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Anxious Behaviors Among Elementary Aged Children: Implications for Teachers and Schools.

Tara L. Jackson

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine possible factors that might influence third grade students' anxious behaviors throughout the day. I was interested in discovering if students' anxiety related behaviors were impacted by the increased curricular demands in the daily schedule. I was also curious about how students feel during and after they complete different routine curriculum assessments and state standardized assessments. Surveys, drawings, interviews, and observations were used to gather data. Analysis indicates that students' emotional responses and environmental factors all impacted students' anxiety level. It is critical to be aware of all the possible factors that impact a student's emotional state so educators can help provide students with the most successful learning environment.

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Introduction

Stella, a third grader, is called on to answer a question about finding text evidence. This skill has been one focus during the first three weeks of school. Her face begins to flush with embarrassment and her hands begin to tremble. In order to control her hands she wraps them up in her tightly curled hair.

She is reacting to this English Language Arts (ELA) task of finding “text evidence” the same way she would with the pain and determination of cleaning up her scraped knee during recess. When I ask her to take a deep breath and try to work through this problem with me she loses all control and her eyes swell with tears. When I ask her what is the matter she unloads in a single breath, “Well the learning target says I can effectively work in small groups and Sam and Jen were confused so I tried to get them back on task. When I helped them I didn’t get to do my sheet and I couldn’t pay attention to you so now I’m confused and don’t know what’s going on.”

I’m also confused about why Stella, and some of her classmates, are consistently demonstrating frustration during our Literacy block. Could these behaviors of flushed faces, shaky voices, trembling fidgety hands, and tear filled eyes be signs of anxiety? Rachman writes, “Although extensive research has focused on the concept of anxiety, it cannot be defined by purely objective or concrete means” (As cited in Larson, Ramahi, Conn, Estes, & Ghibellini, 2010, p. 3). This is due to the fact that an anxious behavior for one person may not be perceived the same way by another. For the sake of this study I will be considering these behaviors as signs of anxiety. These extreme behaviors are affecting students’ abilities to

proficiently perform the demands of the curriculum during lessons and especially affects their performance on assessments. Could it be that my students' perceptions of the assessments are resulting in competence-based anxiety? If their curriculum assessments are being viewed as extremely stressful tasks than how might their perceptions compare to the high stakes assessments given in April?

As Sarason (1959) wrote, "We live in a test-conscious, test-giving culture in which the lives of people are in part determined by their test performance" (As cited in Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Embse, & Barterian, 2013, p. 489). Sarason wrote this a half century ago, and it has become increasingly true. Across our nation accountability in public schools has increased; school districts, teachers, and students are measured and compared through standardized tests (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). It's hard not to feel the pressure no matter what position of the educational system you are in. Due to the pressure that comes from standardized tests, curriculum time is used to prepare students for the tests. It's a shame that teachers have to view these blocks as test preparation in the first place, but since student performance on these assessments directly affect school districts, teachers, and students, it's hard to think of this time differently. Students aren't the only ones being compared and criticized on their standardized assessments. Schools can lose funding and teachers can lose their job security (Embse & Hasson, 2012).

As a first year teacher I am already feeling the pressure of showing growth in student learning and having my students perform well on the standardized tests that they will face later on this year. "Pressure to produce high test scores and threats to job security have caused teachers to feel disempowered, anxious, and alienated" (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005, p. 239-

240). Since I was already noticing these extreme behaviors early in the 2015-2016 school year I wanted to reflect on the climate I established in my classroom. Then I could begin to look outward at the school climate and the district climate. Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, and Ystgaard (2013) describe climate as, the emotional and instructional support that is created not only between the teachers and their students but also the support among the students. They also stress the importance of a positive school climate: "...good social climate in class is positively related to children's mental health, social functioning, and academic achievement" (Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, & Ystgaard, 2013, p. 421). It was important to reflect and consider the pressures I was feeling about showing growth and how they might have been affecting the students in my classroom.

My district was also concerned with our students' performances on the English Language Arts (ELA) State test. Our ELA curriculum instruction has been increased to three hours compared to our hour of math instruction. Previously, ELA instruction was two hours and Math instruction was an hour and a half making the time spent on the two subjects more balanced. Now we spend three times as much time on ELA as we do on Math. Since most of my school day is focused heavily on ELA I was noticing more stress related behaviors and frustration. Therefore, it was critical to note and observe these behaviors in order to determine if and how this switch was affecting our students. How big of an impact were these behaviors having on student performance?

There are several studies that relate to child anxiety in relation to high stakes testing, reading and writing and the relationship to anxiety, as well as how anxiety affects a child's social problem solving skills. Embse (2012 & 2013) has worked on two different research

articles involving test anxiety around high-stakes testing. He first focused on how test anxiety may be affected by school setting and socio-economic status. Ultimately, what he discovered was that these factors didn't seem to make a large impact. There was not enough of a variation to determine if it had a positive or negative correlation (As cited in Embse & Hasson, 2012). He then wrote an article about how students perceive high-stake testing situations. He compared the NCLB state assessments to classroom assessments and found students reported significantly more anxiety in relation to the high-stakes NCLB assessment (Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Embse, & Barterian, 2013). In my review of research I have found a lack of studies done comparing student perceptions on daily ELA Common Core curriculum, curriculum assessments, and the Standardized Common Core State ELA tests. I can't change the fact high stakes testing exists, but if I can pinpoint when the behaviors occur during the day I may understand why they are occurring. Having a better understanding of why stress related behaviors occur would help me be able to work towards limiting the occurrence of these behaviors in my classroom. "Educators must consider systemic ways to create a positive testing environment, allowing all students to succeed to their potential and prevent school failure" (Embse & Hasson, 2012, p. 181). The ultimate goal of educators is to help our students rise to their highest potential, which is why this research is so important. We must look into the possible factors that are getting in the way of our students effectively learning, and do our best to eliminate them. Overall, I wondered how the demands of the ELA curriculum impact 3rd grade student behaviors. How have students developed a perception of the Common Core State Assessment that they have not yet taken? I was also interested in discovering how student perceptions differ when they are taking a regular curriculum assessment compared to

the high-stakes assessments that will occur in April of 2016. Limited research on this topic has been done since Common Core has been implemented. I hoped to discover how Common Core has impacted students' anxious behaviors by closely observing the behaviors of Stella and other students in my class. Could these behaviors be related to the increased curricular demands in the daily schedule? Are students feeling anxiety while completing state standardized assessments more than routine curriculum assessments?

Theoretical Concepts

Within anxiety research there are two particular theories of influence: Competence-Based Anxiety and Identity-Based Anxiety. Competence-based Anxiety is the idea that students become anxious due to insecurities involving their abilities. For example, a student may feel insecure about his or her language ability and therefore when a language task comes around the student becomes anxious and focused on how he or she will be evaluated (Stroud & Wee, 2006).

Identity Based Anxiety is when an individual is more concerned about maintaining his/her relationship with peers than with the task at hand. In this case the student might appear anxious during a language task not because of a doubt in ability, but due to the fear of damaging a relationship with a particular group of students (Stroud & Wee, 2006).

It is important to keep both theories in mind when conducting research about anxiety with children. Both of these theories are often mistakenly considered one in the same or neglected completely. However, if we want to truly understand the cause behind the anxiety it is important to understand the difference between the two theories.

When I begin to step into my classroom and reflect on what I am observing, I am curious about how large of a role Identity Based Anxiety plays. In my opinion, based on observations I have gathered, my students appear to be stressed out due to Competence Based Anxiety. They either needed directions repeated or forgot the material from the previous lesson. I have students who often report that they are having trouble paying attention and as a result get upset easily which is similar to what Jarrett, Black, Rapport, Grills-Trquechel, and Ollendick (2014) found. Since several of my students often are concerned with what assignments are being graded and how they are being assessed, they are likely feeling insecurity about their performance. Identity Based Anxiety is not as regularly observed in my classroom, but I do notice my students are sensitive to being called on at random as well as being assigned a partner. As I look deeper into my students' anxieties I will explore how each type of anxiety manifests itself within them.

Review of Literature

A growing body of research aims to address the possible causes of the anxious behaviors being observed in elementary classrooms. This research has attempted to get a better idea of what these behaviors are, why they are happening, and what implications teachers and schools need to keep in mind. Anxiety can be displayed through a variety of emotions such as depression, perfectionism, stress, and worrying. The specific behaviors associated with anxiety can vary from child to child. The possible cause for these behaviors are high-stakes testing, academic achievement, self-identity, peer acceptance, problem solving, or language in the classroom. Researchers are also encouraging schools and teachers to take into account whether or not their age, gender, school function, location, or family, may be impacting these behaviors.

Through this literature review, I describe how to define anxiety and what it looks like. I will explore the causes of anxiety and the related behaviors. I also aim to discover possible interventions that can help alleviate the symptoms of anxiety.

