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Public Speaking Anxiety in High School Students

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In his 1998 stand up special “I’m Telling You for the Last Time,” Jerry Seinfeld joked, “I saw a thing, actually a study that said speaking in front of a crowd is considered the number one fear of the average person. I found that amazing. Number two was death. Death is number two? This means, to the average person, if you have to be at a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy” (Callner & Seinfeld, 1998). While Seinfeld’s observation was made in jest, the fear of public speaking is real. Every year during the first week of school I introduce my students to the units we will cover throughout the semester. Without fail, every year, one brave student raises his or her hand to ask the bold question the other students in class are desperate to know the answer to: “Will we have to do a speech?” Inevitably, the collective groan is audible when I inform students they are required to deliver a presentation. For most high school students, public speaking is one of the most dreaded assessments they will encounter. However, for some students, that dread is more intense, and the idea of standing in front of a room full of their peers fills them with unshakable anxiety.

Definition of Public Speaking Anxiety

Discomfort, nervousness, or distress when faced with a public speaking situation is common and even normal. However, someone with public speaking anxiety experiences a more intense negative reaction. Anxiety is what happens when “our bodies secrete hormones and adrenaline that eventually overload our physical and emotional responses” (Nash, et al., 2016, p. 588). *Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes* explained that anxiety is “characterized by cognitive apprehension, neuro-physical arousal, and a subjective experience of tension or nervousness” (Robinson et al., 1991, p. 161). As educators, understanding the anxiety

students may experience is important so we can assist and accommodate as needed. Asking students to simply push past the fear in these instances is not enough. Students who truly experience public speaking anxiety are physically, mentally, and emotionally overloaded. To expect students to perform under these circumstances can do more harm than good in the long run and lead to more intense feelings of anxiety. Bandura's theory (1977) of self-efficacy explained that when students find themselves in situations that are "threatening, the resultant anxiety is dependent on [the student's] perception of his/her ability to deal positively with that threat" (Pappamihel, 2002, p. 329). When high anxiety students are required to present in front of their peers without scaffolding or accommodations, they run the risk of reinforcing their negative perceptions of their public speaking abilities.

Students who are highly anxious face challenges when it comes recognizing potential threats. This is more difficult for highly anxious students than it is for others. What most students perceive as uncomfortable or mildly distressing, highly anxious students interpret as a threat—possibly one they fear they cannot overcome. Differentiating between highly anxious, moderately anxious, and nervous student speakers is important. Clinical psychologist C.D. Spielberger (1983) described the difference through trait anxiety and state anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to "individuals who are more anxious and more likely to become anxious regardless of the situation" (Pappamihel, 2002, p. 330). State anxiety is a type of social anxiety that "occurs under certain conditions" such as a class presentation (Pappamihel, 2002, p. 330). Students who suffer from either state or trait anxiety are likely to engage in avoidant behaviors. These students must receive assistance and interventions to curb those avoidant tendencies so they do not become repetitive. Students who routinely use avoidance as a coping mechanism for their anxiety are less likely to make attempts later. In other words, the longer an anxious student

delays completing an oral presentation, the less likely they are to actually complete it because they have built up the threat into something that seems impossible to overcome.

Anxiety in Adolescents

Public speaking anxiety has been widely reported in the general public, and that is no different in the classroom. This specific kind of social anxiety “is believed to affect 33% of the U.S. population at a clinical level. [...] It has been estimated that 63% of the general population also report fear [of public speaking] ranging from mild to severely debilitating” (Brandrick, et al., 2021, p. 109). Adults in America struggle to feel comfortable speaking in front of an audience, so it is no surprise that teenagers share this fear. Research suggests that adolescents actually struggle more than younger students when it comes to situations in which they will be evaluated by their peers, for instance, a class presentation. A 2014 study published in *Child Development* reported that the saliva samples of adolescents who are going through puberty contained more cortisol—a stress hormone—and alpha-amylase—a digestive enzyme that indicates stress—than prepubescent children when delivering a speech to be evaluated by peers (van den Bos et al., 2014). The prevalence of public speaking anxiety combined with heightened levels of distress related to peer evaluation and puberty creates a challenging situation for high school students. A peer audience makes students feel vulnerable. There is nowhere to hide and there is potential to fail publicly. Unsurprisingly, students with high anxiety are less able to determine whether this threat is real or perceived.

