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Childhood Anxiety Within the Classroom: A Professional Development Experience for Educators

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CHILDHOOD ANXIETY WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

MANAGING CHILDHOOD ANXIETY WITHIN THE CLASSROOM:
A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE FOR EDUCATORS

MADELINE L. GARLOUGH

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College
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Abstract

Education majors are required to complete a significant amount of coursework related to student behaviors and best practices regarding these behaviors. However, this coursework lies heavily on the side of disruptive and aggressive behaviors. Much less is taught about students who experience quiet conflict, despite childhood anxiety being one of the most prevalent disorders that children face. The purpose of this project is to provide teachers and future teachers with information about how to best assist these anxious students within the classroom.

Because of the nature of this project, it is also necessary to understand how teaching adults differs from teaching children. In order for the proposed professional development to be effective, the instructor must understand by what ways teachers will most efficiently learn, retain, and apply the information given to them. This requires a study into how educating adults is both compared and contrasted to educating children.

The professional development presentation referenced within this project was administered to a junior level class of Inclusive Early Childhood Education majors at Bowling Green State University.

Managing Childhood Anxiety Within the Classroom:
A Professional Development Experience for Educators

Research Questions

1. What research-based strategies are effective when working with children that have anxiety within the classroom?
2. How do adult teaching strategies compare and contrast with early childhood teaching strategies?

Rationale

Childhood Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are characterized by an internal process of excessive worry, apprehensive expectation, and/or rumination about possible negative outcomes (Conceptual Considerations section, para. 1). The current literature in the area of childhood anxiety disorders indicates that, while childhood anxiety is a common and relevant issue, the study of anxiety in children, rather than adults, is still an emerging field. While much literature has been produced about the causes, effects, and implications of anxiety disorders in adults, much of this information has simply been laid on children (Alfano, Beidel, & Turner, 2002). However, researchers are beginning to recognize the need to differentiate practices for working with childhood anxiety from those of working with anxiety in adults (Alfano et al., 2002). As anxiety is progressively considered more of a cognitive process (Alfano et al., 2002), it is important that teachers are given more insight into how to best work with these students.

Although it would seem counterintuitive, research has begun to show that relaxation therapy and delayed exposure does not actually benefit childhood anxiety disorder (Ale, McCarthy, Rothschild, & Whiteside, 2015). Rather than these strategies, it might actually prove best to provide earlier exposure to decrease the amount of anxiety that a child faces previous to a task (Ale et al., 2015; Hirshfeld-Becker, & Biederman, 2002; Wei & Kendall, 2014). Still, most

children with diagnosed anxiety have parents that also have diagnosed anxiety (Wei & Kendall 2014; Mian, Wainwright, Briggs-Gowan, & Carter, 2011), and if these parents have not learned effective coping mechanisms, it is often likely that they will perpetuate an attitude of avoidance with their children (Hirshfeld-Becker & Biederman, 2002). Therefore, creating a strong connection between teachers and the parents of students that display excessive anxiety is crucial (Wei & Kendall, 2014).

A study that has proven rather successful, as presented by Stallard (2010), is that of the FRIENDS for Life program that has been introduced in the United Kingdom and Australia. Throughout this school-wide model, students are given the skills to better understand their metacognition, allowing them to better evaluate their anxieties. This program, which can be implemented by teachers, greatly uses self-talk strategies to help students to problem solve and face their problems, rather than practicing the avoidance that is often associated with anxiety (Stallard, 2010). When all of these factors - research-based practices, parent involvement, teacher understanding, and student direction - are combined, it is possible that teachers might be better equipped to service the students within their classrooms that are struggling with childhood anxiety disorder everyday.

Adult Learning Model

In order to create a successful professional development experience, it is important to understand how adults learn effectively. According to Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, and O'Herin (2009), the adult learning model consists of five stages. Within the first stage, the topic of the professional development is introduced. Next, the topic being taught is modeled. This allows participants to better visualize and understand the information being presented to them. Third, participants are given an opportunity to practice the strategies presented. These first three stages are done within the professional development experience. The fourth stage, consisting of giving feedback, can take place either on site during the professional development and afterwards within real-world experience. Lastly, when placed in actual situations in which they

can use their strategies, participants practice self-reflection in which they consider their use of the learned strategies.

In addition to the professional development experience in itself, the research of Bartlett (2006) indicates that it is important to incorporate coaching into a program if positive results are anticipated. Throughout the humanistic coaching approach of Flaherty, explained by Bartlett (2006), it is crucial that the coach develops a positive constructive relationship with the participants. Because this will not be possible in the realm of this project, this research supports the concept of creating coaching teams within the group present at the professional development. This will allow the participants to expand upon the reflection stage of the adult learning model once the professional development experience has ended. As peers give each other feedback it can serve the coaching function without the expert present and build on the self-reflection.

