An Overview of Anxiety in the Classroom

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I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

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Anxiety is a very important and powerful instinct that humans have. It is the threat detection system of the body that keeps the body safe from harm (Isaacs, 2016). It has been performing this task ever since birth. Sometimes, however, the body’s threat detection system makes things seem more dangerous or stressful than they really are. This can lead to an overflow of agitation, depression, feelings of exhaustion, and in the most extreme cases it can cause paranoia. Scientists today are trying to understand more of why anxiety develops versus how.

Anxiety is a condition that can be influenced by many different factors, but the biggest and most influential are genetic and environmental factors. Anxiety has been found to pass down through families and attach itself to different phenotypes in humans that are most observable in behavior. Studies are being conducted to analyze these behaviors and to distinguish the full range of symptoms and the extremes. These symptoms can be quite debilitative in certain situations. Anxiety in the classroom is an interesting phenomenon that can debilitate one’s success, courage, and willingness to try. This article will shed light on anxiety for educational purposes, focus predominately on anxiety in the classroom, and its effects on students.

**Background**

Anxiety is the most common mental health disorder in the U.S., so it is important to discuss and understand the background of this condition. What exactly is anxiety? Anxiety is a common problem that typically arises during the early childhood. It is the body’s response to fear, dread, or concern for something. Anxiety predisposes people to most major mental illnesses, forms a fundamental feature in people’s phenotypes, and can remain as a disabling factor for most of the recovery process. This factor can lead to an overflow of agitation, depression, feelings of exhaustion, and in the most extreme cases it can cause paranoia (Isaacs, 2016). In the instances where one’s anxiety takes over and causes incapability of performing certain tasks the body is making things seem more dangerous or stressful than they really are. A scientist by the name of John Rapee has been studying how to help those with anxiety on the ends of the anxious spectrum and has been trying to learn how to catch anxiety early in kids to prevent the chronic outcomes (Isaacs, 2016). Another factor that can lead to anxiety is a fear of the unknown. This fear is quite common in the medical field and all nurses have to be equipped with the skills to prevent it. In fact, one of the Nursing Theories of Practice is called “Uncertainty of Illness” where the uncertainty of an illness can be stress-producing and is capable of “contributing to negative physical and/or psychological outcomes” (Cherry & Jacob, 2019, p. 86).

**Factors Affecting Anxiety**

Research in the area of genetics has shown quite promising results as to why anxiety develops. Throughout the duration of our lives, different genes can become more or less influential over time. Familial and twin studies have shown that anxiety runs through families. Twin studies are used to help disentangle environmental and genetic factors (Gregory & Eley, 2007). These familial and twin studies view anxiety as a personality trait and study those who exhibit that trait. By studying the personalities of those affected by anxiety, these studies have deduced that genetics can influence behavior. Another use of these familial and twin studies is that they can distinguish anxiety symptoms in the full range and in the extremes. These studies have focused on whether the full range of symptoms are similarly passed down as the extreme symptoms and the results show that anxiety vulnerability factors are passed down through the different phenotypes. “This suggests that vulnerability factors for anxiety may operate along a continuum, and that anxiety disorders may simply be the extremes of quantitative traits” (Gregory & Eley, 2007).

Both environmental and genetic factors have a major role in dictating the level and severity of anxiety in children. Over the past several years, cases of anxiety in all ages have increased and scientists are researching if there is another factor influencing the increase in anxiety. As we further dive into the age of technology, researchers are curious to see if smartphone use is influencing anxiety (Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2018). It is very difficult to accurately summarize the relationship between smartphone use and stress. Some studies show that smartphones reduce stress whereas some studies show that stress rises with smartphone use. In the meta-analysis created by Vahedi, and Saiphoo (2018), a positive relationship was found between smartphone use and anxiety. This analysis, however, only used cross sectional studies so claims about the directionality or causation cannot be made (Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2018). The positive relationship was found when the participants of this study showed increased signs of problematic phone use (habitual checking of phone and feeling pressure to be constantly connected). This study is very beneficial to read because it pointed out that only cognitive and emotional aspects of stress and anxiety were focused on and that smartphone use has become an integral part of our culture. Children are receiving earlier access to smartphones at younger ages. This access to smartphones is exposing them to the stressful effects at younger ages. This technology has a major prevalence in our lives, people need to know what this technology can do if not used carefully.

