

**TEST-ANXIETY AMONG JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA:
CAUSES, EFFECTS AND COUNSELLING INTERVENTION**

BY

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Abstract

Test-anxiety is defined as an unpleasant feeling of nervousness experience by students before, during or after taking a test. One of the common educational problems is test-anxiety which affects learning and academic achievement. However, Common causes of test-anxiety include: Fear of failure, Pressure to perform well, past negative experience with taking a test, among others. Symptoms of test-anxiety include Physical, Emotional and Behavioural/Cognitive symptoms. The common and lasting effect of test-anxiety involved concentration difficulties in examination situations, depressive symptoms, somatic discomforts and problems in preparing for examination. It also lay emphasis on the techniques that could be used to overcome test-anxiety. Finally conclusions and suggestion such as public enlightenment to make everyone be aware of the effect of test-anxiety which is necessary to engage in effective practice.

Keywords: Test-anxiety, Causes, Effect and Counselling intervention

Introduction

Test-anxiety is an unpleasant feeling of nervousness experienced by students before, during and after test and is an important consideration to keep in mind while evaluating students. Test-anxiety is also a reaction to tension which is experienced by students when faced with test. The element of anxiety includes a subjective feeling (such as tension, apprehension) behavioural responses (such as impaired performance, avoidance of certain situation) and physiological responses (Barlow, 2001). This reaction can badly affect students' memory to recall, leading to misinterpretation of information which can adversely affect learners' academic performance. Test-anxiety cannot only mask the actual abilities of students but also undermine and adversely affect the outcome of students' achievement in examination, thus making the educational surrounding unfriendly and can actually impair learning and hurt test achievement. Unfortunately, test-anxiety can infuse negativism like decreased self-esteem and confidence thus making students emotionally unstable. When this anxiety begins to affect examination achievement it has become a problem.

Test-anxiety is characterized by apprehension, panic and ruminating thoughts of potential failure that are experienced during an examination. In a test conscious society, students' lives are significantly affected by their test performance. Some students are so handicap by test-anxiety and feel no amount of study or preparation will enable them pass an examination, regardless of how important that examination might be. This realization can be disheartening and demoralizing and in some extreme cases, can cause students to give up on their life goals, if achieving them requires taking sort of formal test. Certain factors contribute to test-anxiety in students such as low self-esteem, psychological distress, low previous grades, inability to manage time, lack of confidence, poor study habit among others (Zamira, 2016).

The prevalence rate of test-anxiety is major concern that needs urgent measures, especially in Nigerian economy where education is the order of the day. According to test-anxieties Disorder association of America (2012), majority of students, mostly adolescents report being more stressed by test and school work than by anything else in lives statistically. Cassady and Johnson (2010) noted that between 45 to 60 percent of students experience test-anxiety, they further stated that students who experience test-anxiety tend to be easily distracted during test, experience difficulty in comprehending fairly simple directive and have trouble organizing or recalling information, such students usually end up failing a test when the students requires mental capacity to pass such test. Test-anxiety has become a pervasive problem over the years which need urgent attention.

Concept of Test-Anxiety

Test-anxiety is a reaction to tension which is experienced by individual before, during and after test or examination, this reaction can be physical or emotional which is characterized by fear and feeling apprehensive. Anxiety is part of daily life that cannot be separated from people, so students who suffer from high levels of anxiety should be taught the best way to control it. Salend (2012), states that test-anxiety is a physiological condition in which people experience extreme stress, anxiety and discomfort during or before taking a test. These responses can drastically hinder an individual's ability to perform well and negatively affects social, emotional, behavioural development and feelings about students and school. Test-anxiety is one of the most important aspects of negative motivation and has direct debilitating effects on school performance.

Test-anxiety is an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has physiological and behavioral concomitants, and that is experienced in formal testing or other evaluation situations, test anxiety as the reaction to stimuli that are associated with an individual's experience of testing or evaluative situations.

