

Predicting risk of school refusal: Examining the incremental role of trait EI beyond personality and emotion regulation*

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Research has not yet been deepened in the link between personality factors and risk of school refusal. Furthermore, previous studies fail to verify the direct relation between trait EI and the risk of school refusal. The present study examined personality traits, emotion regulation and trait EI for the contributory role they may play in predicting the risk of school refusal. The sample consisted of 311 participants, 112 males (36%) and 199 females (64%) with an average age of 14.19 ($SD = .60$), from a high school in the city of Messina (Sicily, Italy). Results show that the risk of school refusal is positively related to *neuroticism* and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, while it is negatively related to the *extroversion*, *agreeableness* and *conscientiousness* and trait EI. Moreover, trait EI can be considered as a strong incremental negative predictor of risk of school refusal over and above personality traits and emotion regulation.

Keywords: School refusal, personality, emotion regulation, Trait Emotional Intelligence, adolescent students.

Highlights:

- School refusal risk is positively related to maladaptive regulation strategies
- School refusal risk is positively related to *neuroticism*
- *Extroversion* is negatively related to school refusal risk
- Trait EI is negative predictor of school refusal risk

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School refusal refers to the inability to cope with stress related to the school context. It is a complex and multidimensional construct. In fact, it can manifest itself in various ways: not attending school for an extended period; not being able to stay in class for a full day; skipping some of the lessons; being late to school (chronic slowness); going to school after so many quirks to induce parents not to send them. So school refusal affects both students who do not attend school for long periods and those who are rarely absent but attend school only because they are forced by their parents (Kearney & Albano, 2010; Sorrenti, Filippello, Orecchio, & Buzzai, 2016). Although truancy is a correlated construct of school refusal, several studies (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014) have shown that school refusal and truancy constitute different reasons for school non-attendance and should be considered two different and separate constructs. School refusal is a very broad construct that must be differentiated by other constructs such as truancy, school withdrawal, absenteeism, and school phobia (Kearney, 2008). School refusal differs from the other phenomena because it is usually characterized by strong anticipatory emotional distress towards attending school, parents' knowledge of the child staying at home during school hours and parents' commitment to making the child go to school (Berg, 1997; Maynard et al., 2015).

The literature shows that school refusal is related to both internalizing disorders, such as anxiety, fatigue, somatic complaints and depression, and to externalizing disorders, such as verbal and physical aggression, and escape from school and/or home (Heyne, King, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001; Kearney, 2008). However, the role of some individual variables, such as personality and emotional skills, has been overlooked. Consequently, it would be interesting to study the influence of these variables to increase knowledge about the problem of school refusal and to act in order to prevent and/or contain this problem. In fact, the literature shows that personality dimensions and emotional skills play an important role in an academic context (Bratko, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Saks, 2006; Filippello, Sorrenti, Buzzai, & Costa, 2016; Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2002; Gilles & Bailleux, 2001; Laidra, Pullman, & Allik, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012; Sorrenti, Filippello, Buzzai, Buttò, & Costa, 2017).

The role of personality in academic context

Kappe and van der Flier (2012) have shown that academic performance is significantly correlated with *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, and *openness to experience*. Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2003) show that personality factors are predictive of school success, as well as cognitive abilities. In particular, *conscientiousness*' effects on academic achievement are similar to those of intelligence (Poropat, 2009). Again, the literature states that *neuroticism* and *psychoticism* are negative predictors of academic performance, while *extroversion* is positively associated with academic success (Qualter, Gardner, Pope, Hutchinson, & Whiteley, 2012).

Notwithstanding the extensive research on the role of personality in academic performance and socio-emotional adjustment at school, research has not yet deepened the link between personality factors and school refusal. Lounsbury, Steel, Loveland, and Gibson (2004) showed that *openness*, *conscientiousness*, and *emotional stability* were negatively related to school absences. Similarly, Petrides, Chamorro-Premuzic, Frederickson, and Furnham (2005) have shown that extraversion and psychoticism predicted absenteeism, truancy, and exclusions from school, suggesting a possible relationship between some personality traits and school refusal. However, a direct association with school refusal was not tested.