Defining Anxiety and What it Looks Like

Anxiety can be defined as a state of psychological distress due to the perception of a potentially threatening event (Larson, Ramahi, Conn, Estes, & Ghibellini, 2010). Anxiety is the interpretation that a potential threat is coming on. Anxiety is most often attributed to negative emotions such as fear, stress, sadness, or disappointment. These emotions greatly impact our brain's ability to process new information because it is overwhelmed with the task of trying to take control over these intense emotions (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010).

In schools the behaviors observed on a regular basis that are most directly linked with anxiety involve more physical states and emotions such as panic, irritability, frustration, boredom, crying, headaches, and loss of sleep. When the anxiety is directly linked to a test or more high stress situation students describe being sweaty, nervous, having stomachaches, and feeling mad, sad, frustrated, hate, confused, tired, and sleepy. Students shared they are worried about factors such as not knowing how to fill in a bubble sheet, not knowing the answers, time constraints, and not passing (Tiplett & Barksdale, 2005). These students in particular are viewing a test situation as being a threatening event and therefore causing them to feel anxious. When students were asked to self-report on their symptoms of anxiety they usually found it hard to describe. Instead they would explain that it happens when they have a hard time paying attention, they feel easily tired, and feel like they get upset easily (Jarrett,

Black, Rapport, Grills-Taquechel, & Ollendick, 2014). Clearly these behaviors are impacting the brain's ability to focus on the important task at hand resulting in a competence based anxiety.

Some studies have found that, children who have higher levels of stress in the home have a better chance at developing anxiety themselves. This is especially true in early childhood. Higher levels of parenting stress in mothers and fathers can result in higher levels of anxiety within their child. "Higher child behavioral inhibition also predicted high child anxiety" ("Parental stress a potential risk factor for anxiety in early childhood", 2012, p. 4). It is definitely worth discovering if the home lives of our students are impacting the behaviors we see in school. Pereira, and colleagues (2013) explored the specific traits in the parenting style of mothers and fathers, to see if there is a relationship with the anxiety found in children. What she discovered was, "...that the mothers' trait anxiety and the fathers' being overprotective and concern have significant impacts on children's anxiety" (Pereira, Barros, Medonca, & Muris, 2013, p. 405). Most studies focus on how a home life and anxious parents can be predictors of childhood anxiety. However, it was interesting that this study focused more on the parenting style. It's critical to have a relationship with the families of our students to help gather a more detailed picture of the individuals that are in our classrooms.

Causes of Anxious Behaviors

As seen in Triplett and Barksdale's (2005) article, testing can be a major factor in causing anxious behaviors to surface, especially when it is high-stakes testing. In the United States testing is becoming increasingly ubiquitous and more high-stakes in nature. Not only do these tests determine the retention of our students, but also greatly impact school districts, schools,

and teachers. Students are being measured and compared and as a result school districts and teachers are also feeling the pressure. Putwain, Connors, Woods, and Nicholson (2012) found that these children are deeply concerned with the measurable component of their learning. Which results in them having difficulty focusing on the task at hand. Baş (2011) not only found that elementary aged children have a strong sensitivity to making mistakes, but also have a stronger need for admiration than adolescent students. These children not only need to feel successful, but they need to hear how well they are doing from their teachers. It has been called into question for years now about how learning and teaching are being impacted because of these tests. Common Core has developed a curriculum that directly models the New York State Assessments which schools have implemented across the state. Schools find areas of need based on students' test performances and change their instruction schedules to focus on improving the weak areas. (Embse & Hasson, 2012). Teachers face threats of job security when students don't perform adequately on these assessments causing an anxiety among the teachers as well (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

Since teachers are also feeling these pressures it is possible that teachers are impacting students' emotional states. According to Baş's (2011) research, students at the elementary level seek acceptance and admiration from their teachers more so than adolescent students. Therefore students fear disappointing their teachers and as a result are sensitive to making mistakes. Students are feeling a pressure to perform on these assessments and feeling that there will be consequences if their performance is not sufficient, not only for their sakes but their teachers as well (Larson, Ramahi, Conn, Estes, & Ghibellini, 2010). Teachers may also be indirectly impacting students through their personal anxieties over the pressure their State and

school is putting on them to get their students to perform. Schools can also be indirectly impacting student performance through the setting and climate it has presented. When schools are drastically changing their schedules to focus more instruction time on one subject area students are directly affected and may feel more of a competence-based anxiety as a result.

Implications of Anxiety

Not only is it critical to think about the possible cause of anxious behavior, but also the kind of impact these behaviors have on students. Students' emotional and social wellbeing is being put at risk because of these behaviors, and when that happens their school success can be greatly impacted (Blaas, 2014). For example, one study found that students who scored higher on the depression scale and indicated they think negatively toward literacy skills scored lower on writing tasks than other students (Bonifacci, Candria, & Contento, 2007). As a result students' self-worth and confidence to perform is being directly affected.

Students are interpreting these demands as threats instead of challenges. Putwain, et al. (2012) found that low competence beliefs increase the chance of failure. Since students view high-stakes testing situations as being more stressful than typical classroom assessments their scores could be negatively influenced. Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Emdse, and Barterian (2013) confirmed the idea that students view high stakes testing as more anxiety provoking than curriculum assessments. All potential implications for test scores and teacher instruction are important to consider if students' performance is being negatively impacted by their anxiety. It is clear students are having negative thoughts and emotions during these high stress situations

but they do not have the coping skills to overcome these emotions (Creswell, Murray, & Cooper, 2013).

Children who experience anxiety often become adults with anxiety. Sulkowski, Joyce, and Storch (2012) add that when childhood anxiety goes untreated it can be connected to chronic depression, substance abuse, as well as anxiety in adulthood. Therefore putting test performance aside, these issues related to student anxiety can grow to become much larger and concerning problems in adulthood. Children with anxiety also struggle with forming peer relationships and appropriate social behaviors in comparison to non-anxious children.

McLoone, Hudson, and Rapee (2006), added that students who become anxious due to social interactions will fear tasks such as meeting new students, talking in class, meeting with the principal, or performing in front of an audience. All these activities happen frequently in the school setting and can cause great distress to students with social anxiety. Since anxiety is affecting our students and their daily lives in a school setting it warrants further research and efforts to further improve our programs.

Intervention

Since research has proven that anxiety exists within schools it is crucial that possible solutions be researched and considered. If teachers are impacting and influencing the physical and emotional behaviors and researchers have found that elementary aged students associate these behaviors with worries on how they are being evaluated, then teachers need to take steps to ease their students' worries (Stroud & Wee, 2006). It could be as simple as walking students through the evaluation process. Teachers need to be helping students become familiar

with how they are being graded and assessed. Larson, et al. (2010) found that two techniques were particularly successful in relaxing students' anxious behaviors: deep breathing and muscle relaxation. Spending a few minutes a day practicing breathing skills can make all the difference. Students found relief just by taking their shoes off or chewing gum during a test (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). Since these are elementary aged children it is still our job as teachers to be providing them with coping skills for dealing with high stress situations (Creswell, Murray, & Cooper, 2014). Teachers need to be providing their students with the skills to be successful in life, which will entail many high stress situations.

McLoone, et al. (2006) focused their research on treating anxiety within the school setting. They discovered and recommended three possible programs. The first is the *FRIENDS* program which is implemented as part of the school's curriculum, and is school wide. The second program is known as the *Cool Kids* program, and this program is offered to a small group of students who are at risk or showing beginning signs of anxiety. The last program is *The Skills for Social and Academic Success Program* which specifically treats social phobia, so therefore it is done either individually or on a small group basis.

For the purpose of my research I found the *FRIENDS* program to be the most valuable and realistic in a school setting. The *FRIENDS* program is a universal program and can be done with your entire group of students. Only the teacher needs to be trained in order to implement the program. "This universal prevention approach has several benefits; it has the potential to enhance resilience in all children regardless of risk status, it avoids the possibility of any stigmatization by selecting only certain children, it can incorporate peer support and modelling and it is often logistically easier to keep a whole class of children learning together" (McLoone,

Hudson, & Rapee, 2006, p. 229). The anxiety I am seeing within my students often happens when they are in a high stress situation and many students would benefit from building their resilience situation and many students would benefit from building their resilience. The program implements these strategies through exercise, relaxation techniques, and preparation for exposure to high anxiety provoking situations. The other beneficial aspect of this program is that it hold sessions for parents to help get them involved.

Importance

Further research on anxiety is vital due to the impact it can have on test scores therefore impacting student promotion and retention, school districts' funding, job security, health, and well-being for teachers and children. Embse & Hasson (2012) agree explaining, "Because indicators of school and student performance are determined through the use of high-stakes tests, it becomes critical to examine any variable which may interfere with the authentic measurement of student achievement and school effectiveness" (p. 180). When schools are affected they make quick fixes in order to show improvement and keep funding. These surface area changes don't make a positive impact on improving student performance for the long run but are effective enough for the time being (Embse & Hasson, 2012). These short term changes could actually be impacting student anxious behaviors and in result continue the negative spiral.