Sansgiri and Sail (2006) and Bonaccio, Reeve and Winford (2010), define test-anxiety as the negative effect, worry, physiological arousal and behavioural responses that accompany concerns about failure or lack of competence on an examination or similar evaluation situation, in order to understand why some students, have high levels of test-anxiety occurring during a testing situation. Weiner and Carton (2011), reveals that test-anxiety is a more specific form of anxiety in which a person feels worried and negatively aroused when being evaluated in a formal situation. Segool, Carlson, Goporth, Embse and Barterian (2013), define test-anxiety as the emotional, psychological and behavioural responses surrounding the potential consequences of negative evaluation on an upcoming test or examination. It is a physiological condition in which people experience extreme stress, anxiety and discomfort during and before taking test.

Causes of Test Anxiety

The possible causes of test-anxiety identified through interactive includes the following: fear of failure, pressure to perform well in tests, focusing on negative consequences of failing test, past negative experience with taking a test, lack of experience of failure, perfectionism, examination performance related to self-esteem, competitiveness and comparison with other students' scores, lack of preparation, inadequate time management, cramming before the exam, lack of sleep among others. Duraku (2016) identifies lack of preparation, fear of failing, family responsibilities, characteristics of the teacher and exam, lack of time management skills, and lack of study skills as factors related to test anxiety factors. Newman (2018) state that most people who experience test anxiety may be unable to provide an exact reason as to why they experience it. In most instances, test anxiety does not have a single cause. Psychologists argue that text anxiety surfaces from a mix of factors as enumerated below;

1. Tight discipline at home: The tone of the home discipline can create tension in the child that could lead to serious test anxiety problem. A child who just got harsh disciplinary measures for failing a certain examination is likely to experience test anxiety while preparing or during a testing process, due to fear of failing and fear of being disciplined. This unfavourable situation creates a narrow window of opportunities for the students.
2. Restricting parental attitude: The attitude of some parents may cause anxiety in their children. Parents who have regimental rules and regulations at home cause anxiety in their children as they strive to live by parental restrictions (Do's and Don'ts of the home).
3. Authoritarian educational instructional mentality at school: The school system is supposed to have a democratic instructional mentality where students are given some measure of opportunity to express themselves, and make valuable contributions in the scheme of activities. Authoritarian educational instructional mentality produces negative outcomes. When students are faced with negative situations regarding school work, they are bound to live in fear and always under pressure, they may develop a feeling of insecurity, uncertainty, and low self-esteem that will constantly produce panic. Such behaviour always, leads to non-cooperative behaviour such as avoidance or withdrawal, and consequently anxious episodes begin to occur during test.
4. Negative teacher's criticisms: Criticisms are builders of character and actions depending on the nature, whether positive or negative. Negative criticism will have a negative toll on students' self-esteem, and releases a feeling of inadequacy that increases test-anxiety. The consequences of negative criticisms can be

long lasting with grievous effects on the students' performance, especially when they come with self-deprecating comments.

5. Punishment: Love by both parents and teachers doesn't diminish the negative impact of high levels of punishment, Punishment actually leaves children struggling with generalized anxiety. Punishment instils fear and creates a cognitive dissonance, and has been linked with poor psychological development of children and adolescence

6. Low grading: Students who record low grades in school often develop test-anxiety, as their academic performance suffer, the anxiety level related to test increases.

7. Negative evaluation: The fear of negative evaluation makes test anxious students perform worse and often remain below their actual potential. Negative evaluation has long term consequences on students as they often have lower professional qualifications and lower labour productivity (Bogels, Alden & Beided 2010). Individuals are usually apprehensive about the negative evaluation that others might have about their test.

Symptoms of Test Anxiety

Symptoms of test-anxiety are signs that students exhibit to show that they are anxious when taking test and it can vary from mild to severe, some students experience only mild symptoms of test-anxiety and can perform fairly well in examination. Other students are nearly incapacitated by anxiety, which may lead to panic attacks before or during examination. Kendrea (2019), identify the following symptoms of test anxiety: Physical symptoms of test-anxiety include sweating, shaking, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, fainting, nausea, shortness of breath and diarrhea. Emotional symptoms of test-anxiety include depression, low self-esteem, anger, feelings of hopelessness, distress, feelings of inadequacy, fear, helplessness and disappointment are common emotional responses to test-anxiety. Cognitive and behavioural symptoms of test-anxiety include Fidgeting, outright avoidance of test situation, forgetfulness, self-doubt, negative self-talk among others.