Emotional skills and academic competence

Emotional knowledge is positively related to academic competence, while poor emotional competence is linked to school difficulties and academic underachievement (Qualter et al., 2012). In the emotional domain, a construct that is highly relevant to well-being and mental health is the trait emotional intelligence (EI) (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). Trait EI refers to a set of behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007) concerning one's ability to recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information, depending on the context and personal differences (Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015). Furthermore, trait EI refers to a person's perception of their emotional skills; for this reason, trait EI was described as 'trait emotional self-efficacy' and has been shown to be extremely relevant for academic performance and success (Mavroveli, & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011; Qualter et al., 2012). Trait EI has been conceptually distinct from ability EI. Ability EI is described as a series of emotion-related cognitive abilities that imply the capacity to perceive, express, understand and regulate emotions. Particularly, Emotion regulation (ER) represents the cognitive strategies by which individuals effectively manage emotions and the processes that persons could use to modify the trajectory of intensity, quality, and/or other components of an emotional response (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015).

Trait EI and ability EI are two distinct constructs that do not correlate much with each other (Joseph & Newman, 2010) and that have different associations with several outcomes that may reflect different mechanisms (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Qualter, Barlow, & Stylianou, 2011; Van Rooy, Viswesvaran, & Pluta, 2005). In our study, the focus is on trait EI, that could be a determinant of the choice of emotional regulation strategy (Hughes & Evans, 2016). Graziano, Reavis, Keane, and Calkins (2007) have shown that emotion regulation strategies contribute directly to children's academic competence because they are more able to control their attention and behaviors when attempting to learn and focus in the classroom (Blair, 2002; Eisenberg, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2005). Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham (2004) showed that high trait EI is negatively related to deviant behavior, such as truancy and unruliness that may result in exclusions (suspensions due to

serious breaches of school discipline), which may be predictive of adolescent maladjustment. Despite this evidence in the literature, the relationship between emotional aspects and school refusal has not been highlighted (Hughes, Gullone, Dudley, & Tonge, 2010). Because of the strong association between school refusal and emotional disturbance, particularly anxiety (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Spear, 2014), it could be useful to deepen in particular the relationship between the emotional functioning of students and the risk of developing school refusal.

School refusal mainly involves negative experience and emotions in attending school (Kearney, 2008) and, consequently, trait EI could be a relevant variable to help students deal with emotional difficulties and stress experiences at school. The strong impact of emotional difficulties in the definition of school refusal and the evidence of the role of trait EI on truancy provided by Petrides and coll. (2004) provide enough justification to test the relation between trait EI and school refusal. Furthermore, in accordance with previous studies (Andrei, Mancini, Mazzoni, Russo, & Baldaro, 2015; Martins et al., 2010; Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham, & Frederickson, 2006), it is relevant to verify the incremental validity of the trait EI over and above personality and other relevant constructs. Trait EI, in fact, captures individual differences in emotion regulation, demonstrating the incremental validity to predict several outcomes over and above the five-factor model of personality and emotion regulation strategies in many studies (Andrei et al., 2015). Although a growing body of evidence showed the incremental validity of trait EI in predicting several criteria (Andrei, Siegling, Aloe, Baldaro & Petrides, 2016), the necessity to verify the contribution of trait EI over and above existing personality traits and other emotion-correlated construct is compelling in the school context (Mavroveli, Petrides, Shove, & Whitehead, 2008; Siegling, Vesely, Saklofske, Frederickson, & Petrides, 2015). The usefulness of incremental validity is to explore the impact of a construct to account for additional variance in relevant criteria over and above theoretically similar constructs. Because trait EI is a lower order personality trait, it shares proportions of variance with the Big Five personality taxonomy (Petrides, Perez-Gonzalez, & Furnham, 2007) and should provide an incremental contribution to emotionally laden criteria (e.g. school refusal). Furthermore, emotion regulation strategies represent typical responses to emotional aspects and for this reason share a lot of variances with trait EI. However, despite some overlap, emotion regulation strategies and Trait EI may play separate roles in the prediction of outcomes and, generally, trait EI should be able to moderate the choice of the numerous emotion regulation strategies. For this reason and to prove that trait EI would not be redundant with existing emotional effectiveness constructs (Andrei et al., 2016), it should be indispensable for trait EI to explain the variance of incremental criteria not accounted for by other relevant and similar constructs. This could be relevant because it could provide evidence of the significant role of trait EI and suggest a focus on the emotional domain of personality in the definition and organization of intervention and preventive programs at school.