Importance of the Topic

Public speaking is an incredibly important part of high school curriculum. Presentations are required in many high school and college level classes. However, not all students are as readily able to achieve success because of their speaking anxiety, which has a negative impact on

their education as a whole. Research has shown that “anxiety [...] depletes positive academic emotions, which are required for students to engage ‘flexible, creative learning strategies such as elaboration, organisation, critical evaluation, and metacognitive monitoring’” (Nash, et al., 2016 p. 588). Furthermore, students who are highly anxious tend to divide their attention hindering the learning experience as a whole and can lead to fewer educational gains (Pappamihiel, 2002). This division occurs because anxious students are often hypervigilant, so they are unable to focus all of their attention on their studies. It is more difficult for students to become motivated in this emotional state which can ultimately lead to avoidant behaviors when it comes to delivering a speech.

In Minnesota, the standards addressing public speaking clearly lay out what is expected of high school students. Standard 9.9.4.4 stated, “While respecting intellectual property, [students will] present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task” (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010 p. 70). Standard 9.9.6.6 required that students “adapt speech to a variety of contexts, audiences, tasks, and feedback from self and others, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate” (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010 p. 68). However, public speaking is more than just a standard teachers need to cover; it is a valuable skill students need beyond their high school careers. According to an article in *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, authors Pandey, Shukla, and Pandey explained, “Presentation and public speaking abilities are beneficial in many avenues of work and life, including business, sales, training, teaching, and lecturing, as well as other social circumstances” (Pandey, et al., 2022, p. 31). In addition to employability skills, becoming a

competent public speaker presents a host of personal benefits. Students learn how to organize their thoughts and ideas in a way that makes sense to others. The National Speech and Debate Association website reports findings from a 2005 study conducted in Minnesota by Frank Duffins that gaining skills in public speaking increases analytical skills by 87% and increases reading test scores by 36%. In addition, public speaking gives students a voice, confidence, and power. The National Speech and Debate Association website references the same study on their website asserting that students who are regular public speakers have 15% higher self-esteem than peers (Our Impact, 2022). Becoming an effective speaker allows students to better communicate in all areas of their lives.

Communication skills are deemed valuable enough for students to gain that teachers begin requiring public speaking in elementary school. According to the state standards, kindergarten students should “speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly, and respond to poems, rhymes and songs” (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010, p. 33). Second graders should “tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, avoid plagiarism by identifying sources, and speak audibly in coherent sentences” (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010 p. 33). When students are exposed to public speaking situations earlier in their educational careers, they are more likely to be successful. A recent study requiring first grade students to deliver an informative speech found that the children involved “showed a higher extent of public speaking skills (improvement at the basic level of public speaking competence), [and] they were also better able to adapt their skills in order to behave appropriately” (Herbein, et al., 2018 p. 179). Clearly, public speaking assessments are a vital step in developing the communication skills students need to be successful in the world.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers can help students who experience high anxiety when faced with public speaking. Although speaking in front of others can be overwhelming, there are an abundance of benefits that one can gain from learning this skill, making it an assessment teachers must include in their curriculum. Educators must be mindful that for some students, public speaking is a threat which can cause crippling anxiety. Knowing how to prepare and assist those students is an important step in whether or not all students will become successful speakers.

Effective communication is imperative in our current world. This idea is so widely accepted that “all countries have acknowledged the necessity of equipping students with effective communication skills” (Tsang, 2017, p. 40). In America, public speaking is expected at all levels of schooling, from elementary to college. The goal of all these speaking opportunities is to “reduc[e] speech anxiety” in students and teach them “effective speech organization” (Parviz, 2020, p. 40). Students are introduced to several organizational patterns, depending on institutional learning goals. And while these skills are vital throughout a student’s education, they are “intrinsically related to one’s future career experience” (Tsang, 2017, p. 39). The job market requires potential employees to have at the very least a basic level of public speaking skills. These abilities are used when interviewing for a position, negotiating a raise, talking with clients, networking, and connecting with colleagues. It is undeniable that public speaking assessments are crucial, and the skills gained from them are indispensable.

Students need speaking opportunities, and as educators, it is imperative that we teach, encourage, and support students in gaining these skills. Even if students are aware of the myriad

reasons for delivering a presentation, many are plagued with speaking anxiety. Physiological reactions like increased heart rate, intrusive negative thoughts about performance, uncontrolled behavior such as trembling, and fear of peer judgement prevent students from feeling comfortable in front of their class (Bodie, 2010). The negative impacts of public speaking anxiety are not only experienced during the speech itself, but before and after as well. All of this can lead to an extreme heightened emotional state, poor performance, and avoidant behaviors (Nash et al., 2016). If students miss out on these skills, the impacts could be much greater than a poor grade in class. When anxiety leads to avoidance of a speech, the negative emotions and ideas are reinforced is likely to result in repeated avoidant behavior (Brandrick, et al., 2021). Avoiding speaking assessments repeatedly could become a potential long-term challenge for students in which they avoid speaking situations in their regular lives. This could impact their college careers, job opportunities, and social events.

