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Gender Differences in Anxiety and Its Relation to Academic Achievement

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Abstract

Anxiety is a major area of interest within the field of education. The present study aims to compare and measure the anxiety of boys and girls at the primary level, and to ascertain the association between academic achievement and anxiety of students at the primary level across gender. The sample consisted of 210 students of Class V from seven government schools of Murshidabad district, West Bengal. The data was collected using the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale-Child (1998). Using statistical techniques including t-test, Pearson correlation and T-score, the collected data was analysed. The results of the present study revealed that girls at the primary level are more in number and percentage having elevated anxiety. Apart from obsessive compulsive disorder and physical injury fear, the study clearly shows that there were no gender differences in any anxiety subscales. The researchers identified a negative association between academic achievement and anxiety among primary students.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a condition of being anxious and uneasy. It is a kind of emotion that alerts us of probable danger ahead. American Psychiatric Association (2013) viewed anxiety as, "an anticipation of future danger or misfortune, which is often associated with muscle tension and vigilance in preparation for future danger and cautiousness". Further, anxiety can be defined in two forms, i.e., minor and major. In minor form, anxiety helps people take action or stop experiencing discomfort by warning them of potential troubles. Anxiety, on the other hand, is

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a major type that highlights the issue that hurts the soul. Sometimes, people use fear interchangeably with anxiety. Though, fear is a real danger that can be in front of us, while anxiety is the perception of a threat outside that may not actually be a threat (Bharti, 2016). Today's individuals experience anxiety in their personal and professional life that may be considered natural and beneficial in some circumstances to get desirable results. But in some cases, anxiety is a threat to the integrity of an individual. Instead of the usual feelings of apprehension or anxiety, there is excessive fear or anxiety when anxiety disorders are present. Agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, specific phobias, generalised anxiety disorder, and separation anxiety disorder are a few of the several types of anxiety disorders and from the majority of all mental disorders, and about 30 percent of people experience anxiety problems at a certain point in their lives (Muskin, 2021).

Nowadays disorders of anxiety are one of the common problems in the study area (Deb & amp; Walsh, 2010; Karande et al., 2018; Bakhla et al., 2013). Though, there are large numbers of students remaining undiagnosed with this problem (Tomb & amp; Hunter, 2004). Lack of diagnosis and treatment of anxiety may lead to various socio-emotional problems in adolescents including low self-esteem, loneliness and challenges in making friends. Students are often encountered with a variety of stressful and anxiety-inducing stimuli at almost every stage of their educational experience (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Anxiety in childhood and adolescence has been shown to negatively impact psychological attributes that include academic achievement and social functioning (Kessler et al., 1995). Sometimes, the student himself refuses to go to school due to anxiety (Berg, 1992). It also contributes to dropping out students from school (Stein & Kean, 2000). The cause of anxiety among school students may be parents' high expectations from children for better grades. This will create unnecessary pressure in the mind of students resulting in dropouts and failure in examinations. National Crime Records Bureau (2020) reported that 1.4 per cent of adolescents below the age of 18 years committed suicides due to failure in examinations. Therefore, it can be stated that anxiety is widespread among children.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are a number of research studies that address the problem of anxiety from different aspects. Last and Strauss (1990) reported that younger children frequently refuse to attend school due to separation and social phobia anxiety. Similarly, Berg et al. (1992) observed that due to anxiety disturbance there are cases of absenteeism. Deb and Walsh (2010) posited that compared to adolescents from both high and low socioeconomic positions, those from moderate socioeconomic status had more anxiety. Further, they

corroborated that teenagers having working mothers were shown to be more anxious. The researchers, Essau et al. (2011) explained that girls had more anxiety disorders than boys did, subsequently, the rates increased with age. Zhao et al. (2012) in their work on 'Chinese children' highlighted that higher anxiety levels are found in adolescents than in children and in girls than boys. In this direction, Bakhla et al. (2013) figured out that 11 per cent of Class VIII students in Jamshedpur have anxiety symptoms and high anxiety associated with females.