The present study

The influence of the Big Five personality factors, the emotional regulation and trait EI on school variables, the importance of exploring the incremental validity of the trait EI over and above the other constructs in the school context, and the strong presence of emotional distress towards attending school at the base of school refusal give further and sufficient reasons to investigate the construct's impact on the risk of school refusal behavior. To provide a stringent approach to test incremental validity in predicting school refusal, it was hypothesized that personality traits would predict school refusal components and that emotional regulation strategies, focusing specifically on utilizing emotion-laden information, would explain additional variance to the criteria. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that trait EI would be a strong predictor of school refusal criteria, both in the presence of Big Five personality traits and in the presence of the emotion regulation strategies. Finally, we hypothesize that gender differences exist. In fact, research has found that most of the gender differences that are observed in adulthood have already developed by adolescence (De Bolle et al., 2015).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 311 participants, 112 males (36%) and 199 females (64%) with an average age of 14.19 ($SD = .60$). Participants were from a high school in the city of Messina (Sicily, Italy). All participants had the Italian nationality and were Italian-speaking.

Measures

The *School Refusal Behavior Scale-Revised – SRAS* (Rigante & Patrizi, 2007) was used for the evaluation of a student's risk of school refusal behavior. This consists of 24 items rated on a 7 Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). The scale measures 4 dimensions such as: *avoidance* of negative affectivity-provoking stimuli (e.g., "How often do you have trouble going to school because you are afraid of something in the school building, for example the teacher, school bus, etc.?"); *escape* from aversive social or evaluative situations (e.g., "Do you have trouble speaking with the other kids at school?"); *attention-getting* behavior (e.g., "Do you often do things to upset or annoy your family?"); positive tangible reinforcement/*gratification* (e.g. "Do you ever skip school because it's more fun to be out of school?"). Scale scores were computed as the means of items. The range had a minimum value of 0 a maximum of 6 (absence / presence of the specific reason which may induce school refusal). The reliability and validity of this scale have been documented in different languages including the Italian language (Kearney & Albano, 2010; Rigante & Patrizi, 2007; Sorrenti et al., 2016).

The *Big Five Inventory (BFI)* is a 44-item scale that measures the Big Five personality factors using short phrases (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The BFI items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always) and are assigned to five scales measuring *extroversion* (E; 8 items), *agreeableness* (A; 9 items), *conscientiousness* (C; 9 items), *neuroticism* (N; 8 items), and *openness to experience* (O; 10 items). This instrument was widely used in several studies in an Italian context (Fossati, Borroni, Marchione, & Maffei, 2011).

The *Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue–SF)*; Petrides, 2009) consists of 30 items with a Likert-style response option format, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) designed to measure global trait emotional intelligence (e.g., “I’m usually able to influence the way other people feel.”). The reliability and validity of the TEIQue have been documented in different countries (Banjac, Hull, Petrides, & Mavroveli, 2016; Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, Larcan, & Petrides, 2015; Petrides, 2009).

The *Cognitive Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ)*; Garnefski, Teerds, Kraaij, Legerstee, & van den Kommer, 2004) is a 36-item questionnaire calculated on a 5-point Likert scale varying from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always) that consists of nine subscales (*self-blame, blame of others, rumination, catastrophizing, putting into perspective, positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, acceptance, and planning*), each consisting of four items. The reliability and validity of this scale have been documented in different languages, including Italian (Garnefski et al., 2004; Presaghi & Ercolani, 2005).

