favor terms such as school non-attendance or school avoidance, reflecting established attendance-reporting practices. In contrast, parents and young people often prefer school distress or emotionally based school nonattendance which shifts the focus away from individual blame (Connolly et al., 2022) and highlights the emotional component of their non-attendance (Square Peg, 2021).For the purposes of this review, the term school refusal was employed, albeit critically and intentionally. While school refusal is often perceived as attributing blame to the student and implying choice, we argue that avoiding a context that does not meet one's needs or causes distress can instead be understood as an act of self-advocacy rather than pathology. Accordingly, this review uses the term school refusal to remain aligned with the existing literature and contribute to the existing school refusal literature, while simultaneously reframing its meaning.

Future researchers and clinicians are encouraged to examine the language they use critically and consider using terms such as 'school distress' or 'emotionally based school avoidance' to capture the young person's lived experience better, while removing perceived attribution of blame. Similarly, consistency within the education sector would ensure accurate coding and reporting of school refusal, increasing the likelihood of accurate prevalence estimates and monitoring of trends.

School-Based Factors

The literature included in this review contributes meaningfully to a socially significant concern, and the findings provide important insight into how schools support and improve accessibility for neurodivergent adolescents. The most common barriers identified in these sources were sensory overwhelm (e.g., loud and overwhelming classroom environments, unexpected changes) and poor peer relationships (e.g., bullying, social isolation). Also commonly reported were academic pressures, lack of individualization or accommodation provision, teacher-related factors (e.g., punitive styles, lack of neurodiverse-affirming practice, poor home-school relationship), poor resourcing and school ethos or policy (e.g., punishing school non-attendance).

The identification of these barriers supports environmental adjustments as a key intervention element when reintegrating young people back into mainstream education delivered alongside more individually focused interventions such as cognitive behavior therapy (Maynard et al., 2018). For example, if a young person reports that the primary barriers to their school attendance are that they are victims of bullying, requiring the young person to attend individual therapy sessions and acquire skills to 'cope' during the school day is only part of the solution. It would be more effective for schools to have more robust processes and policies to mitigate bullying, coupled with the young person acquiring skills to report bullying and conflict resolution skills. Similarly, if a young person reports sensory overwhelm or lack of teacher understanding, these are changes that need to occur outside of the individual young person, supplemented by teaching the young person additional skills (e.g., asking for a break) or introducing strategies to manage these stimuli (e.g., wearing headphones). Therefore, the responsibility is shared between young people, their families, teachers, schools, and policymakers.

Implications of this Review & Future Research

Several recommendations have already been provided for future research, including more diverse participant pools by both gender and neurodiversity identity, as the current sample over-represents the voices of autistic males. Additionally, further research should be done in a broader range of countries, specifically low- and middle-income countries, to represent the cultural nuances and factors experienced in educational systems outside of the UK, where most of this research has been conducted. Researchers must also be more intentional about recruiting diverse participants by ethnicity and deliberately sharing this information in publications. Gender, neurodivergence and ethnicity all play significant roles in the idiosyncratic experiences of young people due to the complexities of how these identities intersect and how the individual's needs may or may not be met by their school context.

Future research should share the experiences of school refusal from multiple perspectives while centering young people's voices. Just three sources in this current review included perspectives from young people, their support at home (e.g., caregivers), and their support at school (e.g., teachers). By collecting data from this triad of participants, all with unique perspectives, the challenges of school refusal can be understood more holistically. In addition, the methods employed in future research should consider integrating components to foster authentic engagement from young people. These could include utilizing choices in the research methods, a youth advisory group (e.g., Goodall, 2019) to help co-design the method, or participatory methods to actively involve young people throughout the research. Third, more consistent use of language would be beneficial to ensure the research has the desired impact and is recognized. We recommend being responsive to the populations for whom this research is intended to benefit, moving away from the term school refusal and towards more clinically accepted terms (e.g., 'School distress). Lastly, an evaluation of the efficacy of changing environmental stimuli that young people are identifying as aversive to school attendance would be beneficial. These data could promote or inform change in both policy and practice to ensure schools and/or teachers are providing responsive environments that are safe and affirming for the diverse student population in modern classrooms.

Considerations

While considerable efforts were made to ensure we captured all the existing literature, due to the inconsistencies in the terminology used for school refusal and complexities in defining neurodiversity, we may have missed some literature. Similarly, because six sources included in this review are unpublished research theses, representing a considerable proportion of the sources included, additional theses may not have been found during this search due to database access. Further, because the search was limited to English articles only, this may limit the cultural diversity, discussion, and nuance of varying cultural perspectives on non-attendance and neurodiversity.

This review aimed to understand what currently exists and inform the next steps of our research. Therefore, the research included in this review was not evaluated against any metrics or rubric to determine their robustness or quality; any sources that met the inclusion criteria were included in this review. Last, because the purpose of this scoping review was to provide an overview, we have synthesized the findings and conclusions from the included sources, potentially further oversimplifying the individual experiences and idiosyncratic responses provided by the participants in the included research.

Conclusions

The existing literature exploring the school-based contextual factors contributing to neurodivergent learners' school refusal behavior is rapidly emerging. Young people, caregivers, school personnel, and professionals have each contributed to this data through various methods, and the outcomes have affirmed the potential significance of making environmental adjustments when planning to mitigate school refusal or reintegration of a neurodivergent young person back into mainstream education. While there was variability across sources, there were general themes and recurring barriers identified by a range of participants with various diagnoses, suggesting there are barriers that are more universally impactful (such as sensory overwhelm and peer and teacher relationships) than others. The identified barriers can inform policy and practice around inclusive practice to ensure our neurodivergent learners are not only included in their school, as required by local governing bodies, but their environment is responsive to their needs.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this review are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this review are available on request from the corresponding author.

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