Though, Bharti (2016) in her research work revealed that support along with good parent-child relationships, teacher-student relationships and parent-teacher relationships, all reduce anxiety. Karande et al. (2018) investigated anxiety symptoms in Mumbai youngsters and discovered that around 11 per cent of kids from Classes III to X had anxiety symptoms. Khesht-Masjedi (2019) and Bushra et al. (2021) are of the same view and state that anxiety is negatively associated with the academic progress of students. During COVID-19, Harjule et al. (2021) discovered that there is a strong and detrimental correlation between anxiety and mental health. Few studies have been conducted to address the problem of anxiety in students at the school level and its relation with academic achievement. The aim of the present study is to close the gap in the academic community.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study's main aim is to examine the role of anxiety in academic achievement. All children between the ages of six and fourteen are guaranteed free and compulsory education under the Right to Education Act of 2009. The aforementioned act also mandates that educational institutions make sure that children's education is free from trauma, fear and anxiety. The holistic development of the kid is another goal of education. The National Education Policy (2020) has correctly remarked that every educational institution must include a counselling system for coping with a stressed and emotionally distressed child. Despite the fact that anxiety is one of the most common emotions, regardless of gender.

Many researchers have discussed that females are more anxious than males (Ishikawa & others, 2009; Essau & amp; others, 2011; Zhao & others, 2012; Bakhla et al., 2013; Maria et al., 2016; Ahmadi, et al., 2016; Jalnapurkar et al., 2018; Karande et al., 2018). The feeling of anxiety gets prevalent among females because they are deprived of equal rights and opportunities, and also subjected to various forms of exploitation. Examining children for signs of increased anxiety is important because it prepares the way for subsequent action. If it is discovered that children have a higher anxiety level, the problem can be handled appropriately. As a result, the researchers will examine the gender variations in anxiety as well as

the connection between anxiety and academic achievement in this study.

OBJECTIVES

The present study is aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- To measure the anxiety of students at the primary level across gender.
- To compare the anxiety level of boys and girls at the primary level.
- To ascertain the association of anxiety and academic achievement of students at the primary level across gender.

HYPOTHESES

To realise the objectives following hypotheses were formulated:

H 1: Boys and girls at the primary level would not differ significantly on overall anxiety and various subscales of anxiety, viz., separation, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, physical injury fear and generalised anxiety.

H 2: There is no correlation between anxiety and students; academic achievement of students at the primary level across gender.

DELIMITATIONS

- The present study was confined to Class V students.
- The study was delimited to the Murshidabad district of West Bengal.

- The study was conducted at government schools.

METHODOLOGY

Data and information presented in the study have been taken from primary sources. The researchers employed the descriptive survey strategy.

Sample

In order to carry out the present study, the investigators adopted a multistage sampling strategy. This study was confined to Class V students of the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. There were five subdivisions in the Murshidabad district. Out of these five, the investigators chose the Jangipur subdivision as of convenience. Further, block Suti-1 from seven blocks of this subdivision was selected through random sampling techniques. There were around 104 as per the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+). Out of these 104 schools, seven schools were selected through a random sampling technique. The sample of the study was composed of 210 students studying in Class V of these selected schools. Out of these students, there were 102 boys and 108 girls.

Tools Used

Investigators used Spence Children's Anxiety Scale-Child (SCAS) in the present study to ascertain the anxiety level of primary students (Spence, 1998). It's a frequently used measure for the assessment of anxiety symptoms

in children all over the world. This tool was meant for students between the age of 8 to 12 years. This scale contained 44 items (6 positive filler items) based on six subscales (mentioned in the introduction part). Each subscale measures different dimensions of anxiety, viz., separation anxiety is a worry or discomfort associated with being separated from one home or attachment figures; social phobia is concerned with excessive anxiety being in the company of others or performing in front of others (especially strangers); agoraphobia is characterised by extreme discomfort accompanied by bodily symptoms (such as perspiration, dizziness or the fear of being trapped in areas where escape is impossible); OCD is a disorder that affects people who are in a lot of pain (due to repeated impulses and thoughts, that are disturbing and may lead to repetitive); physical injury fear deals with intense dread triggered by a specific object or scenario, and the last subscale generalised anxiety disorder deals with excessive worrying about events or activities (DSM-5, 2013).

Test-retest reliability and internal consistency have been demonstrated for the SCAS (Spence, 1997; Spence, 2003; Essau et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). The responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert Scale, i.e., 3 for always, 2 for often, 1 for sometimes and 0 for never. Scoring of the data was done strictly according to instructions provided in the manual. However, the positive filler items scored were not included.