Procedure

This study received ethical approval and was performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki as revised in 2013. Only participants whose parents had provided informed consent took part in the study. Each student was individually tested and informed about the procedure of the study. Students completed the questionnaire in their classrooms during school hours in a single session. All the students responded to the same questionnaire packet. Participation required between 30 and 50 min.

Data analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted for all the variables of the study (Cronbach’s alpha, means, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) in the total sample and in gender groups. Pearson correlations were conducted, and univariate (ANOVA) and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were conducted for all the variables considered to assess gender differences.

In order to test the incremental validity of trait EI on the risk of school refusal, we performed hierarchical multiple regressions and they were as well conducted, separately, for the four functional dimensions (dependent variable). To explore the prediction role of gender and personality traits, the gender and the five dimensions of personality were entered in block 1 of the regression. To account for the emotion-laden information of the criteria, the nine dimensions of emotion regulations were entered in step 2. In the third and final step of the model, the trait EI score was entered to verify the incremental role of trait EI after controlling for the effect a competing set of variables that shared the conceptualization of trait dimension and the focus on emotion-related aspects.

Results

Table 1 shows the Cronbach’s alpha, means, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis values for all the variables under investigation for the total sample and for gender group. The descriptive analysis showed that all scales have good scores of symmetry and kurtosis (Table 1). The internal reliability of all the instruments ranged from 0.60 to 0.80. The MANOVA showed a significant multivariate main effect of gender in school refusal, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.95, $F(4, 306) = 4.01$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, with a significant effect for *avoidance*, $F(1, 309) = 4.29$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, with females reporting higher scores.

Another a significant multivariate main effect were found in *personality traits*, Wilks' Lambda = 0.85, $F(5, 305) = 10.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$, with a significant effect for *Extraversion*, $F(1,309) = 5.02, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$, with males reporting higher scores, while females reported higher levels of *neuroticism* $F(1,309) = 43.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$, and *Openness To Experience* $F(1,309) = 5.43, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$.

Regarding *Cognitive Emotional Regulation*, the MANOVA showed a significant multivariate main effect of gender Wilks' Lambda = 0.92, $F(9, 301) = 2.76, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .08$, with a significant effect for *ruminantion*, $F(1,309) = 5.48, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$, with females reporting higher scores.

Finally, the ANOVA showed a significant univariate main effect of gender in *Trait Emotional Intelligence*, $F(1,309) = 20.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$, with males reporting higher scores.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for total sample and gender group

	Total Sample					Male		Female	
	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Ku</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Avoidance	.76	2.30	1.21	.21	-.57	2.11	1.09	2.40	1.26
Escape	.66	1.22	.92	.69	-.27	1.18	.89	1.25	.94
Attention-getting	.78	2.15	1.20	.39	-.30	2.23	1.14	2.10	1.24
Gratification	.70	3.60	1.18	-.36	-.23	3.77	1.11	3.51	1.21
Extraversion	.66	3.40	.67	-.29	.05	3.51	.67	3.34	.67
Agreeableness	.63	3.60	.63	-.72	1.25	3.61	.56	3.59	.67
Conscientiousness	.71	3.29	.67	-.32	.00	3.38	.60	3.24	.70
Neuroticism	.65	3.15	.68	.20	-.50	2.83	.58	3.33	.67
Openness to Experience	.65	3.53	.59	-.07	-.38	3.43	.57	3.59	.59
Self-Blame	.60	2.42	.75	.37	-.28	2.43	.62	2.41	.82
Acceptance	.61	3.02	.80	.18	-.33	2.91	.82	3.08	.79
Rumination	.66	2.99	.86	-.02	-.44	2.81	.81	3.09	.87
Positive Refocusing	.76	2.88	1.02	.03	-.85	2.90	.99	2.87	1.04
Refocus On Planning	.64	3.27	.81	-.09	-.41	3.33	.75	3.23	.84
Positive Reappraisal	.60	3.39	.84	-.12	-.66	3.36	.81	3.41	.86
Putting nto Perspective	.60	3.09	.85	-.14	-.42	3.01	.77	3.14	.89
Catastrophizing	.62	2.41	.84	.35	-.46	2.44	.83	2.39	.85
Other-Blame	.63	2.27	.79	.61	-.01	2.36	.79	2.22	.79
Trait EI	.80	4.52	.70	.00	-.26	4.76	.67	4.39	.69

