

Causes and Effects of Examination Anxiety on Learning among Students: Implications for Counselling

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Abstract

The problem of examination anxiety which often lead to poor academic performance has become worrisome and unsatisfactory to students, counsellors, teachers/lecturers, school administrators, parents and the larger society. The various efforts put forward in addressing the problems of exam anxiety among students have been widely acknowledged, yet without satisfaction so far. Liman (2016) sees anxiety as a general state of uneasiness that causes mental health problems, affects physical health, fear, apprehension and worrisome. Examination anxiety is a set of responses that normally affect some students leading to an uneasy situation. It can be mild anxiety that includes excessive worry, depression and nervousness or it may be severe anxiety that makes one to have irrelevant thinking to a class of stimuli. Sources of anxiety vary greatly. Adolescents experience anxiety especially when they have other psychological disorders. Essau (2003) was of the opinion that anxiety is connected with age and developmental level of students. This paper therefore aims at determining the causes and effects of examination anxiety and the extent counselling techniques can help to ameliorate the existing problems.

Keywords: Examination, anxiety, adolescents, disorders, counselling techniques.

Introduction

Over the years, examination has generated different social and psychological problems among students. Anxiety during examination is a set of psychological factors and responses that includes excessive worry, depression, nervousness and irrelevant thinking to a class of stimuli from an individual's experience of assessment and outcome (Limen, 2016). Various somatic, cognitive and behavioural symptoms are characterized during the period of preparation in exams. Ergene (2003) defined the term anxiety as a scientific construct referring to the set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioural responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure at an examination or at a similar evaluative situation. These examinations related anxiety impair memory, concentration, decision making, learning and are all associated with lower academic performance.

Anxiety is defined as a future oriented mode or state which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events and that is a distinction between future and present dangers which divide anxiety and fever. Examination anxiety is the reaction to the stimuli that are associated with the individual's experience of testing and evaluative situations. Test anxiety is the set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioural responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on an examination or similar evaluative situation. Essau, (2003).

Examination anxiety as a combination of perceived physiological over-aroused feelings of worry and dread, self- depreciating thoughts, tension and semantic symptoms that occurs during examinations and other related situations. It is a physiological condition in which people experience extreme stress anxiety and discomfort during or before taking an examination. For the purpose of this study, examination anxiety can be defined as emotional reaction caused by psychological, biology and physical factors which a learner experience during/ before and sometimes after taking examinations, tests and other evaluation situations.

Types of Anxiety

Spiel- Berger (2005), asserts that there are two types of examination anxiety that students exhibit. These are trait anxiety and state anxiety.

Trait anxiety

This refers to anxiety that is chronic and pervasive across situations and is not triggered by specific events.

State Anxiety

This refers to anxiety that occurs in specific situation and usually has a clear trigger. He explains that these may be related such that when a student has a high state anxiety, they also have some measure of trait anxiety as well. Essau, (2003) explains the types of examination anxiety a little differently, he suggests there are three types, but instead of focusing on the different types of anxiety, he focuses on student's achievement. According to his research, there are three types of exam anxious students. First are students who lack the proper study skills and inability to organize or comprehend the main ideas of the information being taught. Secondly, are students who possess fear of failure when experiencing assessment. Finally, are the students that believe they possess quality study skills, but in reality, they do not.

Research has shown that the symptoms of examination anxiety include emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioural . Essau (2003)

Causes of Examination Anxiety

Bufka, Barlow and David (2008) see anxiety as an emotional state in which people feel uneasy apprehensive or fearful. For Egbochukwu, Obodo and Obaden (2008) many students usually feel uneasy, fearful, and anxious as exams approach and some even go to the extent of feigning sickness. These physiological over-arousals often referred to as "emotionality" along with dread, worry and expectations of terrible failure are usually caused by the following points enumerated below:

1. **Difficult/ Extensive curriculum:** Limen, (2016) believes that task difficulty is among the factors that make learners worried. He also suggested that there is considerable evidence that the performance of the highly exam anxious individuals on a complex task is adversely affected by evaluation stress or "the less complex the task, the weaker the effect". This fact is supported by a study of Adeola and Adedioe (2008) who found out that examination anxiety is more detrimental to the demanding tasks.

