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**STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN
NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

GLORIA MATTHEWS, PhD

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni Campus
Port Harcourt, Rivers State
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Students' performance in a test is critical to Academic Achievement. Therefore, factors that are responsible for student's poor academic performance in secondary schools should be addressed amongst such factors are test anxiety. Most students in our educational system exhibit signs and symptoms of test anxiety during or before examination. However, little or no attention is paid to students experiencing test anxiety. When anxiety interferes or inhibits test performance it culminates to a problem that affects the entire educational system. Test anxiety could prevent students from demonstrating their maximum intellectual capacity and skill, the resultant effect is poor academic performance. In order to reduce test anxiety and improve students' academic performance, the paper examined strategies for overcoming test anxiety among secondary students in Nigerian Educational system. Also, suggest ways and means of overcoming test anxiety, identify signs and symptoms of test anxiety, state the causes of test anxiety and treatment strategies were proffered. The paper amongst others recommends that stakeholders in Nigerian Educational System should pay adequate attention to students experiencing test anxiety by organizing seminars and workshops in order to create awareness about test anxiety and improve students' academic performance.

Keywords: Strategies, Test anxiety, Overcoming, Educational system.

Introduction

Davidoff in Nwankwo (2006) defined anxiety as an emotion characterized by feeling of anticipated danger, tension and distress by arousal of the sympathetic nervous system. Similarly, anxiety is defined as an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil accompanied by nervous behavior, somatic complains and rumination. Implicitly, from the above definitions anxiety is associated with fear, worry, apprehension, restlessness and tension. This physiological state poses a threat to students' academic performance. When students are confronted with challenging situations such as interview, facing a panel, writing a test or examination optimum level of anxiety is anticipated, it is a pre-requisite for student's motivation, memory and attention. However, extreme anxiety interferes with students' ability to function effectively or accomplish a task. Test and examination at all levels of education is regarded as a major factor in measuring learning. Zollar and Ben-chain (2011) opined that we

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS...

are in an era where students performance is used to judge and asses the entire educational system, therefore factors influencing poor academic performance such as test anxiety could prevent students from reaching their maximum potentials.

Researchers have proffered various definition of test anxiety; it is defined as a condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situation. Test anxiety can also be referred to as a situational anxiety, evaluation anxiety and anticipatory anxiety. Sanguiry and Sail (2006) viewed it as a reaction to stimulus that is associated with individual's negative perception of testing and evaluation situation. Test anxious students find it difficult to concentrate on a task presented, most often, informations they have practiced previously seem inaccessible, and inability to recall information could trigger higher anxiety and confusion. To support this claim, Gaudy and Spielberg (2002) explained that high test anxiety is considered as one of the main factors for low academic performance at secondary school level. Similarly, Kirkland and Hollandworth (1980) view test anxiety as a constellation of behaviors that have a debilitating effect on academic performance. From the above definitions, test anxiety is perceived as internal and external behavior that has a negative effect on test taking and test preparation. Multiple researchers such as Musch & Broder (1999), Dendiato and Diener (1986) opined that students are affected by test anxiety in various degrees, those that are severely affected require intervention strategies.

Similarly, Culler and Hollanhan (1980) explained that test anxiety vary from one student to another, low test anxious students have higher GPAs' than high test anxious students. In the same vein, low test anxious students focus on task relevant stimulus whereas test anxious students focus on test irrelevant stimulus. Based on the foregoing, it is reasonable to assume that teaching students strategies to overcome test anxiety is a critical method of improving student's academic performance.