Project Overview

The activity for this project was the creation and implementation of a professional development opportunity for educators that provides them with useful and effective strategies to best help anxious students within their classrooms. Participants left the professional development with a permanent resource (Appendix A) that they can refer to in the future. The interdisciplinary approach to this project allowed for growth in both the knowledge of childhood anxiety and best practices in the classroom, as well as an understanding of adult learning styles.

The research used to gain information for this project came primarily from articles concerning both childhood anxiety disorders and adult learning styles, as well as online resources that provide support for parents and teachers of children with anxiety disorders. Evidence-based practices were used to create a permanent resource for the professional development participants to refer to. The expected result of this project was that an interactive

professional development opportunity would be created for educators to learn strategies with which to best help students that have anxiety within the classroom. Within this professional development opportunity, participants received a permanent take-away, in the form of a booklet, that they may refer to for future use. This professional development experience was presented as part of a class section of Positive Behavior Supports for Young Children, a junior level class taught by Dr. Alicia A. Mrachko to Inclusive Early Childhood Education majors at Bowling Green State University. A qualitative survey (Appendix B) was sent out to these students a week after the presentation in an effort to receive the participants' feedback.

Results

Through the use of a qualitative survey and discussions, this project proved to have a high degree of social relevance. One week after the presentation of the professional development experience, a qualitative survey (Appendix B) of open-ended questions was sent to all of the participants in the class. Twenty-six responses were collected and analyzed. All but one of the responding participants found the presentation to be helpful. Twenty-one participants found the information that they had received to be relevant to the preschool classrooms in which they are currently student teaching. All but two of the responses indicated that the participants would like more information in the area of childhood anxiety, showing that the participants found the presentation applicable enough to feel that further knowledge of the area would be beneficial.

A drawback within the results was that only five responding participants reported being able to use the information from the presentation and the permanent resource packet (Appendix A) within the week after the presentation was delivered. Factors contributing to this low response rate included many schools being on spring break and participants not being able to identify a specific anxious behavior to address within the short time frame. A follow-up survey might prove helpful to further gain insight into how effectively the participants were able to use the given information within their classrooms.

Three common themes found within the survey responses add to the apparent social validity of this presentation. First, many of the responses included comments about not recognizing that childhood anxiety is such a debilitating condition for children and acknowledging that, for a condition that is so common, childhood anxiety is greatly overlooked within education. This led to the second theme of several participants admitting their own struggles with anxiety and how they were able to connect the given information to personal experiences. A particular response indicated that the participant had greatly struggled with anxiety all throughout primary school, but that teachers had often glossed over the issue. This indicates a lack of recognition and understanding of childhood anxiety within early childhood education. Third, the surveys greatly indicated the relevance of the information. When informed about what forms childhood anxiety comes in, and what it often looks like, many students were able to identify students that might be struggling with these issues that they had not previously recognized.

Reflection

Throughout this project, there have been several eye-opening experiences. The relevance of this project first became apparent to me in the interest of the class participants. Participants showed a high level of interest in the topic, and many expressed their own encounters with childhood anxiety, either personally or through the children in their classroom placements. Only days after presenting this information, my advisor was approached twice about a need for information on the topic of childhood anxiety, further demonstrating that this is an area that is under-researched. Being able to express my own experiences with childhood anxiety, as well as to hear the experiences of others, has shown me that this is a topic that is significantly overlooked within the preparatory work of future educators.

This project has become a catalyst for a desire to further this research and find more opportunities to present and share the information that is currently out there about childhood anxiety. Potential next steps include passing along the resource packet (Appendix A) to county

educational agencies that are interested in furthering their programs and working to have this information published in a professional journal for general educators and special educators. The need for this information is significant, and it is my desire to further educators' knowledge of what the students in classrooms all across the world might be facing as mental health issues become increasingly prevalent.

One of the most interesting reflections that I have gained from my work on this project is the total shift in understanding of anxiety that people have when given more information. When I first began the professional development experience with the class that it was presented to, I asked the participants to raise their hands if they could think of a student in their classrooms that they believed to potentially have an anxiety disorder. Very few raised their hands. However, after a brief explanation of the signs of and differences between anxiety disorders, nearly every student raised her hand when asked the same question again. This made a significant statement to me about the power that simply informing people about childhood anxiety can have.

Possibly the most important information that I gained from this research was a recognition of where to find anxiety disorders within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When completing a search of IDEA, the word "anxiety" never appears. However, the symptoms of anxiety disorders are laid out within Section 300.8 c.4.i. of the document. This section outlines emotional disturbances. I believe that it is crucial that educators and professionals working with children with anxiety disorders recognize that these disorders do, in fact, fall under the realm of IDEA. Many of the children that qualify for these services are potentially not receiving the assistance that they are allotted due to indirect wording. It is my opinion that sharing this information with educators is important for many of the students that go through our educational system in the United States.