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha; *M* = mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *Sk* = skewness; *Ku* = kurtosis

Table 2 shows the correlations among the four functional dimensions of the School Refusal Behavior Scale (*avoidance, escape, attention-getting and gratification*), the five personality factors (*Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience*), the nine subscales of the CERQ (*self-blame, blame of others, rumination, catastrophizing, putting into perspective, positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, acceptance, and planning*), and trait EI.

Table 2
Correlation between variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
1 Avoidance																				
2 Escape	.52**																			
3 Attention Getting	.38**	.25**																		
4 Gratification	.32**	.04	.13*																	
5 Extraversion	-.18**	-.34**	-.05	.15**																
6 Agreeableness	-.16**	-.03	.07	-.06	.17**															
7 Conscientiousness	-.16**	-.10	.11	-.01	.31**	.42**														
8 Neuroticism	.22**	.15**	-.06	-.01	-.29**	-.11	-.25**													
9 Openness To Experience	.06	.04	.02	-.04	.12*	.21**	.22**	.02												
10 Self-Blame	.24**	.28**	.14*	.05	-.21**	-.07	-.18**	.27**	-.01											
11 Acceptance	.19**	.18**	.12*	.12*	-.18**	.02	.01	.22**	.15**	.36**										
12 Rumination	.32**	.25**	.08	.10	-.15**	.04	-.03	.43**	.18**	.42**	.41**									
13 Positive Refocusing	.02	.06	.17**	.12*	.12*	.13*	.11	-.16**	.18**	-.09	.00	.04								
14 Refocus On Planning	.11	.09	.19**	-.01	.06	.20**	.23**	.02	.30**	.16**	.24**	.36**	.40**							
15 Positive Reappraisal	.00	.06	.20**	.08	.13*	.25**	.22**	-.07	.27**	.12*	.20**	.21**	.43**	.44**						
16 Putting into Perspective	.06	.03	.17**	.03	.10	.18**	.06	.02	.19**	.10	.16**	.16**	.37**	.27**	.52**					
17 Catastrophizing	.33**	.22**	.15*	.12*	-.13*	-.04	-.08	.18**	-.06	.37**	.26**	.41**	.14*	.11	.14*	.11				
18 Other-Blame	.14*	.12*	.16**	.16**	-.03	-.16**	-.01	.06	.01	.17**	.14*	.19**	.19**	.12*	.07	.15**	.33**			
19 Trait EI	-.34**	-.29**	.01	.09	.32**	.36**	.48**	-.43**	.16**	-.27**	-.11*	-.28**	.16**	.13*	.20**	.13*	-.25**	.00		

Note. $N = 311$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Regression analyses

In the prediction of the *Avoidance* scale of School Refusal, entering trait EI in Block 3 there was a significant change in R^2 [F change $_{(1,294)} = 8.67$; $p < .01$, R^2 change = .02] and the model explained an additional 2% of the variance in avoidance, $F_{(16,294)} = 5.55$; $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .19$, with the *catastrophizing* maintaining a unique contribution and Trait EI providing additional unique contributions.

Regarding the *Escape* scale, when trait EI was entered into the in Block 3 of regression, there was a significant change in R^2 [F change $_{(1,294)} = 13.86$; $p < .001$, R^2 change = .04] and the model explained an additional 4% of the variance in the escape, $F_{(16,294)} = 5.54$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .19$, with the *Extraversion* and *self-blame* maintaining a unique contribution and Trait EI providing additional unique contributions.

In Block 3 of the regression with the *Attention-getting* scale as criteria, when trait EI was entered into the regression there was not a significant change in R^2 [F change $_{(1,294)} = 1.22$; $p > .05$, R^2 change = .00], explained 0% of the variance in the attention-getting.

