

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH TEST ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the experiences of students with test anxiety during examinations and specifically sought to assess the struggles of students with test anxiety during examinations, and their coping strategies to manage their test anxiety. A qualitative research design using phenomenological inquiry is used in this study to derived fluid, subjective and actual perspectives of the participants regarding their struggles of having test anxiety. The results reveal that all participants expressed their difficulty of having test anxiety during examination in three aspects, namely: cognitive components, behavioral components, and physiological components. The students stated that they have ways to lessen the effects of anxiety which include relaxation and serious preparation in the exam. These strategies enable them to handle the pressure though they still admit that anxiety is still there but already tolerable.

Keywords: education, lived experiences, students, test anxiety, mix methods, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Many students experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during, or even after an exam. As a matter of fact, anxiety is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty that typically appears when an individual perceives an event as being a threat to the ego or self-esteem (Sarason, 1988). That is why test preparations and conditioning are very important before taking the test to reduce the levels of anxiety especially during examinations.

However when taken to extremes, it may produce unwarranted results. One of the most threatening events that cause anxiety in students today is testing. When students develop

an extreme fear of performing poorly on an examination, they experience test anxiety. A student with high test anxiety can fall behind academically because he or she is distracted and has impaired verbal working memory skills when anxious (Hopko et al., 2005). Anxious children often have to exert more effort to perform well because they're trying to manage their anxiety while executing a task (Owens et al., 2008).

The problem of test anxiety has been experienced globally. The results in the United States revealed that test anxiety is negatively correlated with GPA (Jing, 2007). Similar results were earlier found in the study by Chapell et al. (2005) among American students, wherein differences in GPA were a function of the level of test anxiety, with less anxious test takers showing higher GPA than their counterpart who experienced high anxiety. It was also found that test anxiety is detrimental to performance (McCarthy & Goffin, 2005). Meanwhile, Sharma, Parnian, and Spielberger (1983) compared the test anxiety levels of Iranian ($n = 160$) and Indian ($n = 160$) secondary school and college students. The results indicated that the Iranian students had higher levels of test anxiety than their Indian counterparts. Tricultural differences in the test anxiety levels among the Iranian, Indian and U.S. student groups were interpreted as some eastern students showing greater anxiety levels. In the Philippines, the study of Reyes & Castillo (2015) revealed that test anxiety is considered a factor that affects performance of students. They further specified that students moderately felt test anxiety in mathematics which resulted to poor performance rating in Algebra and Trigonometry. Furthermore, the study of Felix (2013) revealed that students in the public elementary school experience moderate level of anxiety, while few students experience extreme levels during the examinations.

With these scenarios, there is a need to conduct a study on the struggles of students during test taking especially those having higher levels of anxiety. To date, there is no study in the literature that documents the experiences of Filipino students in public schools with regards to their anxiety during examination. By documenting their experiences, we are able to understand their feelings and struggles which will be useful in determining the appropriate intervention to help minimize the anxiety levels of the students during examination.

METHOD

This study utilized the mixed method research design

particularly descriptive and qualitative approach. The descriptive design describes characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied (Cresswell, 2003). In this study, the level of test anxiety in the aspects of incapacity and worry are measured among students in a public school.

On the other hand, I employed qualitative research design using phenomenological inquiry to determine the struggles and coping of participants in their test anxiety. This approach was used to extract the facets of information taken from the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, I have used an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation have included the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.

The phenomenological method interprets an experience or fact, by listening to the different stories of the participants. It describes the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumption from other disciplines. The method examines the phenomena through the subjective eyes of the participants that describe the meaning of the experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007)

This endeavor explored the experiences of participants from a population who considered learning as an important aspect of their being, only to find out that they would be experiencing struggles and anxiety during examinations. For the quantitative phase, a total of 43 students were given questionnaires to determine their level of test anxiety.

Meanwhile, the data and conduct of in-depth interviews with seven (7) informants having high test anxiety were made in different places based on the agreement among the students, focusing on the difficult experiences they underwent as they experienced test anxiety. The interviews were recorded through the use of two audio-digital recording devices. After conducting the interview, the

recorded conversations were transcribed by a hired transcriber. After which, transcripts were translated by the researcher and another English teacher. Moreover, the researcher together with two independent readers – analysts have analyzed the data from the audio recordings to cross-validate the findings of the transcriptions and English translations, and employed the expertise of a professional data analyst for the interpretation of the tabulated data, wherein the themes were extracted out and became the basis in the formation of personal insights.

In the initial phase, the quantitative components include a total of 43 students that were randomly selected to answer the test anxiety inventory. In the identification of my research participants for qualitative phase, a total of seven (7) public school students whom I initially selected through purposive sampling as my participants based on a pre-selected criterion relevant to my study (Tongco, 2007), who are students having high level of test anxiety based on the results of TAI inventory.