Research Questions

The goal of this research is to answer the following questions:

- Why is addressing public speaking anxiety in adolescents important?
- How can teachers address public speaking anxiety in adolescents to help students?
- Which therapies are effective in preventing anxiety to limit avoidant behaviors in students who suffer from public speaking anxiety?
- Which special circumstances should be considered when addressing public speaking anxiety?

Chapter 2: Classroom Strategies and Best Practices

Strategies for Easing Anxiety

While many students dislike public speaking, some find themselves completely unable to speak in front of their peers. As educators, there are several factors to consider when it comes to assigning public speaking assessments. Public speaking is “not something that one develops naturally, rather it is a learned skill” (Kahl, 2014, p. 51). However, before we can assess what students have learned, teachers must help students overcome anxiety that may impede their ability to showcase what they have learned about public speaking. Studies show that when it comes to speaking anxiety, teachers need to understand that the “more anxious or fearful a student feels, the less goal-orientated and academically motivated they become” (Nash et al., 2016, p. 595). As educators, it is imperative that we address public speaking anxiety so that students who suffer from it are not penalized, but rather supported. Teachers can help students by creating a positive classroom community, exposure therapy, and cognitive modification techniques.

Classroom Community

Public speaking causes more anxiety than most other assessments because of the audience. If a student does poorly on a paper or a test it can remain private. However, if a student does poorly on a class presentation, it is public. The possibility of public failure causes stress for high school students and in some cases hinders their ability to perform. In their study, van den Bos et al found that in the anticipation phase, before the delivery of the speech, student stress levels were high as indicated by cortisol and alpha-amylase in saliva samples. In students who were more developmentally mature, stress levels actually peaked during the anticipation phase and were higher than they were during the speech itself (van den Bos et al., 2014). Melita Puklek

Levpuscek, and Jelka Berce explained that “the focus of adolescent’s concerns become worries about negative social evaluations, failures, and possible rejections” (Puklek Levpuscek & Berce, 2012, pp. 406-407). Additionally, teenagers “try to present themselves [...] as socially competent, intelligent, and assertive; they want to satisfy their need for belonging and self-promotion being constantly aware of social reactions” (Puklek Levpuscek & Berce, 2012, p. 407). Students who are socially anxious tend to “perceive themselves as less accepted by their classmates” (Puklek Levpuscek & Berce, 2012, p. 407). These factors all play a role in creating an anxiety inducing situation.

Creating a positive classroom atmosphere is essential in limiting the amount of anxiety students feel when expected to complete a public speaking assessment. Laura O. Gallardo and Angel Barrasa’s study on adolescent friendships in connection with academic achievement found that “peer acceptance positively predicted subsequent academic achievement” (Gallardo & Barrasa, 2016, p. 1637). The study argued that “young people who can count on social support [...] will be able to cope with the stressors present in the school setting” (Gallardo & Barrasa, 2016, p. 1646). Public speaking, for most students, is a likely stressor. Those who feel a debilitating level of anxiety will feel more enabled to speak in front of their peers when they feel comfortable and socially accepted in class. This is especially important for students who are typically less accepted by their peers. Puklek Levpuscek and Berce found that students who are not as readily accepted by their peers report higher levels of social anxiety than their classmates (Puklek Levpuscek & Berce, 2012). Creating a positive, supportive environment is crucial when attempting to reduce public speaking anxiety. Playing ice breaker games, pairing or grouping students with new people, incorporating teamwork are all relatively easy ways to introduce students to each other and get them to feel more comfortable around their classmates. Another

way to create a positive classroom climate is to establish rules of acceptable behavior. Students feel more secure if they know that all students are expected to treat everyone with respect. If students feel more accepted socially, they will be more motivated and willing to risk speaking in front of the supportive peers resulting in fewer students taking part in avoidant behaviors.

Exposure Therapy

Exposure therapy is commonly recommended for public speaking anxiety (“Common mental health problems: Identification and pathways to care”, 2011). Exposure therapy relies on repeated experiences with the stressor as a means of diminishing the threat. Authors Smiti Kahlon, Philip Lindner, and Tine Nordgreen explained that while exposure therapy is effective, it can sometimes be a challenge to find an audience for students to present to. Their study employed the use of virtual reality to expose anxious speakers to a controlled audience during a 90 minute session. Students were given a series of impromptu speech topics they were to talk about for a given period of time in front of a virtual reality audience that looked like a typical classroom. Before each impromptu speech, the student left the classroom to talk to a psychotherapist and note their level of distress. After the impromptu speech, the student evaluated his or her performance with the therapist and rated the “subjective level of discomfort” experienced while speaking (Kahlon, et al., 2019, p. 6). Then, the student listened to an audio recording of the speech they delivered and were instructed to imagine themselves as an audience member. After listening, the student rated his or her own performance again.