2. **Pattern and frequency of evaluation:** According to research by Adeola, and Adedioe (2008), pressure filled situation can deplete a part of the brain's processing power known as the working memory which is critical to many everyday activities. Despite the fact that people are often motivated to perform their best the pressure filled situations in which important examinations, presentations and matches occur can cause people to perform below their ability level instead.
3. **Enormous content to be covered in short period of time:** Spiel – Berger (2005) chemistry Education as a course is viewed by many students in tertiary institutions as a hard course because it involved the use of some basic arithmetic processes and practicals which students consider boring and cumbersome. Similarly, other courses that involve use of basic arithmetic have been found to be of great concern to students and causes increase in anxiety level especially during evaluation situation.
4. **High parental expectations/ pressure:** Olorufemi (2003) said that this can be induced by many factors which include parents, teachers, peer group and the society. The child line national exam stress survey revealed that 96% of the 1300 who completed the survey felt anxious about exams and revisions, with 59% feeling pressure from their parents to do well and 64% saying they have never received any support in dealing with exams. Good grades are viewed by many parents and guardians as favourable returns on their investment in their children's and ward Education. This put students under considerable amount of pressure especially during evaluative situation for the fear of "disappointing" their parents. We live an examination conscious era where one of the criteria for acceptance by the society is high performance in Examination.
5. **Poor preparation: Reading culture and study skills:** Several studies have suggested that some students ineffectively organize or process information and they perform poorly in exams because of this. It was found out that when compared with low anxious students, highly exam anxious students have differences in organizing learning materials to be learned. Erygene (2003) stressed that highly exam anxious students have less effective study habits compared with their low anxious counterparts. This view is also supported by Adeola, and Adedioe (2003) who suggested that lack of effective study skills contributes to poor performance under

evaluative conditions which in turn leads to heightened feeling of anxiety when it comes to performing in subsequent examinations.

Support of this research emerged from the treatment studies that have concentrated in helping students to improve study skills. The result of this study suggested that study skill can also help to reduce test/ examination anxiety and improve performance.

Others are voluminous textbook, need to get good grades, non- completion of course outline by Lecturers and teachers, lack of self – confidence and competitive environment. All these and others are what usually pose a good threat to the students hence leading to examination anxiety and test phobia.

Influence/ Effects of Examination Anxiety on Students

Many Students at the verge of entering for school examinations are seen to exhibit some forms of anxiety, restlessness, trembling, fidgeting or panicking. Examination related anxiety has also shown to impair memory, concentration, decision making, learning and is associated with lower academic performance. For Olurun and Akomolafe (2013) examination anxiety contributes to a variety of negative outcomes including psychological distress, academic underachievement, academic failure and insecurity. Moreover, these students tend to react with a strong view of threat, reduced feelings of being able to produce desired result, having a low opinion of self, expecting to fail, blaming others and having a strong emotional reaction. Anxiety over examination is an emotional problem to many students that if not handled very well can lead to neurotic difficulties (Adeola and Adedio, 2003)

Moreso, some of the notable outcome of the influence of Examination anxiety include:

- i. Poor academic performance
- ii. Forgetfulness
- iii. Low self esteem
- iv. Inability to display real knowledge and abilities

Several reasearchers have pointed out poor academic performance as the major effect of examination anxiety. Test anxious students are likely to receive poorer scores, repeat a grade and perform more poorly on tasks requiring new learning and on those administered in a highly

evaluative manner. Most times inferior performance arises not because of intellectual problems of poor academic preparation, but because testing situations creates a sense of threat for those experiencing exam anxieties. Burfka et al (2009) positioned that high examination anxious student's support's this claim. Therefore, it is assumed that examination anxiety and academic performance have an inverse relationship.

Olurunfemi et al (2003) concluded that over test performance has also been related to low esteem, dependency and passivity. He stated that low self-esteem and examination anxiety go hand in hand. He also explains that examination anxiety is about low academics self-esteem and fear that you might be worried that you are not good enough. Furthermore, he also stressed that students suffering from severe examination anxiety have in many cases experienced an unpleasant sense of failure, either in teaching situation because they have been singled out for not having enough skill or at an exam where they failed to achieve success and that feeling stays with them. Students with positive expectation will not perceive failure as something that will repeat itself because they are confident, strongly motivated to learn and are not afraid to show it.