Segool, et al. (2013) recommended further research be conducted around how students perceive the annual high-stakes tests compared to their curriculum assessments and whether there seems to be a heightened distress among students. More important than test scores and

school funding is that anxiety greatly affects the well-being of the child experiencing these emotions. Not only are these students experiencing distress when in these situations, but these emotions also relate to depression, concentration difficulties, poor self-esteem, and difficulty forming peer relationships (McLoone, Hudson, Rapee, 2006). If the anxiety goes untreated these children can be at risk of chronic depression, future substance abuse, and anxiety during adulthood (Sulkowski, Joyce, & Storch, 2012).

Methodology

This study focused on student anxiety in the classroom and how students were being impacted. Data were collected for a period of 2 months and contained two distinct collection methods. First, data were collected through an interview where students reflected on their feelings throughout the school day and during assessments with myself as their teacher. This interview was done on an individual basis and completed during the students' snack time so they did not miss out on any instruction time. The purpose of this interview was to gain a broad understanding of student perceptions of different aspects that exist in their school day. Were they perceiving different situations as stressful?

The students also completed drawings after taking curriculum math and ELA tests, as well as the high stakes tests that happened in April 2016. Students were asked to draw how they were feeling during the assessment and to explain their drawing in words. The purpose of the drawings was to find similar and divergent trends among the students.

Setting

The setting for this study was in a third grade classroom within a Suburban Elementary School that holds grades 2-3. Approximately 500 students attend this particular elementary school. The average class size contains about 22 students. Over eighty percent of the students who attend this school are white, two percent are black, seven percent are Hispanic, and two percent are Asian. About 50 percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. Last year less than half of the general education students who took the English Language Arts State Assessment were proficient (“New York State Enrollment Data”, 2015).

Within the classroom students were arranged in pairs or groups of four. There is a quiet library nook that is somewhat secluded from the rest of the classroom. There is a bean table for pulling small groups, and there are also three open tables where students can take their work and have more room to spread out. There are three comfy arm pillows that students can use while on the carpet doing independent reading. There is a class set of dividers for students when they are completing an assessment. These dividers allow students to have their own personal nook.

Participants

Participants in the study were selected because they were all members of my third grade classroom. There were twenty-two possible candidates, nine of them being males and thirteen were females. All the students were between 8 and 9 years old and all the students in the classroom were Caucasian. Thirteen students were progress monitored for fluency and reading level. Six students received extra math services through a program called Sunrise. The

Sunrise program had students come to school 90 minutes before the regular school day began and receive small group math instruction. Six students received AIS (Academic Intervention Services) reading services. One student received speech therapy. All twenty-two students received math and ELA instruction from me in my classroom. During guided reading and intervention blocks students could be in any of the four classrooms within our “PLC” group (Professional Learning Community). Students rotated among the rooms for the first schedule block of the day as well as the last.

Out of my twenty-two possible candidates I received consent and assent from twenty students. I purposefully collected all twenty students’ drawings and writing for my research to help provide an accurate representation of my classroom. I also randomly selected seven of the students to be used as my focus group. I observed the behaviors of these seven students using a double entry journal. Of these seven students four are female and three are male. One student went to speech therapy. Three students went to early sunrise math. One is on medication for ADD. Three students are progress monitored for their reading fluency. Two students received AIS reading services from our reading specialist. Two students received enrichment instruction during our intervention block. This focus group is an accurate representation of my entire class.

Positionality

My positionality as a teacher-researcher includes many facets of my identity. Taking into consideration my race, class, gender, education, and personal beliefs will enable me to look critically at my research. I am a single, white woman in my 20’s. I grew up in a working class

household. My father was the first and only member in his family to attend college. My mother and father both graduated with Bachelor's Degrees from The College at Brockport. My father works at The College at Brockport as an athletic trainer and my mother is a physical education and health teacher at Hillside Children's Center.

I graduated from SUNY Oswego with a Bachelor's Degree in Childhood Education in 2014. While in high school I did a program through the College at Brockport which allowed me to receive my Bachelor's Degree in three years. Since I was able to graduate early I decided to dive right into my Master's Degree in Literacy. I worked as a substitute teacher for one year and was able to find a job by the end of the 2014-2015 school year. I am currently a third grade general education teacher.

I believe that teachers not only play the role as the educator but also the caregiver during the hours the students are away from their families. Therefore, it is our jobs as teachers to make sure our students' developmental assets are being met in the classroom. Teachers need to create a safe and positive learning environment for their students. Teachers need to take into account their students' feelings and be able to read their emotions throughout the day since they can impact student performance and well-being.

Methods of Data Collection

The high-stakes tests took place April 5, 6, and 7th of 2016. During those days students spent 10 minutes after the assessments reflecting on their emotions during the test. After these assessments students completed a drawing that showed how they felt during the test. Students also used writing to describe their drawing (Appendix A). This activity was also used in the

classroom leading up to these assessments. Students completed this activity after curricular math and ELA assessments, to allow me to better understand students' perceptions of high-stakes tests in comparison to curriculum assessments that are given throughout the year. This way students can have some familiarity with the activity and I will be able to compare students' feelings toward the assessments. Each drawing activity did not take more than ten minutes for the students. These surveys were administered by me and were returned to me as they were completed. I only analyzed the data from the eighteen students I received permission from.

Not only was I interested in better understanding how students felt toward assessments, but I was also interested in discovering how student behaviors were impacted during the school day. This aspect of the research happened over a period of two months. Students in my focus group participated in semi-structured interviews during snack time that allowed them to reflect on their behaviors and attitudes during instruction. These interviews did not impact instruction and did not take more than ten minutes (Appendix B). I audio-recorded these interviews so I could play them back and transcribe them at a later date.

I also used a double journal entry to help record the behaviors that were happening in my classroom and when they were happening (Appendix c). I would spend anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes taking field notes at least twice a week, on my focus group. This in turn allowed me to find trends in behaviors related to anxiety as well as similar times they were occurring.

Trustworthiness of this study was established through the practice of data triangulation (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). Three forms of data were collected which included observational field notes, surveys, and interviews. The research process was

prolonged and data were collected for 5 weeks. I am familiar with the setting in which data was collected, I am also familiar with the participants. Participants were aware they could decline or drop out at any point during the research process, and this helped ensure honesty. I warranted transferability by discussing context as well as participant details. I also used a research partner and advisor to consult with in order to ensure my findings were reliable and accurate. The Institutional Review Board approved my research.

Analysis

I analyzed data using constant comparison where I examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized my data. I also used a coding process to help interpret my data. First, I went through the drawings and descriptions that I had collected from my students. I separated each drawing into piles based on the specific test the students reflected on. Then I sorted through them by test to look for similar themes across all the drawings. Once themes were established I then constructed categories for these themes (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). This process helped me answer the question of whether students were feeling anxiety while completing state standardized assessments more than routine curriculum assessments. I used triangulation in my research since I collected data from drawings, interviews, and observations; which allowed me to provide a more accurate response to this question.

I categorized themes across my interviews with my focus group students. The interview questions I used were self-created and helped answer both research questions. The responses from these interviews related to the drawings students created as well as the observations I

recorded. Similar themes still remained. For the question of could anxious behaviors be related to the increased curricular demands in the daily schedule; both the interviews and observation helped provide an answer to this question.

Findings

Could students' anxious behaviors be related to the increased curricular demands in the daily schedule?

Finding 1: Students react anxiously depending on the demands the individual student finds most threatening.

Through interviewing my focus group I discovered that most of the students' immediate reactions to the question: "Do you enjoy our ELA lessons?" were yes, they like our curriculum lessons. They described them as being "fun", "exciting", and "good". It wasn't until they were able to fully process the question that they started adding comments like "actually it depends" or "sometimes". These comments were usually followed up by a curriculum demand that they did not enjoy, such as finding text evidence or writing a two-point response. These specific demands varied depending on the student's personal preference. I found similar results in my observations. A student would have the same anxious behaviors each time he or she completed the same task. There was no one curriculum demand in particular that jumped out as being anxiety provoking for the entire class besides assessments.

It really came down to personal preference. For example, Stella on March 2, 2016, was putting a lot of pressure on her pencil when writing, then would flip her pencil around to erase what she wrote. As she did this she ripped through her paper. Tears began streaming down her

face. I pulled her in the hall and she began to cry harder. She said she didn't know where to find the text evidence because I didn't give page numbers this time.

Sky, another student facing a different task on March 8, 2016, crossed her arms and put her bottom lip out while working in groups. One group mate tried to coax her back and Sky shouted, "You all hate me, no one ever listens to me. You're all wrong anyway." Then Sky quickly folded her arms back up and began to cry. On another day I observed Stella and Sky having similar reactions when completing an activity that was comparable to the activity that evoked their previous reaction. Stella views finding text evidence as extremely stressful. Sky struggles working in groups with other students and often ends up crying. In our interview Stella talked about how much she enjoys group work because everyone has great ideas to share. Sky doesn't mind taking tests because it's silent and no one can interrupt. These are two different curriculum demands that have very different outcomes depending on the student.