Nolen and Hoeksema (2004) identify four types of symptoms that make up anxiety namely:

1. Physiological, or somatic symptoms, including muscle tension, heart palpitations, stomach pain, and the need to urinate.
2. Emotional symptoms-primarily a sense of fearfulness and watchfulness.
3. Cognitive symptoms, including unrealistic worries that something bad is happening or is about to happen.
4. Behavioural symptoms- includes avoiding test situation, need to urinate among others.

Kendrea (2019) also identify the following symptoms of test-anxiety:

- i. Physical symptoms of test-anxiety include sweating, shaking, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, fainting, nausea, shortness of breath and diarrhea.
- ii. Emotional symptoms of test-anxiety include depression, low self-esteem, anger, feelings of hopelessness, distress, feelings of inadequacy, fear, helplessness and disappointment are common emotional responses to test-anxiety.
- iii. Cognitive and behavioural symptoms of test-anxiety include Fidgeting, outright avoidance of test situation, forgetfulness, self-doubt, negative self-talk among others.

Porton (2013) state that the early signs and symptoms of test anxiety vary from individual to individual. The possible signs and symptoms of test anxiety as outlined are grouped/classified into three namely: Physical, emotional and cognitive/ behavioural:

1. Physical symptoms can include muscle tension, shaking, sweating, dry mouth, fainting spells, stomach pain, need to urinate, heart palpitation, headache, nausea, sweaty palm, chewing of nail, diarrhea among others.
2. Emotional symptoms include fearfulness, self-doubt, stress, helplessness, mind going blank, inadequacy, feeling of anger, low self-esteem, disappointment, racing thoughts, feeling confused panic experience, sensation of having a lump in the throat and depression among others.
3. Cognitive/Behavioural symptoms includes unrealistic worries, forgetfulness, and negative self-talk, outright avoidance of testing situation, skipping classes, dropping out of school, difficult concentrating, procrastinating and comparing self, negative reactions like sleeping during examination, crying, fidgeting, lack of confidence, restlessness among other.

Effect of Test Anxiety

Test-anxiety threatens students' mental health and has negative and significant effect on their efficiency, talent development, personality and social identity formation, and as one of the pervasive and problematic phenomena affects their academic achievement and optimal performance, especially when evaluating negatively. Fehm and Fydrich (2011), opines that students who suffer from test-anxiety often experience concentration difficulties in examination situations, depressive symptoms, somatic discomforts and problems in preparing for examination. Accordingly, those affected tend to have lower professional qualification and lower labor productivity. Audin and Yesilyurt (2006) state that characteristic, such as levels of self-efficacy and the perceived ability to work under pressure, significantly influence test-anxiety, test-anxiety creates psychological troubles for learners, reduce motivation, confidence and self-esteem, prevent learners from reflecting actual performance and consequently cause disinterest in learning.

Paulson (2010), stated most school especially universities has made evaluation a warfare whereby students have to batter in order to meet up with standard's set for them by the school which can be attained by the students through various means like memorizing or copying from a colleague (cheating) which does not translate to learning. Rather when students are allowed to study under an atmosphere that is democratic in style controlled by the teacher, whereby the teacher observes students, encourage classroom interaction aimed at unveiling hidden attributes of students which in-turn assist the teacher in the proper evaluation. This is the way forward for evaluation and will help in improving learning outcome and experiences respectively.

Theoretical Framework

This work anchored on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) developed by Aaron Temkin Beck in 1960. This theory is considered as one of the treatment therapy use to reduce students' test-anxiety. This treatment is designed to address spontaneous negative thoughts, assumptions and beliefs in emotional disorders. According to this method, individuals are taught how to review and evaluate their negative thoughts. Therapists are able to help people rebuild their thought patterns to better cope with anxiety. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has strong evidence-based frameworks that support the effective use of coping skills to overcome anxiety. Coping Skill Therapy is described in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as a structured psychotherapy in which client are taught a variety of cognitive behavioural techniques to be used for reducing both anxiety and depression and for coping more effectively with the problem of anxiety. The cognitive behavioural techniques incorporated into coping skill have been carefully chosen to provide clients with a complementary set of coping strategies on which they can draw in dealing with current problems and with broad range potential future problems. People need to learn and improve their ability to cope with distressing anxiety situation. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is also one of the techniques that is believed to promote active coping strategies such as regular exercise, maintaining daily activities, relaxation, guided imagery among others (Bond, 2001).