In the prediction of the *Gratification* scale, when in Block 3 trait EI was entered into the regression, there was a significant change in R^2 [F change $_{(1,294)} = 4.41$; $p < .05$, R^2 change = .01] and the model explained an additional 1% of the variance in gratification, $F_{(16,294)} = 2.77$; $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .08$, with the *Extraversion*, *acceptance*, *refocus on planning* and *positive refocusing* maintaining a unique contribution and Trait EI providing additional unique contributions.

Table 3
Regression analyses on school refusal

	Avoidance		Escape		Attention-getting		Gratification	
	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β
1 step	$R^2 = .09$		$R^2 = .13$		$R^2 = .03$		$R^2 = .04$	
Gender	.49	.03	-.68	-.04	-.65	-.04	-1.82	-.11
Extraversion	-1.86	-.11	-5.72	-.33***	-1.85	-.11	2.93	.18***
Agreeableness	-1.99	-.12	.37	.02	.53	.03	-1.16	-.07
Conscientiousness	-.89	-.06	-.26	-.02	1.66	.11	-.25	-.02
Neuroticism	2.46	.15**	1.13	.07	-.70	-.04	1.11	.07
Openness	1.73	.10	1.51	.08	.22	.01	-.54	-.03
2 step	$R^2 = .21$ $\Delta R^2 = .12***$		$R^2 = .20$ $\Delta R^2 = .07**$		$R^2 = .11$ $\Delta R^2 = .09**$		$R^2 = .12$ $\Delta R^2 = .07**$	
Gender	1.23	.07	-.15	-.01	-.10	-.01	-1.95	-.12
Extraversion	-1.27	-.07	-5.17	-.30***	-1.72	-.10	3.36	.20***
Agreeableness	-2.18	-.13*	.35	.02	.24	.02	-.89	-.06
Conscientiousness	-.93	-.06	-.12	-.01	1.46	.10	-.43	-.03
Neuroticism	.24	.02	-.29	-.02	-1.07	-.07	.44	.03
Openness	1.32	.08	.93	.05	-.79	-.05	-1.09	-.07
Self-Blame	.60	.04	2.41	.15*	1.50	.10	-.25	-.02
Acceptance	.30	.02	.16	.01	.47	.03	2.40	.15*
Rumination	2.08	.15*	1.47	.11	-.79	-.06	1.46	.11
Positive Refocusing	-.09	-.01	1.28	.08	.72	.05	2.04	.14*
Refocus On Planning	1.15	.08	-.24	-.02	1.42	.10	-2.16	-.15*
Positive Reappraisal	-1.38	-.10	.17	.01	.99	.07	1.21	.09
Putting Into Perspective	.78	.05	-.48	-.03	1.13	.08	-1.09	-.07
Catastrophizing	3.83	.24***	1.10	.07	.95	.06	.18	.01
Other-Blame	-.10	-.01	.63	.04	1.55	.09	1.56	.10
3 step	$R^2 = .23$ $\Delta R^2 = .02**$		$R^2 = .23$ $\Delta R^2 = .04***$		$R^2 = .12$ $\Delta R^2 = .00$		$R^2 = .13$ $\Delta R^2 = .01*$	
Gender	.74	.04	-.77	-.04	-.28	-.02	-1.59	-.10
Extraversion	-1.04	-.06	-4.96	-.28***	-1.62	-.10	3.19	.19**
Agreeableness	-1.55	-.09	1.12	.07	.46	.03	-1.31	-.08
Conscientiousness	-.10	-.01	.91	.06	1.70	.12	-.99	-.07
Neuroticism	-.30	-.02	-.97	-.06	-1.26	-.09	.82	.06
Openness	1.53	.09	1.19	.07	-.72	-.04	-1.23	-.07
Self-Blame	.34	.02	2.12	.13*	1.39	.09	-.06	.00
Acceptance	.38	.02	.26	.02	.50	.03	2.36	.15*
Rumination	1.64	.12	.93	.07	-.95	-.07	1.76	.13
Positive Refocusing	-.09	-.01	1.31	.08	.72	.05	2.05	.14*
Refocus On Planning	1.26	.08	-.12	-.01	1.45	.10	-2.23	-.16*
Positive Reappraisal	-1.20	-.08	.43	.03	1.07	.08	1.07	.08
Putting Into Perspective	.99	.06	-.23	-.01	1.20	.08	-1.24	-.08
Catastrophizing	3.36	.21***	.51	.03	.76	.05	.52	.03
Other-Blame	.28	.02	1.11	.06	1.68	.10	1.29	.08
Trait EI	-2.94	-.20***	-3.72	-.26***	-1.11	-.08	2.10	.15*