Lily is another student who shows signs of anxiety when taking on certain tasks. In our interview together she mentioned that math problems can sometimes be "tricky." She went on to tell me, "Math tests make me worry because I might get one wrong because my mom tells me I rush, she also says I'm not confident." She is a strong student overall, so I was surprised to hear that there are some tasks that she finds worrisome. On March, 4, 2016, Lily was on the same math problem for ten minutes. She was looking around the room frequently and when she would accidentally make eye contact with me she would lift her shoulders and mouth "I don't get it." After letting her grapple with the problem for a few more minutes she began wiggling back and forth on her leg that was tucked between her chair and bottom. She then began pulling her ponytail through her hand repeatedly. Lily was showing signs of anxiety while trying

to process the math problem. Her behaviors were subdued compared to Stella and Sky. Lily who normally completes a task quickly with little distraction and movement, spent her time searching for answers and fidgeting with her hair and legs. This showed me that she was experiencing distress due to the task of solving a two-step word problem.

Nate is also a student who shows subdued signs of anxiety when it comes to certain tasks. In our interview together he mentioned that he feels “confident” completing tasks on his own because he is “smart.” Then when he was asked how he would feel if I tested him today on the topic, he responded with “scared because I don’t know what score I’ll get.” He also commented on how handwriting “isn’t the greatest” and it takes him a long time to write neat. Due to him not being confident in his handwriting skills, he doesn’t enjoy writing paragraphs. On March 7, 2016, I observed Nate during an ELA test where he had to read an informational text and write a paragraph to demonstrate his knowledge. He read the passages in under ten minutes, but when he got to the prompt he began twirling his pencil in his shaggy hair. He did this for seven minutes then began flipping back through the text. After fifteen minutes he began writing the words RADD (Restate, Answer, Detail, Detail) down the side of his paper. RADD is a technique my students have been trained to do to help them remember what to include in their answer. He would write two to three sentences then stop to twirl his hair. He repeated this behavior until he finished the task, which took him an hour and five minutes. Like Lily, Nate was not crying or lashing out toward his peers. Instead he gave attention to his personal struggle through subtle hints of anxiety such as his hair twirling and prolonged time to complete the assignment.

Students show different signs of anxiety depending on the academic demands they find most threatening. These signs of anxiety also look different from student to student. Some students react more outwardly and expressive like Stella did when she cried over finding text evidence. Other students act out by crying and arguing like Sky did when having to complete group work. Then there are also many behaviors, such as wiggling and playing with a pencil that may go unnoticed. Both Lily and Nate didn't draw much attention to themselves and only gave subtle hints of anxiety. Even though their behaviors were different from Stella and Sky, their anxiety was still impacting their performances.

Are students feeling anxiety while completing state standardized assessments more than routine curriculum assessments?

Finding 2: Students found the practice state assessments to be more anxiety provoking than the routine curriculum assessments. However, I was surprised to discover that student anxiety decreased on the actual state assessment in comparison to the practice state assessment.

I created five categories from the themes I discovered in analyzing student drawings and written descriptions: Emotions, Facial Expressions, Isolation, Test Design, and Body. Each of these categories were supported through the drawings.

Categories (Practice State Assessment)	Number of drawings	Percentage
Written Emotions	56/59	94.9%
Facial expressions	59/59	100%
Isolation	56/59	94.9%
Test Design	32/59	54.2%
Body	20/59	33.9%

Figure 1. Categories for the Practice State Assessment. This figure illustrates the categories created after analyzing drawings from the Practice State Assessment.

Categories (Routine Curriculum Assessment)	Number of drawings	Percentage
Written Emotions	29/36	80.6%
Facial expressions	34/36	94.4%
Isolation	32/36	88.9%
Test Design	14/36	25%
Body	5/36	13.9%

Figure 2. Categories for Routine Curriculum Assessments. This figure illustrates the categories created after analyzing drawings from the Routine Curriculum Assessment.

Emotions

If a child explicitly wrote an emotion they were feeling in their written description or thought bubble then they were placed in this category. Several emotions were expressed throughout these drawings. Recurring words included nervous, confident, good, confused, scared, worried, frustrated, afraid, annoyed, and stressed. Other words or phrases that did not quite represent an emotion but were also frequently used included hard, too long, and growth mindset. According to Dweck (2006) people with a growth mindset believe they have the ability to change their intelligence through hard work and dedication. The students I have whom I believe live through a growth mindset used words like challenged and confident to describe their emotions toward the different kinds of assessments. One example is of Daisy who said, “I

knew I always have a growth mindset! My body was saying I want that test! I just felt really really good about myself! Until I got to the last problem (figure 3).”

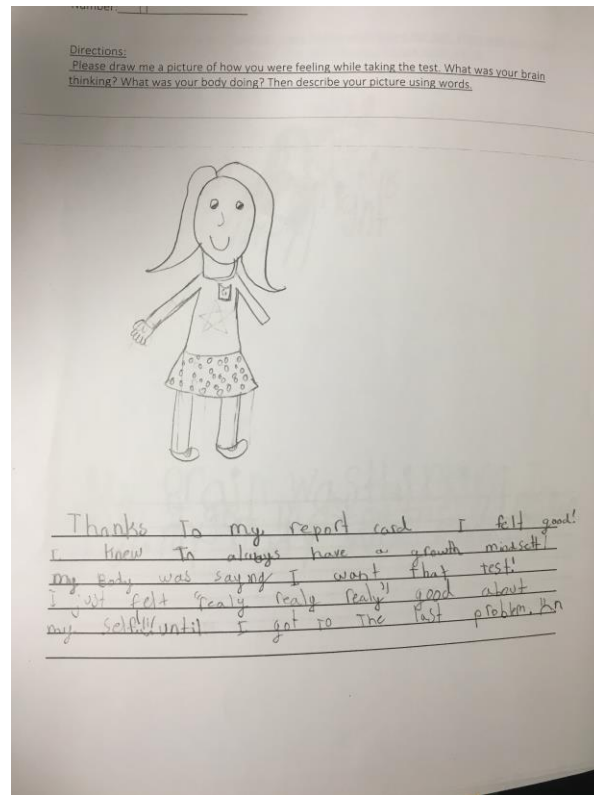


Figure 3: Growth mindset. Student wrote about having a growth mindset.

Overall, the emotions nervous and good seemed to be the most frequently used throughout all the drawings and descriptions. Similar trends about students feeling nervous also were discovered. Many students felt nervous about the time restraints. Students felt nervous that they were going to get a bad grade. Students said they were nervous because of how long the test was. Students also felt nervous that the test would be too hard. For example, one student wrote (figure 4), “Nrvs, the storys are to long. I coodn’t reameder som things. Am I going to get bad grades?”

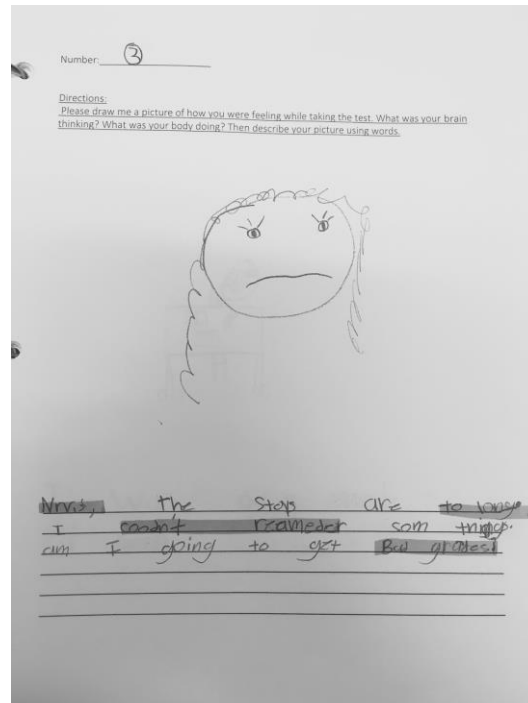


Figure 4. Student writing about feeling nervous. This student was nervous about the length, her memory, and grading.

When it came to a practice state standardized assessment students frequently reported feeling nervous. Seventy-five percent of students reported feeling a negative emotion while taking the test. Only 32 percent reported a positive emotion. It was the complete opposite after students reflected on a routine curriculum assessment. Eighty-six percent of students reported feeling positive emotions during the test while only 17 percent reported a negative emotion (see figures 5 and 6).

Written Emotions (Practice State Test)	Number of drawings	Percentage
Happy	2/56	3.6%
Calm	2/56	3.6%
Confident	5/56	8.9%
Good	6/56	10.7%
Glad	1/56	1.8%
Awesome	1/56	1.8%
Excited	1/56	1.8%
Liked it	0/56	0%
Confused	3/56	5.4%
Upset	1/56	1.8%
Scared	1/56	1.8%
Nervous	17/56	30.4%
Worried	7/56	12.5%
Afraid	2/56	3.6%
Annoyed	2/56	3.6%
Bummed	1/56	1.8%
Stressed	4/56	7.1%
Frustrated	2/56	3.6%
Overwhelmed	1/56	1.8%
Horrible	1/56	1.8%

Figure 5. Written emotions after the Practice State Assessment. This figure illustrates the emotions students felt during the Practice State Assessment.