Counselling Intervention

A counselling intervention particularly coping skill is essential in order to cut down excessive anxiety among test anxious students. Through counselling students experiencing test-anxiety are helped to raise their ego domain, believe in themselves, be more assertive and resilience, since anxiety due to examination fever is the commonest source of anxiety among students. Coping skills emphasize a range of emotional regulation strategies, thought process, and behaviours. Coping skills are likely to help students deal with problem effectively, thus reduce anxiety in examination situations. Therefore, coping skills to reduce test-anxiety include exercise, relaxation technique; deep breathing strategy and positive self-talk among others. Exercise contributes to enhancing mental health and buffering negative impact of anxiety. Students who engage in physical exercise are likely to have fewer test-anxiety symptoms and more psychological wellbeing than those who do not. Exercise is considered an adaptive coping strategy and is a subset of planned, structured and repetitive physical actions, aimed at improving or maintaining physical fitness to overcome test-anxiety.

Relaxation technique is any method, process, procedure that help a student relax, to attain a state of increased calmness, or otherwise reduce level of anxiety. Relaxation technique can help reduce test-anxiety, gain a feeling of control over situation and focus on the test. Relaxation technique can be effective method of reducing test-anxiety and when used the body react both physically and mentally with a relaxation response. The relaxation response replaces body's anxiety response to the stressful situation and

the following psychological changes occur: heart rate slow down, blood flow to the brain increases, level of nitric oxide in the body increases among others. Deep breathing strategy is a natural way to slow the body's reaction to anxiety and is a great way to relax and ease pain and tension. Deep breathing strategy helps expand the lungs and forces better distribution of the air into all sections of the lungs in order to reduce anxiety.

Positive self-talk is an inner monologue that makes individual feel good about himself and everything going on in one's life. It is an optimistic voice in an individual's head that encourages the individual to look at the bright side. During tests, positive self-talk can build confidence and decrease test-anxiety. Using positive self-talk before test also can help reduce test-anxiety and improve student's grades. Putwain and Pescod (2018) opine that, there are many approaches to manage and reduce test-anxiety. The most effective interventions are those that are global, in the sense that they address multiple aspects of test-anxiety using several different practices, For instance, the programme Strategies to Tackle Exam Pressure and Stress (STEPS) pulls together varied practices to help manage stress associated with exams. The programme administers psycho education, academic skill building, cognitive restructuring, relaxation techniques for self-awareness.

Smith (2018) state that strategies to manage test-anxiety can be achieved through the following:

1. Emphases should be placed on the fact that some level of anxiety is both natural and helpful, and stress on nurturing positive coping strategies.
2. Teachers/examiners should ensure that the students get familiar with the testing environment. If possible, let them find their sits and relax before the examination starts. Students who desperately look for where to sit become more anxious.
3. Students should be allowed to complete past papers, including personal information sections regularly before any formal test is given. This is because when students are familiar with simple tasks, it becomes a normal process and lessons pressure and worry.
4. Administer quick test and quizzes regularly at the beginning of a lesson to allow students get familiar with areas of difficulty.
5. Be clear on your instructions. The students should know what is expected of them before and after they have completed the test.
6. Avoid using fear as motivation strategy, pointing out the consequences of failure if students do not work hard raises their anxiety level.
7. Words of encouragement will help them better rather than instil fear in them.

Conclusion

Test-anxiety is characterized by apprehension, panic and ruminating thoughts of potential failure that are experienced during an examination. This reaction can badly affect students' memory to recall, leading to misinterpretation of information which can adversely affect learners' academic performance. Test-anxiety as an emotional reaction of students in testing situation has been identified by psychologists as a determinant of academic performance; such emotional state is accompanied with feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, heightened, anticipation of punishment and loss of status.

Suggestions

Based on the findings from the available literatures, the following recommendations were thus made:

1. There should be public enlightenment to make everyone be aware of the effect of test-anxiety.
2. Students should be encouraged to speak up and report when they are anxious about a test to their teachers.
3. Counsellors should make efforts to address students' test-anxiety individually, in groups and during classroom guidance lessons.
4. Counsellors should advocate for test-anxious students and ensure that the best psychological services are provided for them.

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