Purposive sampling was especially exemplified through the characteristics of the participants wherein one or a few individuals will be solicited to act as guides to a culture (Tongco, 2007). By using the test anxiety inventory, I selected only those participants who have high level of anxiety.

Before the data collection, the participants were requested to sign informed consent which is specified in the instrument for their voluntary participation of the study. Only those who signed the informed consent were considered as part of the study. The researcher also assured that the responses of the respondents were kept confidential and their names were not appeared in any part of this study. Moreover, the signatures of the respondents in the informed consent form were secured before the actual schedule of data gathering. Hence, the manner of recruitment is free of coercion, undue influence, or inducement.

In obtaining data about how the participants think and feel in the most direct ways, an in-depth one-on-one interviewing and direct participant observation were conducted. The methods are based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it not as the researcher views it. The interviewing has limitations and weaknesses, and involved personal interaction; in which cooperation is essential (Cresswell, 2007).

The researcher personally administered the collection of data. The following steps were performed by the researcher in the conduct of this study. First, after the validation, I sought an approval and endorsement of the Dean of graduate school. Second, a letter requesting to conduct research study were sent to the principal of the participating school. Third, after the approval, I communicated with the teachers for appropriate schedule of data gathering without disrupting the class. After the interview, a data were transcribes, encoded, and analysed.

Referential adequacy was used to establish the issue of trustworthiness and credibility in my study. Raw data, observation guide, digital audio recordings and transcription were utilized. Persistent observations, triangulation, peer debriefing, participant member checking, and reflexivity procedures were used to test the strength of the instrument that measured the phenomena under study and qualify findings as accurately as possible representing the data in discernable and meaningful ways will be employed. Trustworthiness and quality were observed in the study which was established by addressing the following components: credibility in preference to internal validity, confirm ability in preference to objectivity, transferability in preference to external validity or generability, and dependability in preference to reliabilit

In the quantitative analysis, the weighted Mean was used to determine the level of test anxiety of the students in terms of incapacity and worry. On the other hand, the thematic analysis was utilized to extract the themes and codes out from the quotes of the participants in the qualitative survey.

Meanwhile, the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involves three steps specifically data reduction, data display, and conclusion. The analysis of qualitative research notes began in the field, at the time of observation, interviewing, or both, as the researcher identified problems and concepts that appeared likely to help in understanding the situation. The data for a qualitative study were the notes jotted down in the field or during an interview from which the original comments, observations, and feelings are reconstructed or transcribed from audio recordings. The basic data were the observations and conversations. The actual words of participants were reproduced to the best of the researcher's ability from the field notes.

Examining relationships was centerpiece of the analytic process, because these allowed the researcher to move from simple

description of the people and settings to explanations of why things happened with those people in that setting. The process of examining relationships was captured in a matrix that showed how different concepts were connected.

During the data reduction, the answers of the informants from the audiotape were transcribed and translated which would make the necessary decisions on how to code grouped categories and to organizing them. During data display, tables respectively illustrating the patterns and findings of the data were presented. During the conclusion drawing and verification, initial thoughts about patterns were developed. The analysis of the qualitative data was exploratory in nature and has employed a constant comparison procedure. The categories and the coding of an outline were taken from three sources: the data, previous related studies, and theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After compiling interview data, I arranged my interview contents into themes that outline facets of struggles of students with test anxiety during examinations and their coping strategies to manage their test anxiety.

Degree of Test Anxiety of Students

Table 1 shows the level of test anxiety of students. In terms of incapacity indicator, the highest mean is 3.442 in the aspect of remembering the answer of exam questions after the exam is already over, while the lowest mean 3.256 in terms of losing focus on important exams and not remembering the material before the exam. Meanwhile, the sub-mean for incapacity is 3.3295, described as "Moderately High". This denotes that memory loss and poor cognitive processing is sometimes manifested by the students.

On the other hand, the worry dimension has the highest mean in the item "When I study for my exams, I worry that I will not remember the material on the exam" with a value of 3.651, described as "High", while the lowest mean is represented by the item "I feel out of sorts or not really myself when I take important exams" with a value of 3.186. The sub-mean of worry is 3.4070, described as "Moderately High". This indicates that the students sometimes manifest worry when they take the examination.

Overall, the level of test anxiety of students is Moderately High. This shows that the public school student's anxiety during test taking

is sometimes manifested. This further indicates that the students both manifest both incapacity and worry during examinations. Hence, its presence to the students during examination can disturb their concentration and would likely affect the result of the exam. This is supported by Coon and Mitterer (2009) that mounting up so much of anxiety will not help the student to perform rather it will influence the academic performance negatively (Coon & Mitterer, 2009).