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main study objectives were to examine the relationship between trait EI and risk of developing school refusal. We also found that trait EI can be considered as a strong incremental predictor of risk of school refusal over and above personality traits and emotion regulation.

First, our data shows that *avoidance* is negatively predicted by *agreeableness* and positively predicted by *neuroticism*. Agreeable individuals are more likely to be cooperative, kind, helpful, and willing to engage in prosocial behaviour (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997). This behaviour becomes more likely to occur when school attendance is regular and consistent (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Conversely, the tendency of students to experience unpleasant emotions and difficulty in controlling impulse and emotion represent a risk factor for peer acceptance and school maladjustment (Andrei et al., 2015). Consequently, they may predispose them to avoid school-related distress caused by known or unknown factors, such as feelings of embarrassment, rejection, or shame (Kearney, 2008). Furthermore, catastrophizing and rumination positively predicted avoidance. Students could catastrophize school situations to a level at which they are no longer comfortable going to school and, as a consequence, they could use avoidance strategies to cope with their discomfort (Haarman, 2011). Similarly, students that ruminate spend extensive amounts of time thinking about and analyzing their condition and this could promote a form of immobility in students that could lead them to avoid engaging in active problem solving and to avoidance strategies in general (Moulds, Kandris, Starr, & Wong, 2007). Furthermore, a relevant aspect is that Big Five effects (agreeableness and neuroticism) that are statistically significant in Step 1 lose their significance when trait EI has joined them as a predictor. These results are similar to previous studies that verify incremental validity of trait EI over personality traits (Andrei et al., 2016; Siegling et al., 2015). This could be explained by the fact that that trait EI is conceptualized as an emotional aspect of personality, distributed across the Big Five domains that show significant correlation with personality traits and that trait EI cover emotion-related variance that is not captured by the Big Five trait taxonomy (Siegling et al., 2015). Avoidance is the most emotional distress-based dimension of school refusal construct and it is reasonable that trait EI could play a primary and exclusive role in predicting a strong emotion-laden criteria.

With respect to the second function of school refusal, our results show that escape is predicted negatively by *extroversion*. The literature shows that individuals who are more introverted are more likely to engage in social withdrawal (Blackburn, 1979; Washington & Alcorn, 1978); therefore, these students might tend to escape from adverse social and/or evaluative situations, such as interactions with peers, group work, or classwork (Kearney, 2008), which are perceived as sources of anxiety. Furthermore, self-blame positively predicted escape. Previous studies (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001; Garnefski, Legerstee, Kraaij, van den Kommer, & Teerds, 2002; Legerstee,

Garnefski, Jellesma, Verhulst, & Utens, 2010) in general population samples have shown that this strategy, together with rumination and catastrophizing, is related to self-reported anxiety symptoms. Trait EI also negatively predicted escape, and this could be explained by the fact that a student can perceive and express emotions and use these qualities to manage the situation without escape from school problems.

Finally, our data show that *gratification* was predicted positively by *extroversion*. This unexpected result may be explained by the fact that this last function of school refusal is less linked to anxiety than the other three, but as well as boredom associated with staying in class (Kearney, 2008). Thus, even extroverted students can search for tangible rewards outside the school, such as watching television, playing video games or spending time with friends (Kearney, 2008). Furthermore, acceptance was positively predictive of *gratification* while refocus on planning was negatively associated with it. Despite the fact that acceptance is a peculiar maladaptive coping strategy of adolescents with anxiety disorders (Legerstee et al., 2010), these results can also be explained by the role played by the pursuit of tangible reinforcements outside the school setting.