As far as academic achievement is concerned, previous annual examination (Class IV) marks of students were taken from school records and their aggregate percentage of marks was considered as their academic achievement score.

Statistical Techniques Used

In order to realise the objectives of the study, investigators computed statistical techniques including the t-test and Pearson correlation.

T-score was computed to determine the anxiety level of primary students and responses having T- Scores more than 60 were considered as elevated anxiety, as per the manual (Spence, 1998).

't'-test was used to compute the gender difference between boys and girls at the primary level on anxiety.

Further, Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the association between anxiety and academic achievement of primary students. The analysis was done with the help of SPSS-version 20.

Data Collection Procedure

In order to collect the data, first investigators contacted the principals of four selected schools. After getting permission from the principal, the investigators administered the SCAS to all the Class V students of these selected schools. The data collection was completed in one month, i.e., September 2021.

Analysis and Interpretation

Data collected by above mentioned tools were analysed and obtained results were interpreted in three subheadings, viz., students and anxiety, gender differences and anxiety, and the relationship between anxiety and academic achievement.

Students and Anxiety

T-score was calculated to measure the anxiety of primary students across gender; results were presented in the Table given below.

Table 1 presents the number and percentage of boys and girls at the primary evel that has elevated anxiety

Table 1
Students with Elevated Anxiety at the Primary Level

Subscale	Boys		Girls		Total	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Separation Anxiety	13	6.19	11	5.24	24	11.43
Social Phobia	15	7.14	18	8.57	33	15.71
OCD	21	10	15	7.14	36	17.14
Agoraphobia	16	7.62	20	9.52	36	17.14
Physical Injury Fear	13	6.19	17	8.10	30	14.29
Generalised Anxiety	10	4.76	17	8.10	27	12.86
Overall Anxiety	13	6.19	17	8.10	30	14.29

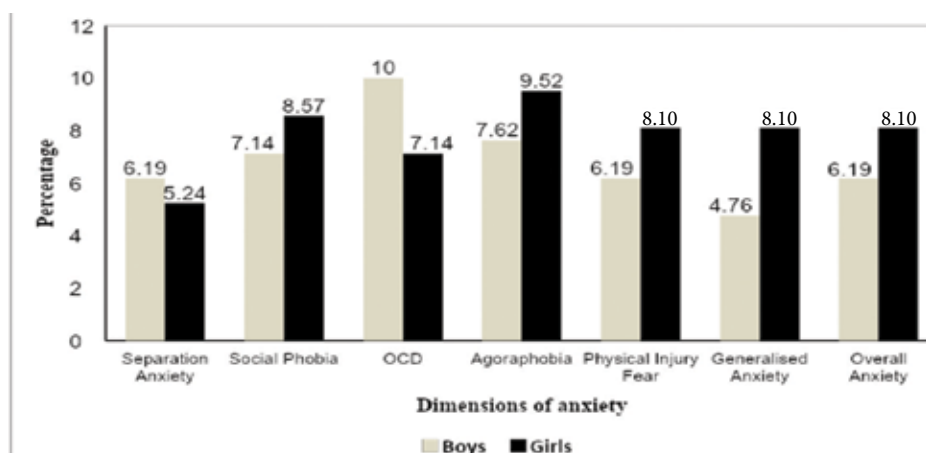*Individual Subscale T-Score>60*

Figure 1 : Percentage of boys and girls on anxiety scale

in totality and on various subscales of anxiety. The highest 17.14 per cent of anxiety was noticed for students on both subscales obsessive-compulsive disorder (10 % for boys and 7.14 % for girls) and agoraphobia (7.62 % for boys and 9.52 % for girls). As far as the social phobia subscale, an aggregate of 15.71 per cent anxiety was reported by students which include 7.14 per cent for boys and 8.57 per cent for girls. Similarly, a total of 14.29 per cent anxiety was found in students on the physical injury fear subscale, while for boys and girls it was 6.19 and 8.10 per cent respectively.