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Appendix A

Managing
Childhood Anxiety
Within the Classroom

Resources for Teachers

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Fast Facts

What is Anxiety?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines "anxiety", in the medical sense, as:

"An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it".

What counts as "Anxiety"?

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Phobic Disorders
- Stress Disorders

Is Anxiety Covered by IDEA?

Although anxiety itself is never discussed under IDEA, anxiety often will fall under the category of emotional disturbance due to the following characteristics, allowing many of these students to qualify for services..

Under Section 300.8 c.4.i. of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, "Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- A. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- B. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- C. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- D. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- E. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems."

Do I have a student that suffers from anxiety?

Although many children do not have an anxiety diagnosis, every person faces forms of anxiety on a day to day basis. Our students with anxiety disorders are facing this even more directly and heavily. It is valuable for teachers to recognize both typical and abnormal anxiety in students and be equipped with tools to help these students succeed.

Watch the following video and jot down a few notes about where you might be seeing some of these behaviors in your own students.

Although this video focuses on the parent interactions with the student, how might you use these techniques as the student's teacher?

Youtube - Helping Your Child With Separation Anxiety by AnxietyBC

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_5eiYlo1XM

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Strategies

<p>FRIENDS for Life is a worldwide mental health initiative that was designed to teach young children, primarily ages 4 to 11, about how to understand and manage their own feelings - specifically those that are anxiety based. The program is designed with the idea that teachers will be the primary facilitators.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">F - Feelings</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">R - Remember to Relax</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">I - I can do it! I can try my best!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FRIENDS for Life</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Anxiety Prevention Program</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">E - Explore solutions and Coping Step Plans</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">N - Now reward yourself! You have done your best!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">D - Don't forget to practice!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">S - Smile, Stay calm, and talk to your Support networks.</p>

Strategies

Parent Involvement is KEY!

Many children with a diagnosed anxiety disorder also have a parent that has been similarly diagnosed. Anxiety disorders are often biological. Therefore, it is important for teachers to recognize this connection and equip themselves with resources to offer to families.

Parents do not want to see their children facing anxiety. If the parents have not learned effective coping strategies for themselves, they will often pass on their less effective strategies to their children. The following might be valuable resources for teachers to pull from in order to offer parents more information. It might be helpful to give this information directly to families.

- School Counselors
- WorryWiseKids.org
- The Anxiety and Depression Association of America
<https://www.adaa.org>
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Anxiety
<http://www.aacap.org>
- Children's Anxiety Institute
<http://childrenwithanxiety.com>

**In the video found on page 2, the mother appears knowledgeable about some of the best practices in helping her child with his anxiety. However, parents often do not have as much information about their children's mental health before the child begins school.

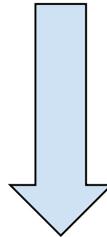
If the parent were responding differently to the child's anxiety in the same video, how might you, as the teacher, respond to the parent to better educate families about how to help their children?

Strategies

Best Practices Concerning Exposure

What About Delayed Exposure?

Although human instinct tends to tell us that we should avoid the things that make us anxious, studies have recently begun to prove that delayed exposure and relaxation therapy are not the best ways to deal with childhood anxiety.



What Does This Mean?

Although we want to shield our students and children from the things that scare them, it is actually in their best interest to direct children to face their anxieties. For example, if a student faces test anxiety, it is less beneficial to the student if he is allowed extra time to calm down before the test. Instead of using that time to calm down, the student will actually just be building in anxiety. Therefore, the sooner that a child is exposed to the inevitable thing that he or she is anxious about, the better that the child will cope with his or her anxiety.

Does this contradict your previous thinking of how to help a child manage his or her anxiety? Jot down your thoughts and how you might use this new information.

Resources for Teachers

Although childhood anxiety is an area that still deserves much research, there are many ways for teachers to reach out for help when there is a child with anxiety in his or her classroom. Here are just a few.

Also, consider speaking to your school's counselor and learning more about the services available to your student through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

- ❖ Kids Matter: Australian Primary School Mental Health Initiative
FRIENDS for Life
<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/programs/friends-life>
- ❖ FRIENDS Resilience by Dr. Paula Barrett
<http://www.friendsresilience.org>
- ❖ WorryWiseKids.org
Sample Accommodations for Anxious Kids
<http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/40>
- ❖ Anxiety and Depression Association of America
<https://www.adaa.org>
- ❖ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Anxiety
<http://www.aacap.org>
- ❖ Children's Anxiety Institute
<http://childrenwithanxiety.com>