Written Emotions (Routine Curriculum Assessments)	Number of drawings	Percentage
Happy	4/29	13.8
Calm	0/29	0%
Confident	3/29	10.3%
Good	9/29	31.0%
Glad	0/29	0%
Awesome	4/29	13.8
Excited	2/29	6.9%
Liked it	3/29	10.3%
Confused	1/29	3.4%
Upset	1/29	3.4%
Scared	0/29	0%
Nervous	3/29	10.3%
Worried	0/29	0%
Afraid	0/29	0%
Annoyed	0/29	0%
Bummed	0/29	0%
Stressed	0/29	0%
Frustrated	0/29	0%
Overwhelmed	0/29	0%
Horrible	0/29	0%

Figure 6. Written emotions after Routine Curriculum Assessments. This figure illustrates the emotions students felt during Routine Curriculum Assessment.

Facial Expressions

Every drawing collected from the students had at least a face. The facial expressions on these faces varied. I also noticed that in several cases the facial expression did not necessarily match the written emotions the student included. For example, in many cases where a student drew a smiley face they wrote about negative emotions such as feeling nervous or that they were going to be sick. One student said, "I feel sick and I was afraid that this was going to be harder." Due to misspellings I had the student read back to me what they wrote (see figure 7).

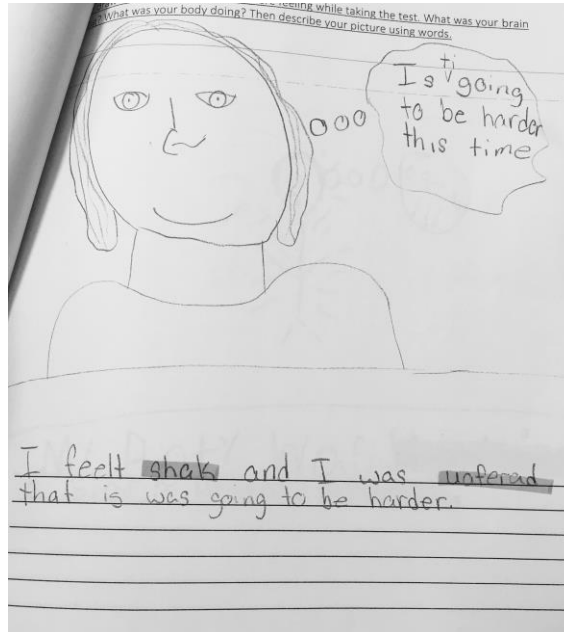


Figure 7. Facial expression drawn after the Practice State Assessment. This figure illustrates a student with a happy face who wrote about feeling negative emotions.

Therefore, I chose to make facial expressions its own category. The most commonly used facial expressions were a frown face and smiley face. Other facial expressions that exhibited being unhappy were wiggly mouth, straight mouth, “O” shaped mouth, and a face without a mouth.

On the practice state standardized assessment students for the most part equally used happy and unhappy faces. Fifty-four percent drew an unhappy face and 46 percent drew a happy face. However these numbers changed greatly after students took a routine curriculum assessment. Twenty-three percent drew an unhappy face and 77 percent drew a happy face (see figures 8 and 9). Therefore, students demonstrated happier facial expressions while taking a routine curriculum assessment over a practice state assessment.

Facial Expressions (Practice State Test)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Happy face 😊	27/59	45.8%
Sad Face 😞	14/59	23.7%
Wiggle mouth 😏	3/59	5.1%
Straight mouth 😐	10/59	16.9%
Mouthless 😬	1/59	1.7%
“O” shaped mouth 😱	4/59	6.8%

Figure 8. Facial expression drawn after the Practice State Assessment. This figure illustrates the facial expressions students drew after the Practice State Assessment.

Facial Expressions (Routine Curriculum Assessment)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Happy face 😊	26/34	76.5%
Sad Face 😞	2/34	5.9%
Wiggle mouth 😏	0/34	0%
Straight mouth 😐	3/34	8.8%
Mouthless 😬	2/34	5.9%
“O” shaped mouth 😱	1/34	2.9%

Figure 9. Facial expression drawn after Routine Curriculum Assessments. This figure illustrates the facial expressions students drew after routine curriculum assessments.

Isolation

Just about every drawing collected showed the child in isolation. For a child’s drawing to be put in this category they had to draw themselves with no one else in the drawing. They did not have to describe themselves in isolation to be put in this category. Ninety-three percent of the drawings displayed the child in the middle of their page surrounded by whiteness. It is reasonable that most students drew themselves this way since they were asked to draw a

picture of how they were feeling when taking the test. But since such a large number of them drew themselves in isolation so similarly, I found it worth noting. Below is an example of a student who drew herself in isolation. As you can see, the student was given ample amount of space to draw but she chose to use less than a fourth of the page. She drew herself small and off centered. There in no one else indicated in the picture, the child noted that she felt nervous (figure 10).

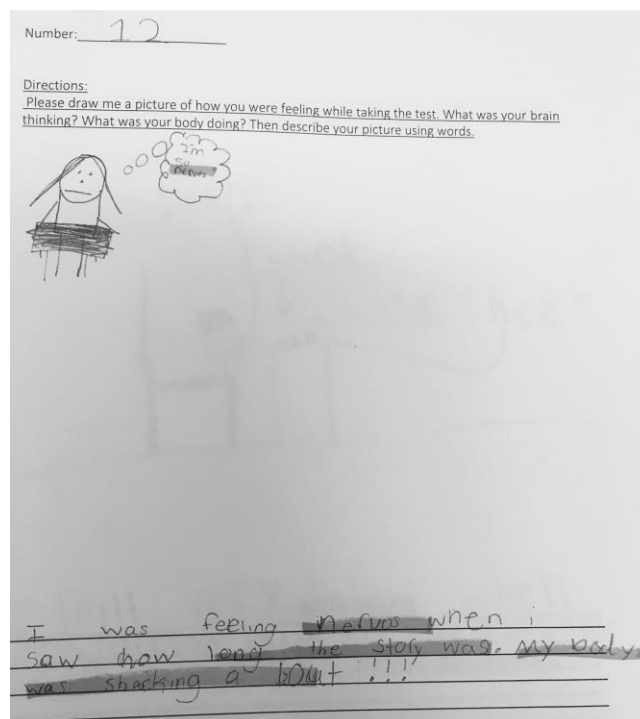


Figure 10. Isolation. Student drew herself in isolation.

Test Design

If the child's drawing included a feature that is unique to the testing situation then they fell into this category. They may have drawn or written about a bubble sheet or the test booklet. They could have commented on what the test was about or questions the test asked. The most common drawing that fell under the category of test design was stressing about the

time restraints. For example, students took practice state assessments that were timed. Several students commented on the fact that the test was seventy minutes or that there were ten minutes left. Many students also reflected on how long the passages were for the ELA test. Bubble sheets were also a common theme that students wrote about. Some students described that they were unsure how to take the test. For example (figure 11), one student wrote, “What is she talking about? I felt nervous, stressed worried a little, confused? How do we do it.”

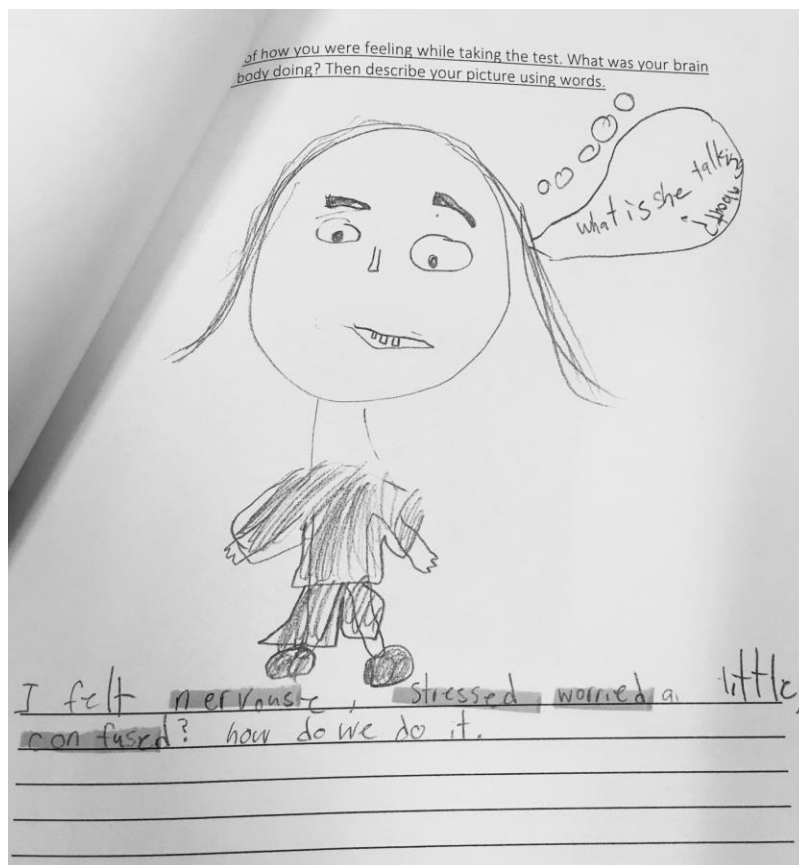


Figure 11. Unsure. Student was unsure of how to take the actual test.