An interesting result is the positive prediction of the trait EI with *gratification*. This relation could be explained by the fact that, controlling for other variables, those students with high trait EI may also manipulate the situation to pursue goals and to obtain larger distant rewards temporarily. However, given that the zero-order correlation between trait EI and gratification was not significant, the significant positive regression coefficient for trait EI may be the result of a suppression effect and should be interpreted with caution.

Criterion variance explained in the incremental effects of trait EI ranged from 0.3% to 4% and it is similar to previous studies that used the TeiQUE-SF after controlling for Big Five and emotionally related similar constructs (Siegling et al., 2015). Furthermore, results from the present study suggest that trait EI is a stronger negative predictor of *avoidance*, *escape* and *gratification* than the higher order personality traits covered by the Big Five model and emotion regulation. With respect to the behaviors of *avoidance* and *escape*, our findings are in line with previous studies that have shown that low trait EI students tend to have more unauthorized absences and are more likely to have been expelled from school due to rule violations, in comparison with their high trait EI peers (Mavroveli, Petrides, Sangareau, & Furnham, 2009; Petrides et al., 2004). School refusal is a construct in which emotional distress plays a primary role and for this reason it is reasonable to expect that trait EI provides a major and incremental contribution with respect to Big Five personality factors.

The findings of this study should be viewed within the context of its limitations. First, our study is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the data, which makes it impossible to identify the causal order of these variables. Second, self-report scales were used to measure the study variables, and behavioral data (on absenteeism, truancy, exclusions, etc.) have not been collected. Although school refusal refers predominantly to the emotional distress towards attending a school that could be measured by self-report, future studies should try to

combine self-report with school behavioural data to provide a broader theoretical and explanatory framework of the problem. Another limitation to take into consideration is that although the level of reliability could be acceptable some scales of CERQ have quite a low level of reliability. This could be due to the fact that major studies that use the CERQ were based on adults, and studies that used this questionnaire with adolescents sometimes showed lower levels of reliability in some scales than adults (Auerbach, Claro, Abela, Zhu, & Yao, 2010; d'Acremont, & Van der Linden, 2007; Garnefski, Koopman, Kraaij, & ten Cate, 2009). In addition, the sample contained only one age level, making these findings limited in terms of generalizations. A wider variety of samples differing in such features as culture, location, and type or size of school should be studied in the future. Furthermore, additional variables of individual differences such as learning styles, academic motivation and academic performance could also be analyzed.

Despite the limitations, the results of this study have educational implications, in preventive point of view, for the promotion of the psychological well-being of students. The most important considerations concern the role of personality and, in particular, emotional skills at the risk of school refusal. Emotion regulation strategies could be taught to all students and, in particular, to those who have lower level of trait EI that have more difficulty in coping with the challenging situations that school requires. Therefore, it would be appropriate to structure training targeted at helping these students face the situations they perceive as stressful.

Furthermore, trait EI seems to have a relevant role in reducing avoidance. Trait EI can help students deal with school problems, and the ability to manage emotions, in fact, could help to focus on problems and try to find solutions and reduce the risk of using avoidance behaviors of frustrating situations (Petrides et al., 2004). In fact, in many studies (Filippello, Harrington, Buzzai, Sorrenti, & Costa, 2014; Filippello, Larcán, Sorrenti, Buzzai, Orecchio, & Costa, 2017; Filippello, Sorrenti, Buzzai, & Costa, 2015; Sorrenti, Filippello, Buzzai, & Costa, 2015a; Sorrenti, Filippello, Buzzai, & Costa, 2015b) the negative role of frustration on academic performance has been found because it is often related to feelings of helplessness which, in turn, negatively affects the psychological well-being of students.

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