The study found that there was a significant decrease in participants’ speaking anxiety after completing the program and those improvements were consistent throughout the follow-up period of 1-3 months. For many of the participants, their feelings of distress decreased after each challenge task. The results suggest that students become more comfortable with public speaking

with increased exposure. There are several ways that teachers could replicate this in their own classrooms. One option is to ease students into speaking by completing a series of impromptu speeches to their classmates. During a weeklong mini unit, students would begin in groups of four in which each student would deliver a minute-long impromptu speech. Before and after each impromptu speech, students record their anxiety levels. On the following day, the groups double in size and students each deliver a new impromptu speech to their new group. Again, students record their anxiety levels both before and after they deliver their impromptu speech. This cycle is repeated and by the end of the week students are required to present to the entire class. This method exposes students to public speaking in a way that slowly acclimates them. By exposing students to speaking in front of groups slowly and safely, students will gain the confidence to speak in front of the entire class.

However, for students with high levels of anxiety, the idea of exposure itself can be debilitating and many students refuse to take part (Landkroon, et al., 2022). Teachers can help students who are in this position through positive mental imagery. This strategy requires students to imagine themselves delivering a speech and visualizing it in a positive manner. In their study, Landkroon, et al. found that through the use of positive mental imagery, socially anxious students “indicated that they experience a positive change regarding their view of giving a presentation” (Landkroon, et al., 2022, p. 84). With this method, students felt less distress during the anticipatory phase as well as during speech delivery (Landkroon, et al., 2022). Educators have many options when it comes to positive mental imagery: mindful meditation practices, journal writing, or artistic expression are all ways in which to help students positively imagine their delivery of a speech. Positive mental imagery alone will not leave students anxiety-free, but it is a strategy that teachers can use with students, especially those with high levels of anxiety, to

reduce avoidant behaviors. Together, exposure therapy and positive mental imagery alleviates negative emotions for students who are anxious public speakers. This approach prevents students from engaging in avoidant behaviors when it comes to public speaking.

Cognitive Modification

Student public speaking anxiety can also be addressed through cognitive modification such as self-talk, cognitive defusion, and affect labeling—all of which have been shown to have positive impacts. Cognitive modification techniques posit that public speaking anxiety “primarily arises from negative or irrational cognitions about public speaking” (Bodie, 2010, p. 87).

Treatments that fall under this category typically ask an anxious speaker to discuss “specific fears about public speaking,” identify “negative self-statements,” and finally, examine how “each belief is irrational” (Bodie, 2010, p. 87).

One technique that falls under cognitive modification is self-talk. A 2015 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* defined self-talk as a “silent or vocalized dialog with one’s own self” (Shi, et al., 2015, p. 126). This study found that “self-talk patterns relate to [a person’s] [public speaking anxiety] levels (Shi, et al., 2015, p. 128). The study also found that those with higher levels of anxiety participated in self-talk more frequently. When students participate in negative self-talk, they inhibit their own success. Educators can take steps to help students identify whether they are partaking in negative or positive self-talk. Students who engage in negative self-talk must address those ideas and actively combat them by countering them with a positive statement. Affirmations surrounding ability and confidence are then used to diminish the negative thoughts a student has. Discussions about how students are talking or thinking about themselves and their abilities is an important step in building up confidence and reducing anxiety.

In addition to self-talk, cognitive defusion is another effective way to help students think about their feelings in relation to public speaking. Defusion therapy teaches students “to observe thoughts for what they are (verbal stimuli that come and go), rather than as what the mind suggests them to be (verbal rules and truths that must be adhered to)” (Brandrick, et al., 2021, p. 110). With this method, students create a list of their worries and fears in relation to public speaking. Once the list is complete, students summarize their list into one word that encompasses all of their negative ideas. This singular word is repeatedly used by students in several activities to defuse the significance of the word thereby making it less powerful for the student. Brandrick, Hooper, Roche, Kanter, and Tyndall reported that “defusion intervention reduced anxiety following exposure to a public speaking task” (Brandrick, et al., 2021, p. 113). This technique removes the power from the word that signifies the students’ fear, therein removing power from the fear itself.

Affect labeling is another useful cognitive modification tool for students to use to reduce anxiety before a public speaking opportunity. This technique is simple, yet effective because “labeling one’s emotional state can disrupt the experience of that emotional state” (Niles, et al., 2015, p. 28). Students who label their emotions participate in metacognition and are more likely to be able to address that emotion and evaluate whether or not it is an appropriate response. This is a necessary step for students to take part in analyzing their own self-talk as well as completing any cognitive defusion activities. Labeling emotions in addition to exposure therapy, versus exposure therapy alone, is also more effective. Students who experience high anxiety are typically not as equipped to regulate emotions; these students benefit from exposure therapy more if it is combined with affect labeling (Niles, et al., 2015). When combined with exposure therapy, students can track their emotions over time which will help them create self-awareness

about their progress in public speaking. Progress tracking of emotions over time shows students that although they may have had strong negative feelings before beginning any public speaking activities, those negative feelings decreased.