Another common theme was students depicting how they were being graded. Some students drew a grade on their exam or wrote about getting a particular grade. Several students commented that they were stressed about getting a bad grade. Other students mentioned the opposite, saying they weren't nervous because the grade doesn't mean

anything. Below is an example of a student who worried about getting a bad grade. She also mentioned that she got upset and cried on her paper. She wrote, “I said I am not going to do this and I got up set and shut down and was crying of my papper. That was half done” (figure 12).

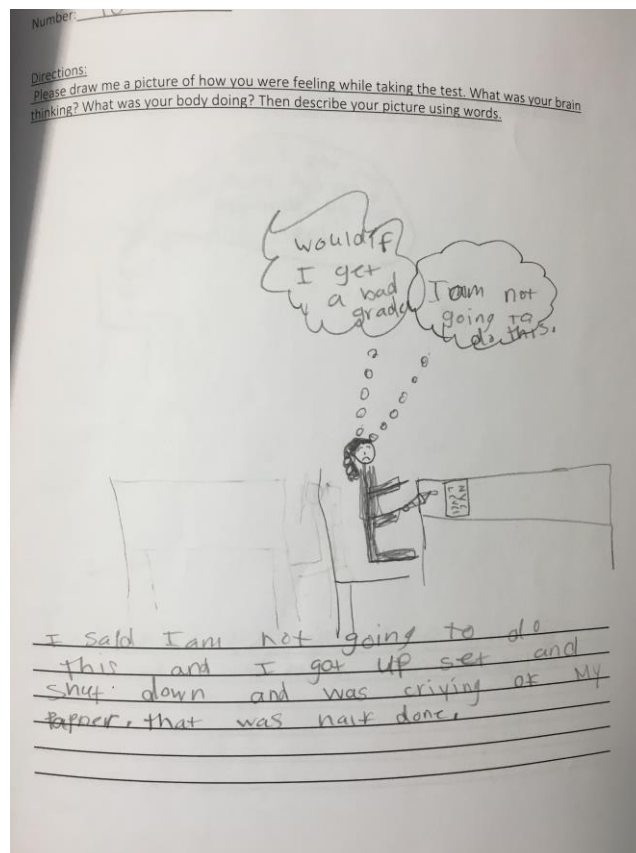


Figure 12: Bad Grade. This student worried about getting a bad grade and as a result felt other negative emotions.

In both types of assessments students reported most on grading and specific questions. However, there was a difference when it came to positive or negative comments about the questions or grade. On the practice state standardized assessment 31 percent of the students worried about getting a bad grade. Thirteen percent of the students mentioned a particular question that was too hard. On the routine curriculum assessments 21 percent of the students

commented on getting a good grade. Fifty-seven percent of the students mentioned getting stumped on a question but they didn't give up (see figures 13 and 14).

Test Design (Practice State Test)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Practice	2/32	6.3%
Length (too long)	2/32	6.3%
Memory (can't remember)	2/32	6.3%
Grading (I'm got a bad grade)	10/32	31.3%
Time (70min is a long long time, what if I don't finish)	8/32	25%
Bubble sheet	2/32	6.3%
Specific Questions (That fraction question stumped me)	4/32	12.5%
Formatting (How do we do this?)	2/32	6.3%
Prepared	0/32	0%

Figure 13. Test Design for the Practice State Assessment. This figure illustrates the category of test design and the possible areas students commented on after taking the practice state assessment.

Test Design (Routine curriculum Assessment)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Practice	0/14	0%
Length	0/14	0%
Memory (I can't remember)	1/14	7.1%
Grading (I think I got a 3!)	3/14	21.4
Time	0/14	0%
Bubble sheet	0/14	0%
Specific Questions (I got stumped on the 3rd one but didn't give up)	8/14	57.1%
Formatting	0/14	0%
Prepared	1/14	7.1%

Figure 14. Test Design for Routine Curriculum Assessments. This figure illustrates the category of test design and the possible areas students commented on after taking routine curriculum assessments.

The contexts these categories were used in were extremely different based on the kind of assessment. For example, on the Practice State Test students wrote about getting a bad grade, but on the Routine Curriculum Assessments students wrote about getting a good grade. The student below wrote about how they thought they would get a good grade after taking a routine curriculum assessment (figure 15). He wrote, "I felt confident that I was going to get a 3 on my test!"

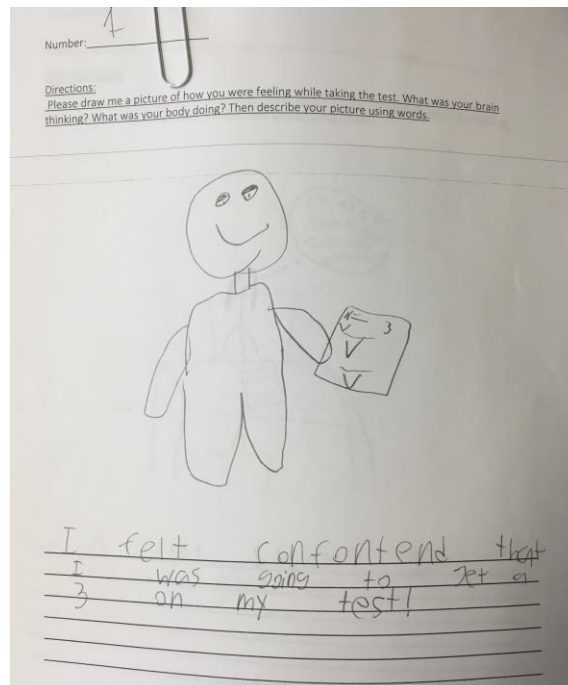


Figure 15: Good Grade. This student wrote that they thought they were going to get a 3 on the test!

Body

This category represents the physical symptoms students reported that they felt during the test. These symptoms could have been depicted in the drawing or written about in the description. On the practice state standardized assessment twenty out of fifty-nine drawings commented on what their body was doing while taking the test. In the routine curriculum assessment only five out of thirty-six reported what their body was doing (see figures 16 and 17). From this evidence I can speculate that the students' bodies responded more physically when taking a practice state assessment compared to when they took a routine curriculum assessment. This correlates to my earlier finding of students feeling more nervous on the practice state assessment versus a routine curriculum assessment.

Body (Practice State Assessment)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Shaking	12/20	60%
Crying	1/20	5%
Tired	2/20	10%
Stretching	1/20	5%
Vibrating	1/20	5%
Shivering Cold	2/20	10%
Deep Breaths	1/20	5%
Pass out	1/20	5%
Still	1/20	5%
Stopped working	1/20	5%
Shred up the test	1/20	5%
Hungry	0/20	0%

Figure 16. What the students' bodies were doing during the Practice State Assessment.

Students wrote about what their bodies were doing while taking the test.

Body (Routine Curriculum Assessment)	Number of Drawings	Percentage
Shaking	0/5	0%
Crying	0/5	0%
Tired	2/5	40%
Stretching	0/5	0%
Vibrating	0/5	0%
Shivering Cold	0/5	0%
Deep Breaths	0/5	0%
Pass out	0/5	0%
Still	2/5	40%
Stopped working	0/5	0%
Shred up the test	0/5	0%
Hungry	1/5	20%

Figure 17. What the students' bodies were doing during Routine Curriculum Assessments?

Students wrote about what their bodies were doing while taking the test.

The most prevalent physical symptom was shaking or vibrating. These physical symptoms were usually paired with frown faces and negative emotions. As seen in figure 18 a student wrote, "My brain was wow when I herd 70 minits. My body was shaking when I saw

the first.” Other common physical symptoms included crying, stretching, shivering, deep breaths, and stillness.

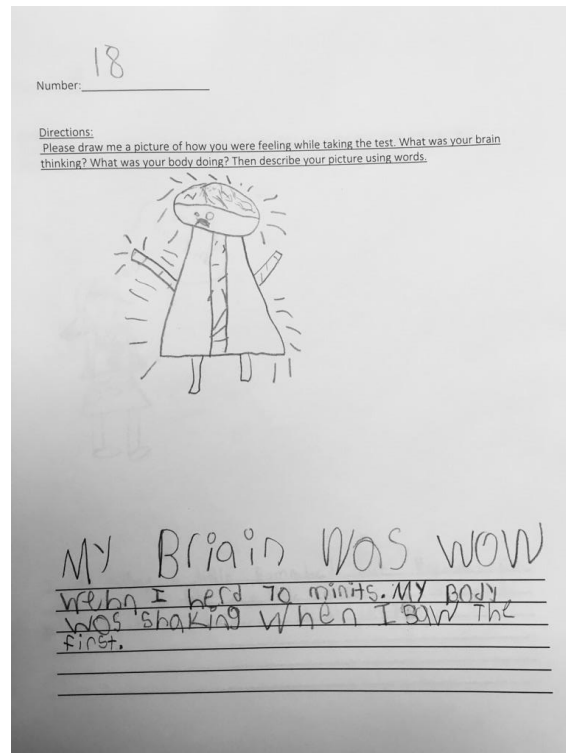


Figure 18: Body Shaking. This student drew lines coming off their body and wrote that their body was shaking.