The case of generalised anxiety was 12.86 per cent, wherein 4.76 per cent of boys and 8.10 per cent of girls. However, the lowest 11.43 per cent anxiety was measured in students on the separation anxiety subscale. Out of this, 5.24 per cent of the students were girls and 6.19 per cent were boys. When we see the overall anxiety from table-1, reveals that 14.29 per cent of students at the primary level were found anxious altogether, with which boys at 6.19 per cent and girls at 8.1 per cent. Karande et al. (2018) reported that 11 per cent of students of Classes III to VIII were having anxiety symptoms in Mumbai city. Similar results were reported by Bakhla et al., (2013), that 11 per cent of students of Class VIII in Jamshedpur were having anxiety symptoms.

It was clear from the overall and four subscales results that girls experienced greater levels of anxiety than boys i.e., social phobia, agoraphobia, physical injury fear and generalised anxiety. However, a percentage of boys at the primary level were found more anxious on subscales of separation anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder than their girls. It clearly shows that there was variation in T-score between boys and girls at the primary level in totality as well as on various dimensions of anxiety. On the whole, it can be concluded that girls' anxiety levels are more in percentage in totality.

The finding is in conformity with that of Bakhla et al., (2013), who stated that female students are having high anxiety levels. The findings of the present studies are also supported by Ahmadi et al. (2016), Ishikawa etal. (2009), and Karandeetal. (2018); they reported that girls have more anxiety symptoms than boys. The contradictory results were reported by Deb and Walsh (2010) who reported that boys were more anxious than girls.

Gender Differences and Anxiety

To test the hypothesis that gender differences would not differ significantly in overall anxiety and on various subscales of anxiety, the sample was divided into two categories (i.e., boys and girls) and then the 't-test was computed.

Table 2
Gender Differences and Anxiety

Descriptions	Gender	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.
Separation Anxiety	Boys	13	66.75	3.31	0.12	0.90
	Girls	11	66.97	4.66		
Social Phobia	Boys	15	63.97	2.46	1.50	0.14
	Girls	18	65.46	3.25		
OCD	Boys	21	63.82	2.86	2.74*	0.009
	Girls	15	68.33	6.74		
Agoraphobia	Boys	16	64.38	2.39	1.66	0.10
	Girls	20	66.96	6.58		
Physical Injury Fear	Boys	13	64.05	2.50	3.98**	0.00
	Girls	17	70.52	5.76		
Generalised Anxiety	Boys	10	64.80	3.14	1.14	0.26
	Girls	17	66.37	3.45		
Overall Anxiety	Boys	13	61.36	1.28	2.50	0.19
	Girls	17	65.03	4.94		

M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation, N: Number of Students
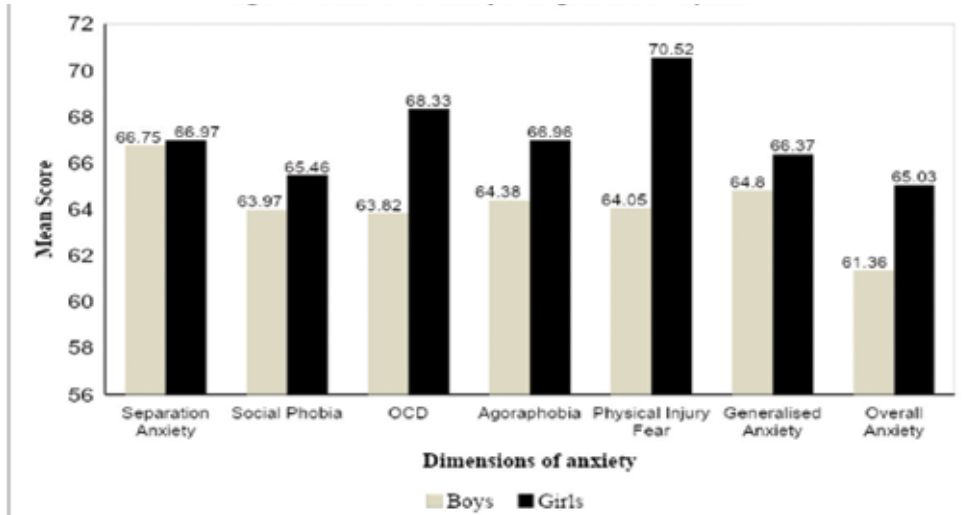*Significance: $p<.05$, **Significance: $p<.01$*