The Concept of Test Anxiety

Test anxiety refers to personalized experience of severe psychological, cognitive and behavioural anxiety that occurs before or during test taking situation which interfere with test performance, it is a physiological condition in which people go through extreme stress, anxiety and discomfort before or during test or examination. Test anxiety creates a significant obstacle to learning and academic performance. Research has shown that high level of emotional distress have a direct influence on academic performance. Test anxiety has negative impact on student's social, emotional and behavioural development as well as their attitude towards learning. Test anxious students perform poorly in their academics as opposed to students with low anxiety. In a study carried out by Sarason on test anxiety, he noted that test anxious students perform poorly in their academics, furthermore, he stated that they find it difficult to concentrate, read instructions and comprehend simple instructions. When students are placed under undue pressure by parents and guardians to have excellent grades, this situation usually trigger test anxiety, Deffenbacher in (Ndirangu *et al.*, 2008).

Furthermore, Matthews (2015) stated that excessive anxiety during examination condition leads to under-performance and memory loss during test. Test anxiety increase when the number of test carried out is excessive and beyond student's intellectual capacity. In the same vein, Test anxiety is defined as a state of arousal that leads to change in physiological, intellectual, physical and emotional condition that interferes with individual ability to recall previous information while sitting for an examination, it is connected with anxiety and worry

(Morris & Libert 2007). Conclusively, moderate level of anxiety help students to adequately prepare for an examination, while extreme anxiety leads to consistent failure in a test situation, students could be conditioned to fear exam because of constant failure.

Signs and Symptoms of Test Anxiety

Anxiety and depression association of America classified symptoms of test anxiety into the following: Emotional symptoms, behavioral symptom, Cognitive symptom and Physical symptoms.

Physical Symptoms

- Sweating profusely
- Vibrating
- Increased heart rate
- Dehydration
- Fainting spells
- Vomiting
- Physical illness
- Headache

Emotional Symptoms

- Depression
- Low self concept
- Irritability
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Feeling helplessness
- Frustration
- Fear
- Worry

Cognitive and Behavioural Symptoms

- Fidgeting
- Avoidance behavior
- Substance abuse
- Blanking out during exam
- Negative thoughts
- Lack of concentration
- Racing thoughts
- Freezing
- Confusion

Causes of Test Anxiety

Birjandi and Alimi (2010) states that students who are under pressure to increase performance perform poorly and experience more tension than those in a less threatening situation. Based on the foregoing, the following are the causes of test anxiety;

- Undue pressure from parents and teachers is likely to trigger anxiety among students.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS...

- **Poor Test Histories:** A student who has performed poorly previously in a test situation is likely to become anxious when faced with similar situation.
- **Fear of Failure:** Most students are scared of being labeled as failures; fear of failure is anxiety provoking.
- **Unhealthy Competition:-** Anxiety could also be caused due to unhealthy competition among peers.
- **Task Difficulty:-** When a task exceeds students intellectual level, it triggers anxiety.
Lack of adequate preparation:- Inadequate preparation for an examination could lead to a situation where students are tensed, apprehensive and anxious during examination.
- **Unconducive Environment-** The learning environment remains a very sensitive area that should be given due consideration. Test and examination should be administered in a conducive learning environment that has good ventilation, well lighted and good seating arrangement. An environment that lacks these could trigger anxiety.
- **Examiner's characteristics:-** Most examiners are impolite, rude, and aggressive during test administration such traits create tension among students and lower students confidence level

Diagnosis of Test Anxiety

The diagnostic and statistical manual, under the classification of social anxiety disorder, DSM IV stipulates that the person must exhibit four different symptoms:

- The individual must exhibit an instant anxiety symptom when the individual comes in contact with the feared situation.
- Show attempt to avoid performance situation.
- Must affect the individual's ability to function effectively due to fear associated with the situation.
- These signs must have lasted for at least 6 months.