State Standardized Assessments

After analyzing, coding, and categorizing this data I expected to find similar results after the students reflected on the actual state standardized assessments. Since there were such clear numbers of students feeling more anxious and negative toward the practice state assessment, I assumed those numbers would look similar or even increase. There were still more negative emotions and facial expressions used in the reflection drawings than on the routine curriculum assessments. However, the numbers for negative emotions weren't as high as they were on the practice state assessment (see figures 19 and 20).

Assessment:	Total Amount of Written Negative Emotions	Percentage
Practice State Assessment	42/56	75%
Routine Curriculum Assessment	5/29	17.24%
State Standardized Assessment	20/35	57.1%

Figure 19. Negative Written Emotions. This chart shows the total amount of negative emotions written after reflecting on each kind of assessment.

Assessment:	Total Amount of Negative Facial Expressions	Percentage
Practice State Assessment	32/59	54.2%
Routine Curriculum Assessment	8/34	23.5%
State Standardized Assessment	29/60	48.3%

Figure 20. Negative Facial Expressions. This chart shows the total amount of negative facial expressions used after reflecting on each kind of assessment.

Instead I found that students had mixed emotions after taking the actual state assessment. Happy and sad faces were used equally, as well as positive and negative emotions. In fact, roughly 20 percent of the students wrote about feeling mixed emotions on the test. Nora started with saying she felt good which reflects a positive emotion, but then quickly changed to feeling nervous and afraid because there were some hard questions. For example, Nora wrote, “I was feeling good but a little nervous. Some questions were hard and I was unfearful that was going to find the answer. So I just tried to do my best and find the answer” (figure 21).

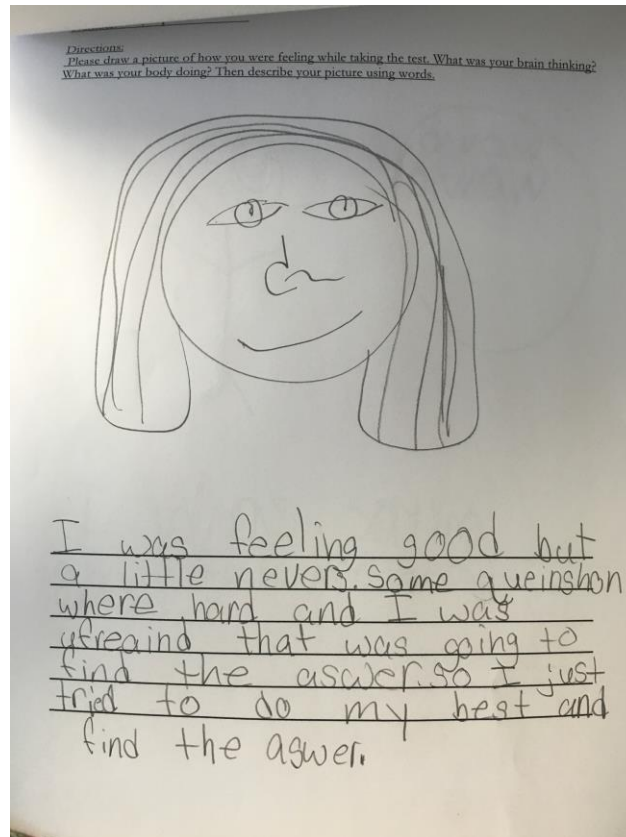


Figure 21: Mixed Emotions. Student used both positive and negative emotions to express how they felt after the state standardized assessment.

Another unexpected finding was that after the state standardized assessments students were less likely to actually write about their emotions. Only 56 percent of students wrote about an emotion after the state standardized assessment, whereas over 80 percent wrote an emotion for the practice and routine curriculum assessments. For example, Jack drew a negative face but provided no writing to reflect his emotions (figure 22).

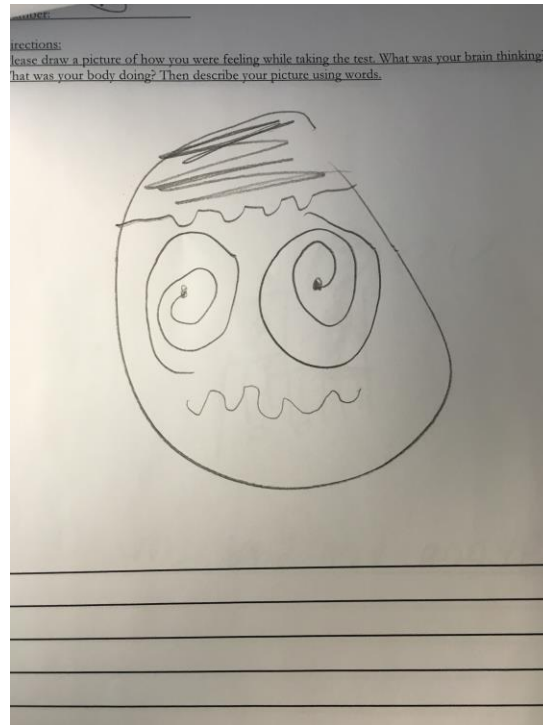


Figure 22: No written emotion. This student only drew a negative face and did not provide a written explanation.

I can't help but wonder if this lack of written emotions was due to a burn out in stamina. After a few hours of testing were they too spent to focus on reflecting? Were they unsure of what to feel or think about their latest testing adventure? I can only begin to speculate, but judging from the look of exhaustion that I observed I predict that students used the majority of their energy on the test and didn't save much for reflection.

It is also important to note that 23 percent of my students chose to opt out of all state standardized assessments. Some of the parents' reasons for opting out involved their child having anxiety due to these assessments. If these students did take the state assessment my results could have been closer to what I initially found with the practice state assessment.

Discussion

My findings were reinforced when I referred to the literature regarding children's drawings (Malchiodi, 1998; Triplett, & Barksdale, 2005). For instance, I discovered that students most commonly reflected by drawing a facial expression. According to Malchiodi (1998), children up to the age of ten reveal their inner emotions through facial expressions when drawing. For Triplett and Barksdales' (2005) study they only had students reflect through drawings and assumed the facial expression matched their inner emotion. I discovered that in many cases my students would draw a facial expression, but then write about feeling an opposite emotion.

My finding of students commonly drawing themselves in isolation also concurred with Triplett and Barksdales' study. Seventy-five percent of my students drew themselves in isolation. Triplett and Barksdale had 55% of students draw themselves in isolation. In Malchiodi's (1998) study, she found that when students draw themselves small and surrounded by white space that it may suggest having low self-esteem. This finding may have a larger impact than I had initially expected. This finding connects to my finding of students feeling more anxiety towards assessments.

Are students feeling anxiety while completing state standardized assessments more than routine curriculum assessments? It is apparent that the answer to this question is yes because 57 percent of the students reported feeling nervous after the state standardized assessment, whereas only 17 percent felt nervous after routine curriculum assessments. Students are feeling a large amount of anxiety toward high stakes standardized assessments

compared to routine curriculum assessments. Studies like Triplett and Barksdale (2005), Embse and Hasson (2012), and Segool, et al. (2013) have found similar trends of anxiety in relation to high stakes testing. All these studies agree that students report feeling significantly greater anxiety on high stakes testing than they do on routine classroom assessments.

Most of the literature and other research studies I used to help guide and confirm my findings looked at anxious behaviors holistically (e.g., Embse & Hasson, 2012; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005; Segool, et al., 2013; Putwain, et. al., 2012). Their research did not look deeper as to why anxious behaviors were occurring. Instead the researchers noted that the anxious behaviors were a result of high stakes testing. I chose to focus on when and why these behaviors were happening. I discovered they were a result of students reacting anxiously depending on the demands the individual student found most threatening. Therefore every student is not going to have the same reaction to the same task.

Conclusions

Anxiety occurs when an individual feels most threatened. My first conclusion is students feel anxiety toward the demands they perceive to be most threatening. This first occurred to me during my interviews with my focus students. Our conversations all began positively as students commented about enjoying our school day and the different topics we cover. However, every student had an activity that they did not enjoy accomplishing independently. These activities seemed to be the ones students perceived to be their weakest area of performance. Since students value grades, tasks that they did not perform as adequately on become anxiety provoking for them. After this discovery I decided to also record

the task or demand students were completing as I observed them. Through doing so I was able to further confirm this conclusion. During my observations I discovered the demands students complained about in their interviews were also the demands that caused a physical display of anxiety. These displays of anxiety included crying, shouting, shaking, repetitive interactions, and delayed completion. The display of physical anxiety also differed depending on the student.