Erygene (2003) stated that pressure filled situation in which examination and test occurs can cause people to perform below their ability. Anxiety may be severe in examination setting that it significantly limits student's ability to demonstrate their knowledge. This is supported by the view of Limen (2016) that extreme anxiety can be quite debilitating and can result in serious underestimation of the student's basic scholastic ability and achievement. Brilliant students as well may perform badly due to anxiety created by factors like time limits, examination techniques, examination format environment, clarity and attitude of the invigilators or supervisors. He therefore concludes that examination anxiety is usually the cause of student's underachievement rather than their intellectual abilities.

Some of the notable tips of management of Examination anxiety

1. **Effective study:** the students should not cram the night before the examination, they should plan their study with regular scheduled study time.
2. **Accurate Information:** the course materials package should be checked, read the course outline, get all available materials for the project ready (e.g calculator. Graph sheet etc)
3. **Exam taking preparation:** a student practice on sample texts in the textbook or study guide tests in the textbook or study guide, rest well the night before the examination,

avoid drinking coffee before the examinations and avoid people or things that may disturb or distract one's confidence, focus and relaxation.

4. **Examination taking strategies:** a student should survey, that is read the instructions and go through it a second time, mark the ones he/she can answer based on questions expected of him and easy questions should be answered first so as to guarantee marks in the least amount of time. Pace yourself and don't rush through the questions.
5. **Procrastination:** the students should not indulge in postponing, delaying or wallowing about when they are supposed to study
6. **Visit the counselling center:** schools are aware of the tolls exams can take on students. They have offices or programs specifically dedicated to helping students and providing additional educational support so that students can be successful. Counselling centre must be made available in all schools.

Remedy to the Problems/way out

Examination anxiety with its attendant problems like nausea, sweating and nervousness has been seen to be causing more harm than good on our students and so need to be remedied. Such remedial approach includes:

1. Rational Emotive Therapy Approach, cognitive restructuring techniques, cognitive behavioural approaches and cognitive behavioral modification approach if well used by guidance counsellors will go a long way in reducing examination anxiety.
2. Skill deficit treatment approaches including study skills training and skill-focused treatment approaches should be well used on students.
3. School guidance counsellors should be given the opportunity to organize orientation programs and intermittent group counselling approaches to help these students so that they will not fail victims of examination anxiety.
4. All the examination bodies at all levels of education should make appropriate good use of guidance counsellors and psychologists, research statisticians, evaluators who are in a better position to guide and determine the better mode of testing and evaluation to help students reduce the examination anxiety.

Examination anxiety on guidance and counselling

This study has implications for the counselling profession. Proactive or preventive counselling approach should be adopted by Guidance Counsellors to reorientate students who are prone to engaging in examination malpractices. Proactive counselling refers to professional services provided by trained counsellor to prevent a student from engaging in examination malpractices and this is predicted on objective assessment of student's study habits prior to sitting for examinations. For this preventive approach to be effective, more professionally trained Counsellors should be employed to render skillful counselling services to the teeming population of students in our Educational institutions. Moreover, the success of this preventive approach is also dependent on availability of standardized psychological tests in Nigerian Schools such as study habit inventories, Examination Anxiety and Attitude Inventories, personality test Inventories and so on. A conscious effort should be made to administer the psychological tests on a cross section of students and the results from such test administration should be properly interpreted and used as a basis for inviting students for Counselling interviews (Okafor and Ike (2022)

- (i) Standardized examination anxiety inventories should be made available for Counsellors in tertiary institutions
- (ii) Teachers and counsellor should be trained or retrained on the procedures for administration, scoring and interpretation of scores of standardized examination anxiety inventories in relation to student's attitude towards examination malpractice.
- (iii) Examination Attitude Inventories should be developed for use in tertiary institutions
- (iv) Measures of student's examination anxiety and attitude towards examination malpractice could be used to identify students who are likely to engage in examination malpractices.
- (v) Reorientation programmes and proactive counselling, should be organized for students who show tendency to engage in examination malpractices. Okafor and Ike (2022)

Conclusion

In view of the attendant problems caused by anxiety among our students, it is then pertinent that sensitization programs be mounted to reduce the ugly menace. School guidance counsellors should be given the chance to mount orientation programs for these students as well as intermittent workshops and seminars to help reduce the examination anxiety, enhance the student's academic abilities and improve their psychological health. When these are done, this ugly menace will be removed as it is fast eaten deep into the fabrics of our academics and as Speli-Benger (2005) noted it is a serious academic impediment to our students.

In conclusion therefore, all hands must be on deck and we should make hay while the sun shines as a stitch in time saves nine.

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