By using a combination of these techniques, students can address the emotional and cognitive side of the anxiety they feel rather than focusing solely on behavioral therapy practices. When it comes to working with adolescents, teachers need to remember that “student emotions are central to their learning, and that although teachers see engagement as cognitive, students see it as predominantly affective” (Nash, et al., 2016, p. 589). Educators must address the intense emotions that accompany public speaking to effectively engage students. Taking part in affect labeling, cognitive defusion, and positive self-talk are activities that can take place before, during, and after a public speaking assessment. Studies show that “students who complete pre- and post-public speaking exercises [...] identified greater feelings of satisfaction and less fear, indecision, and confusion in relation to public speaking” (Nash et al., 2016, p. 594). Addressing these emotions with students is necessary for educators who require public speaking. By ignoring them, teachers are implying that those emotions are unimportant and discounting the fear felt by students potentially leads to more avoidant behavior.

Best Practices in Public Speaking Education

Teachers at all levels must include public speaking assessments in their classes so their students are given the opportunities to gain these skills. However, teachers must do more than simply assign a speech and leave kids to figure out how to be successful. There are strategies teachers can utilize to make public speaking more manageable and approachable for students.

Engage Students and Allow Collaboration

Getting students engaged and excited about a presentation is important when requiring students to complete a speaking assessment. Experts agree that “interaction with teachers and other students is essential for developing positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and also improving students’ ability to work collaboratively and productively with peers” (Walters, et al., 2022, p. 844). One creative way to encourage collaboration is to gamify the presentation. In his article, Davide Girardelli presented an activity to engage learners. The activity is set up as a gameshow with the teacher as the host and the students split up into teams. The teams are presented with a story scenario, for example a superhero and the enemy. Each team member is then assigned a part of the story to tell. Students are given a limited time to prepare before they present their part of the story to the class. While they are presenting, a designated judge ranks each team (Girardelli, 2017). This activity is an effective way to ease students into speaking publicly. By telling a story, students find it easier to improvise than they would in a traditional speech assessment. The collaborative work required for this activity creates a sense of community as well which helps ease anxiety students may feel.

Another creative and engaging activity presented by Elnaz Parviz helps students “gain awareness of organization in [a] persuasive speech, write speeches effectively using clear and descriptive language, [and] notice the role of teamwork” (Parviz, 2020, p. 41). With this activity, students are put in a hypothetical situation: there is a zombie apocalypse and only one remaining town that can only accept one group. Students are put into teams and told to create a persuasive pitch for the town’s city council. Each student is given a part of the pitch with directions and explanations of what should be included in their portion. Once all teams have presented to city council—the class—students vote on which team was the most persuasive, however they are not

allowed to vote for their own team. This activity creates classroom community and allows students to practice organizing and presenting persuasively—a speaking genre typically required in academic speaking. This activity also requires students to think about their audience and adjust accordingly. Most significantly, this activity engages students and leaves them with a positive speaking experience.

In order to carry out both of these activities, teachers must allow collaboration. This strategy also lines up with Minnesota State Standard 9.9.1.1: “Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions” (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010, p. 70). Collaboration can occur at points throughout the project (for example only during preparation and practice), or throughout the entire presentation. According to Hsiang-Ann Liao, students like preparation sessions and getting feedback from their peers (Liao, 2014). This practice alleviates speaking anxiety. Additionally, Liao’s study found that “African American students, Hispanic American students, and students whose mother had no more than a high school education benefited the most from collaborative learning” (Liao, 2014, p. 50). This finding is important to note. As educators we strive to close the achievement gap and this strategy could help us get one step closer. To ensure these positive outcomes, the instructor must help students structure their collaborative time.