Figure 2 : Mean score of boys and girls on anxiety scale

Table 2 clearly indicates that there were no significant differences in the average score between girls and boys at primary level on separation anxiety (t-value=0.12, p>.05), social phobia (t-value=1.5, p>.05), agoraphobia (t-value=1.66, p>.05), generalised anxiety (t-value=1.14, p>.05) and overall anxiety (t-value=2.5, p>.05). Thus, the null hypothesis stands tenable. It was evident from obtained results that no gender differences were found in totality at the primary level and dimensions of anxiety, i.e., social phobia, agoraphobia generalised anxiety and separation anxiety. The findings are corroborative of the results of Ahmadi et al., (2016), where no gender differences were found. Further from Table 2, it can be viewed that boys and girls at the primary level differ significantly on obsessive-compulsive disorder (t-value=2.74, p>.05) and physical injury fear (t-value=3.98, p>.05) subscale of anxiety. The mean scores of girls (M=68.33) were found higher than that of boys (M=63.82) on the OCD subscale of anxiety. Similarly, the mean scores of girls (M=70.52) are also above that of boys (M=64.05) on the physical injury fear subscale of anxiety. It can be concluded that compared to boys, girls are more likely to experience physical injury fear and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. The finding is supported by Ishikawa et al., (2009), Essau et al., (2011), Zhao et al. (2012), Bakhla et al. (2013), Maria et al., (2016), Ahmadi, et al., (2016), Jalnapurkar et al., (2018) and Karande et al. (2018), who reported that women exhibit more anxiety disorder than men. The high anxiety among girls may be due to their hormonal changes during adolescence and their involvement in household chores. However, the result is contradictory to the findings of Bharti (2016), who founds that boys are more anxious than girls.

Association of Anxiety and Academic Achievement

Pearson correlation coefficient was used to ascertain the association between anxiety and academic achievement of primary students across gender, obtained results were presented below Table 3:

Table 3
Coefficient of Correlation (r) Between Anxiety and Academic Achievement

Group	r-value	p-value	Level of Significance
Boys	-0.3*	0.002	Significant at 0.05 level
Girls	-0.085	0.002	Not Significant
Overall	-0.091	0.19	Not Significant

In Table 3, the relation between anxiety and academic achievement of students at the primary level has been presented. According to Table 3, there is no apparent correlation between academic achievement and anxiety in girls and overall students at the primary level. However, a strong negative association was found between anxiety and academic achievement for boys at the primary level. It clearly shows that when there will be an increase in the level of anxiety among boys then their academic performance will decline and vice versa. Thus, the null hypothesis is partially rejected. The findings of Khesht-Masjedi (2019), and Bushra et al., (2021), support our findings. They stated that, anxiety is strongly negatively associated with the academic progress of students.

Suggestions

Within its constraints, the present study has significance for various education stakeholders. The study confirms that anxiety is hampering the level of academic achievement of students. Hence, the following suggestions are proposed so that the aforementioned stakeholders will have a strong basis to increase the level of academic achievement:

- Anxiety identification and detection at the school level are important as it predicts other psychopathological disorders in later life.
- Attention on screening, identification and prevalence of anxiety is needed by the stakeholders of the school education system.
- The treatment and epidemiological studies done in India neglect anxiety disorders, particularly of children. Anxiety symptoms among primary students are one of the major issues in the social, emotional and intellectual development of a child.
- Early diagnosis would help the stakeholders of the school education system to manage the students for the long term academic and social development of children.
- Workshops on managing stress and anxiety during adolescence may act as a useful activity.
- Teachers should also be motivated to participate in capacity building programmes on managing anxiety.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that girls are more in number and percentage that have elevated anxiety at the primary level. However, the percentage of boys is more on subscales, i.e., separation anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In addition, the study finds no gender differences in anxiety cases, with the exception of subscales of anxiety connected to

obsessive physical injury fear and compulsive disorder. The findings clearly show that girls had higher levels of physical injury fear and obsessive-compulsive disorder than boys. As far as the association of anxiety with academic achievement is concerned, for all students, researchers discovered a link between anxiety and poor academic achievement at the primary level. For boys in primary school, a significant inverse link between anxiety and academic achievement was also found. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that an increase in the anxiety level of boys results in a decline in their academic performance and vice versa.

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