Treatment for Test Anxiety

1. **Beta blockers:** -These are useful for treating performance anxiety. Propranolol is an example of beta blocker which, helps to prevent physical manifestation of anxiety. It is very effective in reducing heart rate.
2. **Benzodiazepines:-** It is recommended for the treatment of anxiety, it should be administered thirty minutes before test administration.
3. **Antidepressants-** These are useful for the treatment of depression that is associated with anxiety. However, it is not advisable to be taken before an examination.
4. **Psychotherapy:-**It is the application for psychological principles for the treatment of psychological problems through interaction. It helps to modify the individuals' pattern of thought that triggers tension and replaced with positive outlook towards life.
5. **Psychoanalysis:-** This method is used to uncover repressed thoughts or conflict that underlie avoidance behaviour. Anxiety is perceived as symptom of underlying conflict. This method can be adopted by clinical psychologist to uncover student's repressed thought that is anxiety provoking.

6. Systematic Desensitization:-The approach can be adopted to reduce anxiety. Students could be made to imagine series of increasingly frightening scenes of participating in an examination while under deep relaxation, research evidence indicate that this technique is effective in reducing test anxiety.
7. Relaxation Technique:- This technique is very effective in treating test anxiety. Students should be made to practice deep breathing once they notice sign of anxiety during and before examination.

Strategies for Overcoming Test Anxiety

1. Adequate preparation is a pre-requisite for high academic performance, this include attending lectures regularly, jotting down notes, forming a good study group and most importantly preparing for the examination on time. Reviewing test materials on a weekend preceding the examination is anxiety provoking; students are therefore advised to start revising their test materials on time in order to have mastery of the subject matter.
2. Students should feel free to ask their teachers the format of a test, an idea of how the test is formatted will help to reduce anxiety.
3. Avoid cramming as a method of test or exam preparation, inability to recall crammed information leads to frustration that would trigger higher anxiety.
4. Make use of relaxation technique such as deep breathing during or before examination.
5. Teachers should reinforce students positively whenever they sit for a test, irrespective of their performance.
6. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine prior to examination.
7. Practice mock exam writing in order to reduce tension.
8. Read the direction carefully and allocate time to each question, in order to avoid spending most of your time on one question.
9. Students should review past examination questions and identify their weaknesses and improve on them.
10. When you are presented with test materials you are advised to start with questions you are familiar with, instead of wasting so much time on a particular question.
11. It is necessary for students to find out specifically, what triggers their anxiety during exam. This is necessary to enable them work towards reducing anxiety.
12. Always ensure that you have a sound sleep before the examination.
13. Lack of adequate rest is likely to trigger anxiety.
14. Approach the exam with assurance that you would excel irrespective of any circumstance.
15. Make good use of your time by avoiding acts of laziness, procrastination and distraction.
16. Students should be thought how to develop effective learning strategies.
17. Students should not hesitate to share their problems with the school counsellor, who is equipped to help them modify their mal-adaptive behaviour.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been stated:

1. Seminars and workshops should be organized to create awareness about test anxiety and students should be taught behavior modification techniques in order to reduce anxiety.

2. Teachers should exhibit friendly characteristics in order to avoid instilling tension in their students.
3. The environment where test is being administered should be conducive in terms of ventilation, it should be well lighted and have good seating arrangement.
4. Students should, not be made to feel that their life depends on test performance or examination. Research has shown that student's perform better in a less threatening circumstance.
5. Teachers should teach their students good study habit, in order to prepare properly for their examination.
6. Counsellors should create awareness about their services, in order to counsel test anxious students.
7. The developmental stage of students should be considered before and during test administration. The questions set should be within their developmental level.
8. Teachers should let students know about the format of their examination this can help to reduce tension in students.
9. Adequate attention should be given to students that are test anxious in order to improve student's academic performance.
10. There should be secure student-teacher attachment pattern, so that students can feel free to share their problems with their teachers.
11. Teach students to have high self-concept and self-confidence as regards their academic performance.
12. Teachers should motivate, reinforce and encourage students for greater performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study examined the concept of test anxiety, strategies on how to overcome test anxiety, signs and symptoms of test anxiety were reviewed, causes, diagnosis and treatment options were also proffered. Finally, recommendations were made.

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