Student Awareness of Learning and Expectations

With any assessment, informing students of the expectations is a necessary step. This step is invaluable for public speaking assessments. Presentations are one of the most anxiety inducing assessments students face in school, so they must know how they are going to be graded. However, Tsang argues that oftentimes, rubrics for speeches are too vague and a “major problem lies in the over-generalization in many descriptors and rubrics” (Tsang, 2017, p. 40). This issue

must be addressed because “a learner awarded a low grade in ‘speaking style: speed, volume, and intonation’ may very well not be able to identify the exact areas for improvement” (Tsang, 2017, p. 41). Tsang suggests that to correct this, students should help construct the meaning and description of the requirements. Students must become aware of their own learning and decide what effective speaking looks like. Teachers may decide to show examples and have students make observations about the delivery and content. Students could look at lists of presentation features and evaluate or rank their importance. This valuable practice was noticed by students. In the article, one anonymous student said, “I have greater confidence [...] Our teachers [before] didn’t spend time going over [presentation skills] even though these are very useful” (Tsang, 2017, p. 47). Involving students in the creation of the rubric forces them to think about presentation skills in a different way. It also encourages them to analyze what the skills they are expected to have look like when they are being implemented. Confidence in their speaking abilities will strengthen if students are more aware of what they will be graded on and how they will be evaluated. By taking responsibility of their learning and understanding of speaking requirements, students are more likely to be able to meet the expectations their teachers have of them and feel more comfortable in their abilities.

Encouraging Critical Thinking

In all areas of education, teachers push their students to think critically. As cited in Philip Wagner’s article, critical thinking is when students “engage in a thoughtful way [with] the problems and subjects that come from within the range of one’s experiences” (Wagner, 2019, p.159). However, Wagner argues that this does not happen in public speaking assessments as much as teachers would like. Often times students choose topics that are surface level and make arguments that are obvious. To alleviate this problem, Wagner assigns his students topics that are

relevant to today's society. He also assigns them their position, which may or may not go against what the student actually believes. He points out that by creating an argument opposing their own beliefs, students found that "it helped bolster their own perspective and strengthen their stance" (Wagner, 2019, p. 163). Another variation of this strategy is to have students prepare both sides of an argument and then choose which side they will present. Requiring students to include counterarguments could also encourage critical thinking.

Every type of speaking provides opportunities for critical thinking. In an informative speech, students may be required to include a section on the implications of their topic. Here they would explain how their topic impacts society as a whole. This section should strive to look past the obvious implications and instead share with the audience surprising connections. For example, an informative speech about libraries might talk about the impacts libraries have on communities with high levels of poverty; or a speech about the history of body hair might look at the implications it has on trans people. Persuasive speeches could include a solutions section in which students are required to offer actions their audience could take. Students must analyze their audience in order to provide solutions the audience members could take part in.

Another area for students to think critically is when it comes to delivery. The tone used on specific words, the pauses used, where a speaker changes volume, the facial expressions a speaker makes all create meaning in a speech. Students who look through their speech and annotate it to determine their delivery participate in critical thinking. They scrutinize every phrase to determine how it should be delivered which requires them to think about what they will do as well as how their audience might receive that message. In order for presentations to be an effective means of learning, educators must encourage critical thinking skills in their assessments.

Chapter 3: Considerations for All Learners

To assume that all student anxiety is the same is ignoring the intersectionality of our students' identities. We must consider our students' backgrounds and experiences in life when working with anxious students.

Multilingual Learners and Cultural Considerations

Recognizing and Respecting Culture

A key factor in teaching public speaking is considering students' backgrounds and cultures. As with all assessments, instructors must consider dual language learners and their "mastery of English vocabulary, [...] speech organization skills and [...] background knowledge necessary to discuss one topic (Girardelli, 2017, p. 156). When it comes to public speaking, there are other factors to take into consideration. Traditionally, public speaking requires students to consider their physical qualities like eye contact, gestures, posture, and movement. Students must also consider their vocal qualities such as volume, pacing, intonation, and enunciation. Audiences want a speaker who is engaging, confident, knowledgeable, and organized. However, when setting these expectations, teachers must be aware of the cultures in their classrooms because America's "public speaking curriculum is far from universal" (Boromisza-Habashi, et al., 2016, p. 20). While America's expectations of public speaking may work for some, that is not true of all cultures. For example, the organization of "African speeches are often circular" seemingly tangential, but always going back to the thesis (Boromisza-Habashi, et al., 2016, p. 21). The American organizational pattern might prove difficult for a student who is not familiar with it. Students who are unfamiliar with these expectations are at risk of feeling more anxiety than students who are. Teachers must decide how to address cultural differences when it comes to public speaking to avoid creating more anxiety. In some instances, it may be more appropriate

for students to receive more support when it comes to structuring and delivering their speech. In others, it may be better to determine if the differences in structure or delivery actually deviate from the standard being assessed.

Additionally, credibility in many cultures is not just based on having done the research. In Kenya, social status determines credibility. In some Native American communities, elders are considered credible, and younger people are expected to listen. What Americans consider basic public speaking skills, are considered rude or unacceptable in other cultures. Eye contact is considered impolite in some cultures. If a speaker stands close to their audience, it may imply they are confident or friendly, or it may imply that the speaker does not respect people's personal space. In some cultures, speaking loudly is admired and viewed as passionate, or it may be seen as rude and arrogant. When it is "appropriate for an individual to speak up about an issue and who is allowed to speak up about that issue" differs from culture to culture (Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 66). A student's culture and background play a major role in their learning, which teachers must be aware of. If not, teachers risk expecting behavior from students that may go against their familial and cultural beliefs, expectations, and traditions. Something as simple as having students fill out an "About Me" form on the first day of the semester can help teachers gather information about their students' backgrounds.

