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Test Anxiety in the Classroom
How Educators Can Help Their Students

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Definition

Test Anxiety usually occurs when a student has to take a test. There are two forms of test anxiety: trait and state anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to anxiety that is present in most circumstances and is not caused by a specific event or setting. State anxiety is usually associated with test anxiety. It is possible for students to have both trait and state anxiety

Glossary

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Case study

Maria is a 13 year-old female. She is a diligent student. During tests, Maria appears nauseated and seems to have sweaty palms. She complains of a stomachache and frequently leaves the classroom to use the bathroom during tests. Maria's teachers have noticed that her grades are declining. Maria's parents expect her to graduate high school with high grades and get admitted to a prestigious college. Maria is increasingly becoming more preoccupied with her academic performance. Maria feels she is an inferior student and that her friends who are doing better than her will think she is stupid. She fears there is nothing she can do to bring up her grades.

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. Does test anxiety exist for specific subjects?

Test anxiety has been shown among a range of subjects such as Science, French, Social Studies, Math and English.

2. Does test anxiety decrease with age?

Studies have shown that test anxiety increases with age, as students are exposed to performance based tests

3. Does test anxiety vary between boys and girls?

Research suggest that test anxiety is higher for females than males, but cautions that this maybe biased since girls are more willing to report anxiety than boys. There is also conflicting research indicating that test anxiety is equal among boys and girls

4. Does test anxiety affect classroom assignments?

Research suggests that test anxiety does not affect classroom assignments, essays or reports. It is believed that, it is the characteristics of a test that may affect anxiety level. Students are generally less anxious during tests that carry a low percentage of final grade than tests that carry a high percentage of final grade. One can infer from this that it might

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be beneficial to school leaders to incorporate other forms of evaluation students in determining students' abilities.

Returning to Case Study

Maria's teacher, spoke to her and the school psychologist. They had a meeting with Maria, her teacher and with her parents in which they devised techniques to help reduce her anxiety. The information in the meeting was shared with her IEP team and was subsequently included in her IEP report. Maria is now implementing the techniques discussed in the meeting, and her grades have improved

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever encountered a student like Maria who is preoccupied with thoughts about academic performance?
2. How can students be encouraged academically without imposing high expectation upon them which may serve to increase anxiety?

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Study Session:

The study session is intended to assist students with their study skills and to foster feelings of preparedness for upcoming tests. The following are a few suggestions from Salend, S.J. (2011) Addressing test anxiety.

Teaching Exceptional Children, 44, 55-68 and Wachelka, D., & Katz, R. C. (1999). Reducing test anxiety and improving academic self-esteem in high school and college students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 30, 191-198.*

- ❖ Set aside a certain amount of time each day to study. It should be early study session so to identify difficult material that may require help from teachers for additional clarification and instruction
- ❖ Set specific goal such as what areas are going to be covered during study session
- ❖ Have necessary study aids and materials (index cards, writing instruments, scratch paper)
- ❖ Create an outline of main points from textbooks, notes, quizzes, classroom and homework assignments and handouts, relating to the areas agreed to be covered in study session

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- ❖ Create flash cards and mnemonic devices for key terms and formulas
- ❖ Associate the completion of study assignments with enjoyable activities.

Once specific assignments are completed, reward yourself

- ❖ Study alone.
- ❖ Study in a group only to review material already learned.
- ❖ Study one subject for at least 45 min.
- ❖ Avoid skipping to different subjects.

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Annotated Bibliography

Huberty, T.J. (2010) Test and performance anxiety. Good Communication and support can help minimize its negative impact. *Principle Leadership*, 75, 34-38.

The author of this article is a professor and director of the School Psychology program at Indiana University. In the school environment test anxiety usually occurs when a student has to take a test. Test- anxiety usually affects a students' academic performance. There are two forms of anxiety: trait and state anxiety. State anxiety is usually associated with test anxiety. The main characteristic of anxiety is worry, however other physical signs and disruptive behavioral maybe apparent especially with upcoming tests. A notable sign of test anxiety occurs when students do not perform well despite knowing the material especially if the student currently has good academic achievement. Several interventions can be used to reduce test anxiety in students. Some of these techniques involve using practice test, reviewing content before tests, use of mnemonic devices, and using alternative forms of assessment. It is essential that principals, staff and parents see test anxiety as a real mental health issue. There should also be communication among the staff and mental health practitioners regarding how to identify and work with students with test anxiety. This article was very informative and the information provided was relevant to school leaders especially the areas that highlighted the need for the school, mental health professional and the parent working together to help the student.