	Mean	SD	Level
The closer I am to a major exam, the harder it is for me to concentrate on the material.	3.372	.8735	Moderately High
I lose focus on important exams, and I cannot remember material that I knew before the exam.	3.256	.7896	Moderately High
I finally remember the answer to exam questions after the exam is already over.	3.442	.9077	Moderately High
I worry so much before a major exam that I am too worn out to do my best on the exam.	3.349	.9483	Moderately High
I find that my mind sometimes wanders when I am taking important exams	3.326	.8923	Moderately High
I struggle with written assignments, or avoid doing them, because I feel that whatever I do will not be good enough. I want it to be perfect.	3.233	1.0875	Moderately High
Incapacity	3.3295	.52262	Moderately High
When I study for my exams, I worry that I will not remember the material on the exam.	3.651	1.0885	High
During important exams, I think that I am doing awful or that I may fail.	3.233	1.1092	Moderately High
I feel out of sorts or not really myself when I take important exams.	3.186	.9065	Moderately High
After exam, I worry about whether I did well enough	3.558	1.1191	High
Worry	3.4070	.69869	Moderately High
Overall	3.3682	.51192	Moderately High

Struggles of Students during Examinations

All participants expressed their difficulty of having test anxiety during examination which is reflective to three themes, namely: cognitive components, behavioral components, and physiological components.

Cognitive components. The test anxious students have trouble in their concentration during test taking particularly in the aspects of understanding test instructions and specific item questions. In fact, most of the students admit that they are easily distracted and have problems in recalling what they have previously learned. Hence, this contributed to the feeling of worry among the students regarding the outcome of the exam. These cognitive problems are expressed in the following narratives:

Usahay dili ko kasabot sa instruction sa test mao mahadlok nako na mali akong mga tubag (I usually have trouble in understanding test directions that's why I have fear to commit mistakes) (Participant 1)

Dili ko kasabot sa sulod sa exam pag muaksyon nako og kabalaka (I find difficulty in understanding the content when I became anxious) (Participant 5)

Pag mabalaka nako, makalimot ko sa akong mga gistudyhan (If I feel anxious, I forget the lessons and the materials that I've previously studied) (Participant 3)

This phenomenon can be explained by the study of (Zeidner & Mathews, 2005) that test anxiety has cognitive effects which include worrisome thoughts and concerns about the consequences of failure or having fear of negative evaluation. Moreover, King, Ollendick and Gullone (1991) stated that test anxious pupil may have difficulty in concentrating during a test, and in reading and understanding test instructions and questions; they may become easily distracted, and experience problems in recalling learnt material.

Behavioral Components. The concentration problems can be attributed to their concerns about consequences of failure. Most of them have negative thoughts and became worried about the effects of failing the test. Moreover, the students are thinking about what could happen or what would their parents feel if they cannot pass the examination. Moreover, majority of them are thinking negatively and comparing their selves to others. It is also evident also in their descriptions of their actions indicating a lack of task focus during a test such as playing with a pencil, looking around the room and so forth. These experiences are evident in the following narratives:

Panan-aw nako na mabagsak ko kung muaksyon nako og kabalaka (I usually feel that I will fail the exam when I am anxious) (Participant 4)

Naghuna huna ko na amasuko akong mama pag mabagsak ko sa exam mao mutaas hinuon akong kabalaka (I'm thinking that my mother will

get angry if I fail the exam that increases my anxiety)
(Participant 2)

This result suggests that the students have negative self-evaluation during test taking, hence supported by Arnkoff, & Wright (1990) that the performance of a high test-anxious student is impaired by negative self-evaluative statements and task-irrelevant thoughts that interfere with the ability to recall task relevant information (Dendato & Diener, 1986; Smith, Arnkoff, & Wright, 1990).

Physiological components. It is also revealed during the interview that they have bizarre feelings in their body while taking the test. Many of the student participants experienced tension, tight muscles and trembling which resulted to disturbances while taking the test. As a matter of fact, they describe their tension through manifestation of strong heartbeat, sweating of their palms, and feeling of getting black out. These are represented by the following narratives:

Mukusog ang pitik sa akong dughan pag madawat na nako ang papel. Panington tanan ako lawas og akong kamot. (My heart is pounding when I received the examination paper. Sweating is all over me particularly in my hands.) (Participant 6)

Mukurog akong tiil nga dili nako mapugngan pag hapit na mgasugod ang exam (My legs are uneasy. I feel that I cannot control its movement when exam almost starts)
(Participant 1)

The physiological manifestations intervene with their concentration and thus making the students find difficulty in answering the examinations. These physiological effects can be explained by Conley (2010) that test anxiety can manifest physiologically through the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, producing elevated cardiovascular responses such as heart rate and blood pressure, and increased electrodermal activity. The physiological effects resulting from test-related anxiety also pose the possibility of interfering with psychomotor processes that are used during complex problem solving (Deffenbacher, 1986).