Student Accents

Cultural norms and expectations are not the only source of public speaking anxiety for multilingual students. Students with accents often have "a fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension" (Pappamihiel, 2002, p. 331). In many cases, this means multilingual students self-isolate and "interact less in the mainstream classroom, choosing instead to remain as far away as possible from the action of the classroom" (Pappamihiel, 2002,

p. 326). Multilingual students' negative feelings of "annoyance, humiliation, and regret" are not something educators can ignore since "these negative feelings are detrimental, given that they can lead to anxiety" (Tan, et al., 2021, p. 11). One option schools may consider to ease public speaking anxiety in multilingual students is to commit to linguistically diverse classrooms. Studies have shown that students who are "enrolled in linguistically diverse sections of public speaking [courses] [...] reduced their [public speaking anxiety]" (Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 66). Students who may have been hesitant to speak because of their accent begin to feel more comfortable by hearing other accents in the class. The benefits do not end there: "[A] recent survey found that 96% of employers agreed or strongly agreed that 'All college students should have educational experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own'" (Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 75). Likewise, the Minnesota State English Language Arts Standards state that students should be able to "respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives" (Minnesota Academic Standards English Language Arts K-12, 2010, p. 70). By incorporating linguistically diverse public speaking classes, students are better able to handle their anxiety as well as gain communication skills they will need in their careers. Both of which are imperative in future success.

Post Pandemic Considerations

The current student body has additional challenges teachers must consider. These students have navigated life during a global pandemic, which has surely had impacts emotionally, behaviorally, and educationally. According to the CDC, January 20, 2022 marked the first laboratory confirmed case of COVID in the US. The first person-to-person transmission was confirmed ten days later. By March 11, 2020 there were "more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths, [and] the WHO declare[d] COVID-19 a pandemic" (COVID-19

Timeline, 2022, para. 40). Following this news, many schools around the country began to shut down including the New York City public school system, affecting 1.1 million students (COVID-19 Timeline, 2022, para. 44). Similarly, Governor Walz of Minnesota announced on Sunday, March 16, 2020 that all schools in MN were required to close by the following Wednesday. It was an “unprecedented move that [...] affect[ed] nearly 900,000 students in public and charter schools across the state” (Bierschbach, 2020, para. 4). Many experts have determined that “distance learning is likely to have consequences on the students’ educational experience for many reasons, including home distractions, less effective supervision, and limited interaction with peers” (Walters et al., 2022, p. 844). According to UNESCO, the “pandemic affected more than 1.5 billion students and youth with the most vulnerable learners were hit hardest” (COVID-19 impacts youth voices and hampers participation, 2022, para. 1).

Many students struggled during distance learning. They “miss[ed] time with their peers and being within the school environment and some reported finding it a struggle to complete tasks without a structure” (Walters et al., 2022, p. 845). Studies have found that many students experienced an increase in anxiety. A study published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* reports that “internalizing problems (depression and/or anxiety) increased to an alarming 18% in school-age children during the pandemic from 5% prior to the pandemic” (Spencer et al., 2021, p. 8). Additionally, “in the COVID Experiences fall 2020 nationwide survey, caregivers of school-age children were more likely to report worse mental health of children in virtual vs. in-person school (24.9% vs. 15.9%)” (Spencer, et al., 2021, p. 9). It would be unrealistic to assume that an increase in mental health issues would not impact students even after the return to school. Because students were isolated from others and communication was restricted to virtual options, a rise in social anxiety has been noted. *The New York Times* reports

that “even those who generally describe themselves as extroverted notic[ed] social anxiety” (Taitz, 2021, para. 1).