McDonald, A. S. (2010) The prevalence and effects of test anxiety in school children, *Educational Psychology, an International Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 21, 89-

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The author is part of the National Foundation for Educational research. Anytime performance is being assessed varying levels of physical and emotional reactions are experienced. Test anxiety usually occurs whenever we feel unprepared or question our abilities and we may feel anxious and stressed. High levels of anxiety before or during a test can impair their performance and as such does not demonstrate students' true abilities. Some factors that can contribute to test anxiety include students' past experiences and beliefs, competing with classmates, and high academic expectations from parents and school. There has also been a tendency for test anxiety to increase with age especially in girls. It has been reported that girls display more test anxiety than boys however this difference may be due to girls reporting anxiety more than boys. It was also shown that when children were praised for their test performance/ intelligence and later they did poorly at a test they were at risk for developing anxiety. However if children are praised for their effort their desire for learning increased. In reducing test anxiety it might be helpful to consider test characteristics and eliminating time constraints. The authors provided supportive and contradicting research on test anxiety which somewhat took away from the article. However the authors did provided some valuable insights into the history and prevalence of test anxiety

Salend, S.J. (2011) Addressing test anxiety. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 44, 55-68

Students with upcoming performance evaluation often experience high levels of anxiety which not only affect their performance on the test but their attitudes toward school. Some of the triggers for test anxiety maybe due to perfectionist tendencies, poor study skills, a highly competitive classroom environment, and family-related expectations to excel. This

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can then lead to physical symptoms such as excessive perspiration, shaking body parts and flushed skin color. The behavioral symptoms include difficulty with attention, concentration and memory. It has also been shown that younger students exhibit more physical signs of test anxiety and older students are more likely to the behavioral symptoms associated with test anxiety (as cited in Salend 2011). There are a variety of strategies and guidelines that can be used to help students overcome anxiety and perform better on their tests. Some of these strategies include providing students with study guides, and coming to the test environment on time to avoid interactions with others that can intensify their anxiety. Other strategies include creating accessible and student friendly test and considering a range of scoring methods. In particular students with disabilities experience higher levels of test anxiety as such they might benefit from timing, scheduling and setting accommodations. I found this article to be the most enlightening it covered every aspect of test anxiety and I would recommend educators reading it, its language is understandable. It will be very useful to school leaders and students.

Swanson, S., & Howell, C. C. (1996). Test anxiety in adolescents with learning disabilities and behavior disorder. *Exceptional Children, 62*, 389-397

Children with learning disabilities and behavior disorders have higher levels of test anxiety than regular students. Test anxiety works against students' motivational skills and increase their propensity to make errors due to difficulty concentrating. Test anxiety in students with learning disabilities is often associated with task irrelevant thoughts and an inability to focus their attention. This is often accompanied by self defeating thoughts, poor study

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skills, disruptive behavior and lack of motivation. Researchers propose (as cited in Swanson & Howell, 1996) that test anxiety is a result of the interaction between positive self talk, study habits and test taking skills, grading, motivation, behavior and self perception. It was also shown that a highly competitive classroom increases anxiety in students. However providing a supportive and structured classroom can decrease test anxiety. This article was very interesting but I felt more information could have been provided. However there are some valuable insights that can be very useful.

Wachelka, D., & Katz, R. C. (1999). Reducing test anxiety and improving academic self-esteem in high school and college students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 30, 191-198.

The authors of this article work within Department of Psychology, University of the Pacific.

Test anxiety is common among students whose performance is being evaluated. The effects are even greater for students with disabilities. Test anxiety has been associated with a fear of failure to the extent it affects students' grades, self esteem, behavior and attitudes toward school.(as cited in Wachelka & Katz 1999) A cognitive behavioral treatment was administered to students to help reduce their test anxiety and improve their study skills. The treatment attempted to change their negative attitudes about test and to engage in more positive self talk. This was done by teaching students to focus on factual events then develop a rational response to the situation and to pay attention to the relationship between their thoughts and feelings. (Wachelka & Katz 1999)They were also taught to visualize an anxious event and to work through it by relaxing and engaging in positive self talk. The treatment also focused on teaching- study skills as feeling

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unprepared contributes to their anxiety. The students were taught to not only manage their study time effectively but to incorporate the use of review tools. The students were taught test taking skills which involved arriving early to a test to relax, listening carefully to instructions, writing down memory aides, looking over the entire test before starting and developing a time plan for the test. (as cited in Wachelka & Katz 1999). They were also given several suggestions for improving their study behavior however the most noteworthy advised students to study in a group but only to review the material they already learned, avoid switching to different subjects during a study session and to pace themselves; so they can work on assignments before they are due to have enough time to do their best. (as cited in Wachelka & Katz 1999). Overall the treatment increased the students self esteem and study skills. The treatment plan presented here can be very helpful if implemented with public schools and some of the information presented can be useful for school leaders.