Coping Strategies of Students

The students stated that they have ways to lessen the effects of anxiety which include relaxation and serious preparation in the exam. These strategies enable them to handle the pressure though they still admit that anxiety is still there but already tolerable.

Relaxation. The students acknowledge that they performed relaxation techniques before taking the test. These involve deep breathing, relaxing their muscles, and imagining the anxiety producing situation. They have reported that it can balance their state of body and mind, even if they knew that the anxiety is still present and felt. Among the narratives are:

Akong himuon usahay kay muginhawa ko og lalom para mukalma akong gibati (I usually perform the basic breathing exercise and I feel calm afterwards)
(Participant 7)

Muhigda ko o diba mulingkod ko og tarong para makalimot lang ko sa kabalaka sa exam (I just lie down or sit on my convenient position so that I can forget my anxiety)
(Participant 5)

It can be observed that relaxation technique is effective in lowering down the anxiety based on the reports of the participants as they feel that situations will be manageable if they are relaxed. It can be noted in the study of Larson, El Ramahi, Conn, Estes and Ghibellini (2010) that various forms of relaxation training have been used to mitigate the deleterious effects of anxiety. Two particular techniques, deep breathing and muscle relaxation, have been shown to effectively decrease anxiety levels in individuals who have difficulty relaxing in anxious situations.

Serious preparation in the exam. The students denote that simple studying does not work if you have test anxiety. It will just further elevate their anxiety if they have poor preparation in the examination. They understand that they have to heavily prepare for the materials. Although, they admit that often students do not spend the time required to really understand the material thoroughly. Real studying involves thinking, analyzing, writing things down, organizing the material in a meaningful way, and figuring out ahead of time what will be on the test. They also suggest that an effective way to deal with test anxiety in a particular subject is to study for a test so thoroughly that there is no way that they can do poorly. The narratives are described below:

Mutotok ko sa akong pagtuon mao na mugasto jud ko og oras sa pagbasa sa mga lessons (I need to focus well in my studies by spending a lot of time reading my notes)
(Participant 7)

Walay sagabal kung duha ka semana ko magprepara sa exam (It takes no distraction which I need to focus at least 2 weeks before the exam)
(Participant 6)

Kinahanglan nako balik balikon akong mga gstudyhan aron makaprepara ko sa exam (I need to repeat and memorize over and over again so that I'm ready during the exam) (Participant 4)

This finding denotes that better study preparation would lessen their anxiety at work since they will become confident due to their thorough preparations, and thus would lessen their feeling of being anxious during the exam. This is supported by Turgay Ergene (2011) which investigated the relationships between study habits and test anxiety, and found that those students having better study skills are those who have reduced anxiety during examinations.

IMPLICATIONS

The students struggled in three aspects such as cognitive, behavioral, and physiological. Hence, those students having anxiety are really expressing their difficulty particularly in concentration and somehow feel hopeless and negative when it comes to the outcome of the exam. The physical manifestations are also disturbing for the students as it will initiate distress to them especially when chronically experienced.

With this, it is important for instructors to reduce the negative stigma surrounding mental, physical, and behavioral effects of test anxiety.

Relaxation techniques serve as a counter- action against anxiety that balance the mind and physiological state of the students during test taking. However, the multidimensional nature of test anxiety makes it difficult for the student to totally removed it but somewhat can be lessened. Students might lack skills to deal with test anxiety directly in the context of evaluation rather than bodily

aspects. Hence, the academe has a role in incorporating strategies like relaxation techniques before the start of examinations. Moreover, the study habits are also a very important strategy to reduce anxiety since the students feel confident that they are already fully prepared for the exam. Although it needs thorough and serious preparation before this strategy can be effective. Thus, teachers can include in their training to their students on how to increase their study skills. Nonetheless, the study preparation is considered to be a factor to reduce the test anxiety of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and implications of the study, the following recommended:

1. Since anxiety is a common reaction of students during test taking, it is suggested that teachers would conduct monitoring as to the degree of anxiety that are experienced by their students. Hence, those having higher anxiety would be given intervention by professionals such as guidance counselors or psychologist.
2. The relaxation technique is shown to be effective in reducing anxiety based from the findings, it is suggested that certain programs relating to this aspect will be conducted in the school.
3. The study habits needs to be monitored by teachers since it is an effective strategy to lower down the anxiety levels of students during test taking.
4. An experimental research design is suggested to be performed to determine the effectiveness of the intervention programs such as relaxation techniques and study skills development.

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