During the pandemic, teachers did their best to meet public speaking standards. The most common way to achieve this was through video recorded presentations or Zoom or Google Meet presentations. These methods were an appropriate accommodation during the pandemic. However, now that students are back in the classroom and expected to present live to a classroom full of students, the increased levels of anxiety are evident. Robyn Mehlenback, director of the Center for Psychological Services at George Mason University explained, “For children with social anxiety, virtual learning took away the social pressures to look or act a certain way. There were fewer pressures to dress a certain way, cameras were often off so no one could see their expressions and there was less pressure to verbally participate in front of others” (Karimi, 2021, para. 7). For students who thrived during online learning, coming back to class is an anxiety inducing obstacle. This anxiety is only heightened when faced with a public speaking assessment, and due to the pandemic, more students are feeling that dread. This anxiety can lead to an inability to participate and it shows up in all areas of education, most notably during class presentations. Students who delivered speeches virtually “felt their ability to adapt to their audiences was [...] impaired. [I]t was more difficult to read their peers’ expressions, their level of interest in their topics, what they took away from their speeches, and whether they needed to inflect more energy and volume into their vocalics” (Hoops, 2022, p. 43). While virtual speeches presented problems, anxious students felt safer behind their screens. However, now students must relearn how to engage with a live audience, which is no easy feat. Joshua Hoops from William Jewell College noted that his students “felt their ‘true personalities’ were not able to be displayed to the audience” through

virtual speeches (Hoops, 2022, pp. 44-45). Yet, for many students with anxiety, this revelation of their true self puts them in a vulnerable situation, further heightening their anxiety. A study focused on the differences between in person and virtual speaking published in *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies* reports that in a survey with 65 student respondents “almost half of the students (45.7%) were more anxious about giving their speech face-to-face, and a little more than one third (34.3%) were more anxious about the web-based delivery” (Campbell & Larson, 2013, p. 4). As we continue to navigate post-pandemic education, teachers must consider how our learners have changed over the past few years. Educators need to address the heightened levels of anxiety felt by students and ease them back into learning as they were able to do before the pandemic.

Challenges and Strengths in Transferring Skills

As educators, our goal is to prepare students to be successful and transfer the skills they have learned into other areas of their life. Public speaking is clearly a transferrable skill, but this does not mean that students will always find this transfer easy. Outside of class, students may find it difficult to speak on their own. When it comes to public speaking “students perform better when they prepare their speech collaboratively than when they prepare their speech alone. [...] [Collaborative learning is] especially beneficial to minority students and students of lower [socio-economic-status] (Liao, 2014, p. 53). Outside of an academic setting, there are not always options to work collaboratively. Students who thrived with collaboration may struggle to speak publicly in front of others.

Although students may feel uncomfortable speaking alone, after being exposed to public speaking throughout their entire educational career, students should be equipped with the skills to be successful in speaking opportunities in their lives. Studies have shown that after completing a public speaking course “students felt more confident in preparing and delivering a speech, and

students' overall level of speech anxiety decreased” (Liao, 2014, p. 51). Additionally, the critical thinking skills students gain through preparing a speech are “skill[s] that will serve them well in life” (Wagner, 2019, p. 163). By completing speaking assessments, students will learn skills to succeed during a formal speech and in their own day to day lives.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study regards the sample groups from some of the research. The studies pertaining to the emotional therapies affect labeling, self-talk, and cognitive defusion did not focus on high school students. Instead, these three studies focused on university students. While it is likely that the information could transfer to adolescents, these studies did not test adolescents to confirm this. There is a possibility that the results of these studies would not apply to high school students because of the setting differences. The atmosphere and social structures of a high school setting differs from a university setting. Another reason this information may not apply to adolescents is due to heightened sensitivity of peer evaluation during puberty (van den Bos et al., 2014). This sensitivity may not be as heightened in university students, especially those who are older.

Another limitation lies in how data was collected in many of the studies found during research. Measuring distress and anxiety presents challenges. Many of the studies relied on self-reporting from participants which does not provide a steady baseline for anxiety and distress. What one participant might label as high anxiety, another may label as moderate. This discrepancy could possibly skew the results of the research used in this study.

Lastly, since we are still navigating the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research on education, student anxiety, and most notably public speaking in a post pandemic world is new and relatively limited. As more research is conducted in these areas, educators may need to

adapt. Fear and anxiety surfaced among students due to sudden changes from face-to-face learning to online learning. The implications of the pandemic are something “school staff and Educational Psychologists will need to consider going forward. The findings identified will help inform policy and practice for supporting adolescents’ learning and mental well-being in the future during transitions of learning environments” (Walters, et al., 2022, p. 855).

Summary and Conclusion

Teachers of all ages and subjects must give their students opportunities to speak publicly. Students gain myriad skills that will benefit them throughout their lifetime. To help students gain these skills, teachers must include engagement and collaboration to build classroom community. Educators should expose students to public speaking often in a variety of ways, starting with low stakes options and building and developing as the semester goes on. Teachers should allow their students to express their feelings about speaking and help them diminish the power of those negative thoughts. They must include students in meaning making of the rubric to improve student awareness. Teachers must encourage critical thinking skills, and all the while we must recognize and respect our students’ cultures and diverse backgrounds. Students need the skills that come with public speaking. And maybe, if we are able to give them opportunities to gain these skills, our students will rather give the eulogy than be in the casket.

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