**Anxiety in the Classroom**

One of the most stressful courses that students can take are the language learning classes. “Second language anxiety is defined as a state of uneasiness, tension and fear, happening from a real or perceived threat. This kind of anxiety discussed here is foreign language anxiety. Foreign language anxiety is not a psychological feature that can manifest itself in any learning process but is only related to the specific course of L2 learning” (Ghorbandordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2016, p. 4). This type of anxiety is unique because it involves a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to the classroom. The anxiety that is generated in these classes is related to the students’ fear of performing in front of their peers, being vulnerable in front of their peers, and the input of what they have been taught in the classroom. “Many experiences have supported that learners become anxious while learning an L2, because they feel helpless when depressed of the relaxation given by their first language to accept communication tasks” (Ghorbandordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2016). Language anxiety has a major affect on student performance because they are scared of being vulnerable. In a study performed by Gkonou (2013), it was reported that the students’ fear of making mistakes in front of their peers and bad opinions being made about them was the principal cause of their anxiety. This debilitative anxiety and stress can affect performance levels of students by decreasing accuracy, grades, and confidence. This is an interesting phenomenon which helps explain anxiety in other classes and other environments. Language anxiety and classroom anxiety can be fought by teaching the students to be autonomous. Autonomy is the ability of a student to take charge of their learning process. This can combat the fear of making a mistake in front of one’s peers by giving the student the confidence to make mistakes and to learn from them. “It is believed that the last educational goal of language teachers is to help learners become autonomous” (Ghorbandordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2016). If every teacher made it their goal to promote autonomy in their students, it would encourage them all to learn from their mistakes and to keep trying.

Although a dark side of anxiety has been widely theorized and accepted by other scholars and researchers, it is oversimplistic and incomplete to suggest that anxiety only has debilitative effects on performance. The work of Cheng & McCarthy (2018) argue that anxiety is not always detrimental to performance but can have facilitative effects, or a bright side. These two researchers suggest that anxiety can be a motivating factor and enhance performance. Anxious individuals are vigilant in monitoring their surroundings and themselves thus making them more sensitive to feedback. “Such hypervigilance signals that more resources, such as effort, need to be allocated to the task” (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). Research has also proven that performance is highest and of best quality at moderate levels of anxiety. As discussed above, the idea of failure in front of one’s peers is very strong. It is so strong that it can harm and diminish the quality of their performance. The anxious students do not want bad opinions to be made about them so they will devote more time, energy, and effort into their work so that they will not be embarrassed. Since their anxiety is forcing them to give additional effort toward the completion of their work, become more receptive of feedback and adding more attention to detail, it is therefore enhancing their performance and their work.

**Conclusion**

Anxiety has become one of the most common mental health illnesses in the United States of America. It is driven by genetic and environmental factors. Anxiety is the body’s response to fear, dread, or concern for something. Fear and concern are the main triggers for this condition. Familial and twin studies are used by scientists to research the hereditary nature of anxiety and discern how anxiety can affect behavior. There are often inconsistent findings regarding texts discussing the affects anxiety has on mental health and performance, but the truth is it can have both positive effects (facilitative) and negative effects (debilitating). Foreign Language Anxiety is an interesting phenomenon that is characterized by the fear of failure in front of one’s peers and being judged by them. This occurrence helps explain similar anxiety in other classes and other environments. Students’ performances can be negatively affected in other classes because their fear of failure can be so strong that it inhibits or debilitates their confidence and willingness to try. Anxiety can be a debilitating factor; however, it can also facilitate the enhancement of one’s performance. If a moderate amount of anxiety is present or arises from a certain situation, anxiety can be used by the student to put forth more energy into their work in an effort to eliminate the possibility of failure. A confounding factor of anxiety is also the prevalence of problematic smartphone use. Although a direct correlation cannot be made with absolute certainty, studies have shown that the increased presence of problematic smartphone usage can lead to higher levels of anxiety. More research needs to be conducted in general anxiety and classroom anxiety so that everyone can be educated about what anxiety is, how it can debilitate performance, and how it can enhance performance.

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