Students report feeling more anxiety toward the practice and actual state

standardized assessment. My second conclusion is that students found the practice state assessments to be more anxiety provoking than the routine curriculum assessments. I discovered this through analyzing the students' drawings. I found that 75 percent of students reported feeling negative emotions while taking the practice state assessment. Fifty-seven percent of students reported feeling negative emotions during the actual state standardized assessment. Only 17 percent of students report negative emotions after routine curriculum assessments. This conclusion was also confirmed through my observations. Physical displays of anxiety occurred more frequently in a larger amount of students compared to routine curriculum assessments. This discovery is most likely related to the idea that students find different tasks threatening. Since the state standardized assessments cover material from the entire year students are more likely to come across a task they find threatening. In contrast, the routine curriculum assessments usually covered the most recent material taught so students felt more comfortable with the topic.

However, I was surprised to discover that student anxiety decreased by 18 percent on the actual state assessment in comparison to the practice state assessment. This decrease in anxiety could be related to the fact that 23 percent of my students opted out of all state

standardized assessments. The reasons parents had for opting out their child often had to do with the amount of stress and pressure the students were feeling toward the assessments. This decrease in reported anxiety could also be a result of students feeling more equipped to take the actual state standardized assessment because of the practice assessments they participated in. The practice assessments the students took fell under the 2014-2015 guidelines where there were time limits of seventy minutes. The guidelines changed this year by giving students unlimited time on the assessment, this could have also alleviated some of the negative emotions students previously felt. Lastly, as a result of the anxiety students were experiencing after practice assessments I implemented different techniques in attempt to help provide the students with some coping skills. These relaxation techniques could have been effective in alleviating some negative emotions as well.

Implications

During this study I have developed several implications that may benefit students in the future. These implications have the potential to improve engagement, self-esteem, and student motivation.

Teaching students to have a growth mindset. According to Dweck (2006), mindset is a self-perception people have about themselves. A growth mindset is when people believe they have the ability to grow through dedication and hard work; nothing is fixed. This goes beyond teaching students to have a growth mindset, but it also means we must have one ourselves. The first step to helping our students acquire a growth mindset is by living by one ourselves. We must change the way we speak to students and change the way we allow our students to speak

about each other. Have them focus on the effort and practice they put into something instead of how easy they accomplished a challenging task. Allow them to see how their mistakes really led to new learning instead of setbacks. Help them discover that their mistakes can turn into their motivation. We want our students to embrace challenges instead of running from them. Encourage students to find inspiration in their peers instead of viewing them as their competition (Dweck, 2006). I've attempted to embrace these ideas and live by them to help inspire my students. Whenever a student of mine is faced with an overwhelming challenge I celebrate the small successes and encourage them to push further. When they experience anxiety due to a task they find threatening, we discuss how far they came and what they need to do to succeed. We always end with them sharing a positive strength they have to help give them the motivation to persevere.

If students are able to see challenges as opportunities to grow then they will not feel as threatened when faced with a difficult task. Therefore, their anxious behaviors may decrease as their perceived threats turn into opportunities to grow. A growth mindset can lead to a student who has higher motivation and improved self-esteem (Dweck, 2006).

Implementing relaxation techniques. I recommend the use of Jensen, Stevens, and Kenny's (2012) research on Yoga Nidra relaxation. This technique focused on breathing patterns and has shown success with boys who have disruptive behaviors. They suggest this program be implemented in a series of sessions where students gradually increase their ability to sit silently and focus on their breathing. Students start by learning the different techniques and practice breathing while sitting still for 30 seconds to 5 minutes. Eventually the students work their way up to a full 20 minutes of remaining still and quiet.

I believe our students are lacking coping skills to help them when they are experiencing anxiety. I have implemented a few breathing techniques into my classroom and was thrilled to see that some students mentioned them in their drawings when they came across a problem that was “hard.” I’ve also received phone calls from parents asking, “What have you done to my child? They are a completely different person.” I had this conversation with Stella’s mom. She was sharing with me how relaxed Stella seemed. She also mentioned that Stella was acting like a normal eight year old girl. Stella’s favorite breathing technique was gently blowing on the back of her thumb. I would catch her doing this occasionally throughout the day not just on assessments. After day one of the state standardized assessment Stella reflected by saying, “I felt awesome because when Miss Jackson told me to feel confident it helped. I took her direction and it worked. Blowing on my thumb helped. And what was going on in my head was me trying to be confident. Also my body kept jiggling around.” Due to misspellings I had the student read back to me what they wrote (See figure 23). I couldn’t help but notice how she drew a tongue sticking out of her smiley face, in the beginning of the year Stella wouldn’t have even considered drawing that face. I could really see her remove the pressure and focus on doing her best.

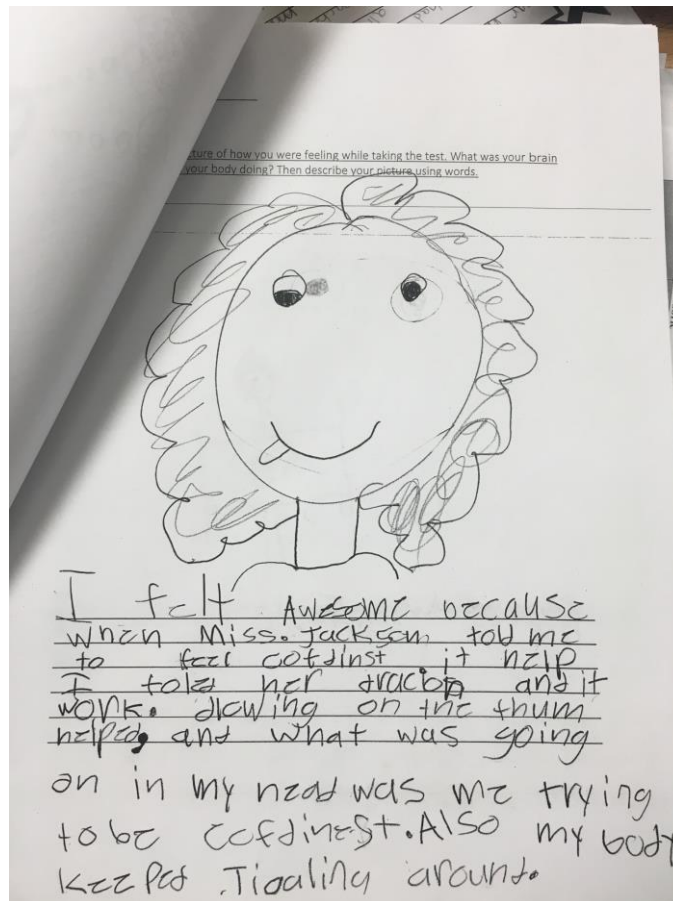


Figure 23: Stella Relaxed. Stella reflected on a breathing technique.

Limitations

Since data were collected for only a period of four to six weeks, time would have been one limitation of this study. Also I was unable to get a baseline point for my data because I did not start collecting data until the middle of the school year. Therefore, I was unable to compare how students felt in the beginning of the school year. Lastly, since I did have students choose to opt out of the state standardized assessments I was unable to track their progress and missed out on their data for the holistic group.

Future Research

I would recommend that future research look into how student performance is impacted by these feelings of anxiety. Since these standardized assessments are used to determine school funding, job security, and student placement it is crucial that we know if these scores are being impacted by these behaviors. Lastly, I recommend that future research attempt to discover a trend in the demands that students find most anxiety provoking. If there are trends and similar themes we can then begin to determine if these demands are age appropriate.

Overall Significance

This study is significant because it has shown that these anxious behaviors exist within our students. As a result of this study we have a better understanding of how anxiety looks different from person to person. We also understand that students feel anxiety toward the demands they perceive to be most threatening. This study has also confirmed that students feel more negativity and anxiety toward state standardized assessments compared to routine classroom assessments. The findings presented in this research are significant because educators need to be aware of the impacts their instruction can have on the wellbeing of their students. These findings can be related to the context of other instructional settings and these implications can be adapted to meet other students' needs. In order for all students to reach literacy success they must learn to cope with their anxious behaviors.

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Appendix A:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions:

Please draw a picture of how you were feeling while taking the test. What was your brain thinking? What was your body doing? Then describe your picture using words.

Appendix B:

Interview Questions:

- 1.) What did you think of today's ELA lesson?
- 2.) Did you feel confident in completing the task on your own without help?

Why?

- 3.) How would you feel if I tested you on that topic today? Why?
- 4.) How do you feel when you take tests?
- 5.) Why do you think you feel that way?
- 6.) What does your brain do when you take a test?
- 7.) What does your body do when you take a test?
- 8.) Do you think the tests you take show me who you are as a student (everything you know and can do)?
- 9.) What happens to the test now that it is over?
- 10.) How do you feel now that the test is over? Why?

Appendix C:

Child's Name: _____	_____
Observed Behavior with Date/Time:	My Thinking: