Well-being of the students – What matters?

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety disorders are highly prevalent globally and it is much more prevalent among adolescents because of their exposure to a variety of stressors. Research shows that emotional and biopsychosocial well-being changes over the course of their schooling, with a general increase in anxiety, highlighting the need to further investigate the risk factors that contribute to worry and anxiety symptoms among college student populations. In Mauritius, there has been a rise in the number of adolescents who are recipients of psychiatric treatments at the local government hospitals as well as an increase in the number of cases reported to the school authorities. The present study aimed to identify the causal factors of anxiety among adolescents, and its effects in the educational context. Further, the role of educational social workers in overcoming anxiety was explored and the aim was achieved using the exploratory approach. A focus group discussion using a semi-structured questionnaire was conducted with ten (10) people including educational social workers and educational psychologists recruited through convenience sampling. A thematic analysis of the data shows academic anxiety as an emerging factor, followed by bullying and lastly, family issues. The findings revealed impacts at the school level such as students' inability to concentrate in class, non-participative and also showing emotional distress. While educational social workers provide counselling to students and parents, a need for teacher empowerment and peer counselling are proposed as future avenues.

Keywords: Adolescent anxiety, student anxiety disorder, social work intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

College life may sound fun-packed for many adolescents but can actually be challenging for many others. According to Kumaraswamy (2013), college depicts a significant shift from the adolescent period of high school to early adulthood life. Such a transition contributes to stress build-up, which may require substantial coping resources. Although optimal stress is vital for personal growth, too much stress can overwhelm a student and impair their capacity to cope. This may depend on the nature, frequency, and persistence of the stressors and how it is managed. Unfortunately for those who are unable to manage stress, it can lead to anxiety-related issues. Anxiety is defined by persistent, excessive worries that do not go away even in the absence of a stressor. Such anxiety-related issues impact the psychosocial well-being of the student, which may have spill over effects on their

academic performance and holistic development.

APA (2013) defines anxiety as "apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune accompanied by a feeling of worry, distress, and/or somatic symptoms". Specific criteria for diagnosing anxiety disorders, including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, and particular phobias, are provided by DSM V (APA, 2013). To diagnose, one must note the occurrence of persistent and elevated fear or anxiety related to specific circumstances or objects that have caused noticeable distress or impairment for at least six months. Anxiety is described by Allen et al. (1995) as an unpleasant sensation of anxiety and apprehension that is marked by discomfort brought on by the expectation of danger or anything unfamiliar or odd. According to their perspective, anxiety is diagnosed as a disease when it reaches a

severe degree that is out of proportion to the stimulus and interferes with a person's capacity to function daily, enjoy emotional comfort, and enjoy their quality of life.

According to Castilloa et al. (2000), the symptoms of anxiety disorders are far more severe than those of regular anxiety. The authors highlighted problems such as exaggerated worries or fears preventing an individual from relaxing, a continuous sense of tragedy, exaggerated fear of suffering humiliation and/or bullying, and an inability to control their attitudes and thoughts leading to panic syndrome and social panic. These disorders are made worse by technological advancements, where pressure and anxiety about the future are combined with an abundance of information, especially for college students. They may be subject to particular sets of stressors as college necessitates a considerable adjustment. As such, students may encounter numerous 'firsts' such as unfamiliar surroundings, companions, and lifestyles, competition, pressure to perform, as well as exposure to diverse cultures and ways of thinking and they are more likely to struggle if they are unable to handle these firsts.

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent psychiatric condition among adolescents (Ghandour et al., 2019), affecting nearly one in four adolescents. Early studies such as that of Strongman (1995) put forward the classification anxiety theories into psychoanalytic, learning/behavioural, physiological, phenomenological/existential, and cognitive. For example, according to cognitive models, socially anxious people have attention biases towards social threats, like judgmental or negative facial expressions (Gade, Molloy, and Anderson, 2021). Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to tackle challenging tasks without anxiety, effectively manage cognitive load, and persist in the face of failure (Yerdelen, Mccaffrey and Klassen, 2016). Tension and uncertainty emerging from societal stereotypes and classroom norms can lower self-efficacy and cause anxiety, especially in underprivileged students (Kalender et al., 2020). Early onset of mental illnesses like anxiety and depression emphasises the significance of early intervention, especially before a stressful period like college (Asher BlackDeer, 2023). This brings the call for action to ensure the well-being of students. Wellbeing is a concept that is gaining momentum and is associated with health to a large extent. Well-being encompasses psychological and social well-being which includes various elements like personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, meaning, and engagement (Lopes et al, 2020). But well-being can be achieved if the causes of stress and anxiety are known, along with what is being currently done to manage them.

Problem statement

According to WHO (2022), an estimated 4% of the global population currently experience an anxiety disorder. While anxiety is prevalent across different age groups, the symptoms experienced by adolescents during their school years are different from those of adults. For example, adults are able to recognise stress and adolescents may not. If this goes unnoticed, further damage can be caused. Parodi et al. (2022) point out the debate in the research about whether and to what degree mental health issues, such as anxiety, are becoming more common in young people. If left untreated, anxiety disorders in children and adolescents can frequently continue into adulthood and are linked to a number of negative consequences. Mental health among college students is a growing public health concern, with some scholars describing collegiate mental health as a crisis (Chen et al., 2019). Despite their considerable prevalence and incidence, mental health care for anxiety disorders is usually overlooked and not given as much attention as other physical health illnesses such as cancer and cardiovascular disease (NCFS, 2022).

Mauritius witnessed a significant number of adolescents evidenced by an increase among this group under treatment at the local mental hospital. The government employs educational social workers (ESW) who are professionals to assist students with mental health concerns, behavioural concerns, academic, and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents, and administrators as well as provide individual and group counselling. An article published in the local press 'Le Mauricien', dated May 2023, expressed an appeal by educational social workers (ESW) to recruit more officers to address issues reported, the same press published figures as follows:

Zone	Number of new cases reported	Number of visits effected by ESW with the families
1	1 128	1 092
2	1 032	2 528
3	613	1 083
4	636	636

The figures reported above are of concern as the education statistics of March 2023 (Economic and Social Indicators 2023) showed that while the enrolment rate in secondary school/college was 98,900, nearly 3000 cases of anxiety-related problems were reported. Such staggering statistics create alarm, and thus this study intended to understand the underlying causes of anxiety in college students and its ongoing impact on their socio-emotional and educational behaviour.

Aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate the problem of anxiety among adolescents at school.

The objectives are to:

• Identify the main causes of anxiety among adolescents
• Explore how their anxiety affects life at school
• Appraise the role that educational social workers have in helping such students overcome anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study sought to explore the causes and consequences of anxiety among adolescents as seen from the perspectives of those who work with adolescents. To achieve this purpose, the qualitative stance is adopted for this purpose. Merriam (2009) explains how constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction are the philosophical roots of a basic qualitative research study. Researchers who are interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" use this type of study. The ultimate goal is to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and lives (p. 23). The author also argues that a basic qualitative study can be used to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of highly effective teachers and administrators. In line with this argument, this stance is adopted.

Population and sample

The population of respondents for this study was educational social workers and psychologists who have the responsibility to liaise with the school and the community to identify cases of students needing special attention. As they work closely with students in their natural environment, they are deemed as appropriate in identifying cases as well as having information about the causes and consequences they have. The convenience sampling method was used to recruit ten (10) social workers who work in school settings as well as who work outside the school setting, but who are involved in intervention with adolescents. The selected participants were first contacted and informed of the nature of the study and invited to take part. It was emphasised to them that the purpose of the project was to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences with students having anxiety-related issues.

Instrument used

According to Halcomb (2016), in seeking to understand or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people assign to them, qualitative researchers carry out their work in natural environments. Moreover, according to Ipek (2016), self-reports (diaries, interviews and scales) are regarded as the most powerful means of measuring and identifying anxiety because they are more precise in focusing on a specific affective construct, such as anxiety. Hence, the narratives of people who work with such adolescents are crucial in providing answers. Furthermore, Hinsliff-Smith et al. (2015) describes the use of diaries in a phenomenological study of the experiences of breastfeeding amongst new mothers in the first six weeks postpartum. Diaries and reflective journals are essential tools that counsellors use to gather information over time and record their observations. Following procedures adopted by Hanton and Connaughton (2002) and Hanton and Jones (1999a), an interview guide was developed for the purpose of the study, and the following were included:

• The main causes of anxiety among adolescents
• Any difference between girls and boys
• How these are reflected in their education.
• The role that educational social workers/ psychologists/ teachers have in helping such students overcome anxiety

The sample was asked to reflect on their observations made during the past 2 years and in order to maximise the retrieval of data, the participants were sent a copy of the interview guide and asked to reflect on their answers in preparation for the interview. This method is evidenced in the work of Hanton, Mellalieu and Hall (2004).

Data analysis

Their observations were recorded in the form of a report, which was then taken to be the data to be analysed. As explained by Schmidt (2004), the analytical strategy may be presented in five stages: first – in response to the material –categories for the analysis are set up. In the second stage, these are brought together in an analytical guide, tested and revised. Thirdly, using this analytical and coding guide, all the interviews are coded according to the analytical categories. Fourthly, based on this coding, case overviews can be produced; these form the basis, in the fifth and final analytical stage, for the selection of individual cases for in-depth single-case analyses. For this study, the collected data were thematically analysed by breaking the larger components into smaller ones and assigning codes and themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings are summarised in Table 1.
   From Table 1, it can be observed that anxiety causes range from internal to external sources. Adolescence is

frequently marked by intricate changes in the body and mind (Moksnes, Byrne, Mazanov et al., 2010). As such, they face the developmental stage where there is a dual between identity development and role confusion, often leading to their outward expression of the need for isolation and the inner need to be protected and looked after. In their study, Mitchell et al. (2021) argues on Erikson's psychosocial stage model that identity formation is a key developmental task for adolescents and refer to Erikson's (1950, 1968) model that situates the identity vs. role confusion crisis as a central developmental task for adolescents, and one that sets the stage for healthy maturation across adulthood.

Table 1. Summary of main findings.

	Area of focus	Extracts of verbatims	Themes that emerged
1	Main causes of anxiety among adolescents	"I believe that at this age, they undergo a number of changes in terms of their body and mind." "Some students have been affected by the school calendar disruption during Covid-19. Some have one or both parents whose jobs were affected in this period" "I have worked in several schools and I see a heightened prevalence of anxiety disorders in elite schools or among high-achieving students, where the pressure to excel, whether intrinsically or extrinsically driven, is more pronounced."	Biopsychosocial change Impression Management Changes in school calendar due to Covid-19 Loss of jobs faced by their parents in/post Covid-19 Time management Peer Pressure Dating Issues Pressure to excel academically Bullying regarding looks/ socioeconomic status/ sexual orientation
2	Gender Differences	"Males and females do not display the same types of issues. Male adolescents have more behavioural issues and tend to compete when exams are close. Females tend to stress for academic issues and are also most likely to feel the stress and anxiety of dating and heart-breaking issues."	Male adolescents display behavioural issues. Females display over-stress
3	Impact on academic performance	"Students having anxiety problems show a lack of engagement with the educators, lack of follow up with the academic work, poor attention level, decrease in academic performance, decrease in self-confidence, low self-efficacy."	Decreased engagement Poor attention Decrease in academic performance, confidence and self-efficacy
4	Role of educational social workers/ psychologists in overcoming student anxiety	"Psychologists and educational social workers play a pivotal role in the assessment process. They also use psychological tests where necessary." "We meticulously tailor the interventions to address both individual and familial levels. Counselling is provided to students who have stress/anxiety-related issues. We conduct sessions with the concerned families as well." "We act as a mediator between the school and the parents." "We talk to the student, to the teacher, to the management and the family to customise our intervention strategy."	Assessment Intervention Therapy Needs-based intervention

People have an ongoing interest in how others perceive and evaluate them (O'Callaghan and Doyle, 2001). It is therefore common that this group also feel the need to be liked or positively viewed by peers, often leading to how

they manage impressions to fit the desired image. Reitz et al. (2014) explain the fact that peers are a persuasive part of life and the omnipresence of peers in our lives is likely to influence who we are. They also emphasise the importance of peer relationships and particularly peer groups sharply increases during the transition from childhood to adolescence.

When it comes to gender differences, boys often deny their emotional problems and tend to mask their emotional difficulties through externalised behaviours (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick et al., 2007). While girls, experiencing negative mood and anxiety, are more instinctive in being expressive of their depressive and anxiety symptoms (Dell'Osso, Carmassi, Massimetti et al., 2011). However, it is also true that girls are more vulnerable to anxiety-related issues and this is coherent with Chaplin et al. (2008) who argue that females may feel more depressed and anxious than men because they are more susceptible to stress and pain. This is accentuated by their beliefs about what it means to be a traditional man or woman influencing how they act and think about life's experiences (Gao et al., 2020). The above can also be substantiated by the work of scholars who conceptualize gender as a multilevel structure that covers cultural beliefs, the distribution of resources at the macro level, patterns of behaviour at the interactional level, and roles and identities at the micro level (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

Bullying is yet another issue that surfaces as a factor that might trigger stress and anxiety. Those involved in bullying have higher rates of mental health issues than their peers who do not engage in bullying on a variety of mental health indicators (Rivers et al., 2009). The study's findings shed light on the mental health burden bullying can have on students, with the identified link between bullying and stress and anxiety requiring immediate attention. Fear of retaliation and escalation of bullying often prevent victims from reporting incidents, leading to persistent victimization and increased anxiety about future bullying. This fear-induced silence can have severe consequences for students' academic performance and well-being.

In their study, Bernstein et al. (2008) reported that the severity of social anxiety is correlated with deficits in communication skills, attention difficulties, and learning problems within the school setting. When it comes to the academic performance of the students concerned, it has been observed that those who present symptoms of anxiety demonstrate a lack of engagement with the educators, lack of follow-up with the academic work, poor attention level, decrease in academic performance, decrease in self-confidence and a low self-efficacy. These reflect on the marks and grades they achieve and can further hamper their progression to higher class levels. Archbell and Coplan (2022) also explain that interactions with peers and instructors are important predictors of classroom success and students with anxiety issues can be at a disadvantage in their academic pursuits.

It has also been reported that ESWs are overwhelmed with the number of cases that have to be dealt with. Schools and colleges need to have a well-being corner where ESW/ psychologists are readily available. Anxiety is a growing concern among adolescents, yet psychologists often play a reactive rather than proactive role in addressing it. The roles that ESW and psychologists play are pivotal, and these range from micro-level services to students, to parents/families, to mezzo level such as school personnel and school-community liaison and which could also add to the macro level through policy-making bodies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Andriyani et al. (2017) studied the well-being of students in Indonesia as a predictor of trait and state anxiety, as a result of generalized anxiety. In order to prevent school dropout, the authors recommended that educators create school programmes that enhance students' well-being by offering fresh extracurricular activities and services that help students feel at ease and succeed in the classroom. In line with this recommendation and the various findings that emerged, it is proposed that teachers be trained in effective communication techniques that enable them to establish open and supportive relationships with their students, creating a safe space for discussing and addressing stressors. The shift towards holistic development approaches in education necessitates a concomitant focus on teacher training. By investing in teacher training programs that emphasize holistic development and equip teachers with the skills to address psychosocial stressors among adolescents, we can foster a learning environment that supports students' overall well-being and academic success. This investment in teacher education is an investment in the future of our students and society as a whole.

Anxiety among students can stem from various sources, both internal and external, with internal sources relating to the individual's psychological state and external sources being situational or environmental factors. Understanding the complex interplay of factors contributing to anxiety in adolescence is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems. Thus, strategies should target those various triggering factors and should preferably be dealt with by those who are directly concerned. This includes three levels of intervention starting at the micro level with educators, school social workers, psychologists, and the family, the second level being the mezzo level englobing the school management and the community at large, and a third level which is ideally what can be done at the macro level and this includes policies that address the teaching and learning mechanisms.

It is also recommended that schools and communities

prioritize a supportive environment where students feel safe reporting bullying incidents to ensure timely intervention and prevent further victimization. This also includes macro-level intervention where policies on bullying at school are drafted and enforced. The above arguments are illustrated in Figure 1.
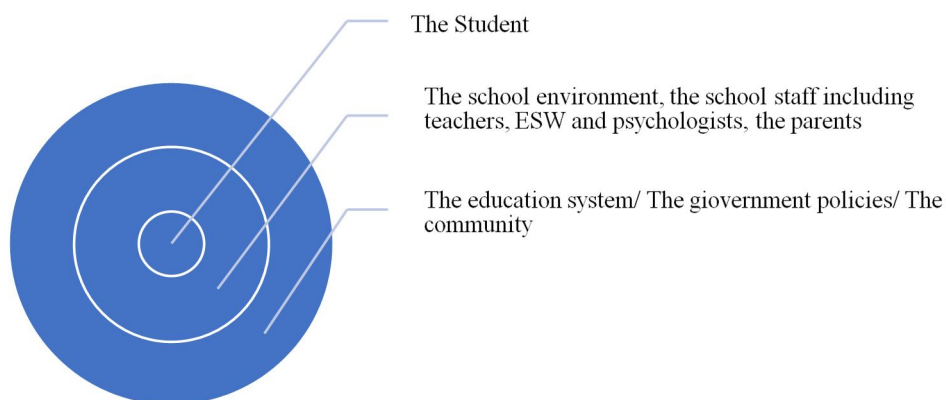
The Student

The school environment, the school staff including teachers, ESW and psychologists, the parents

The education system/ The giovernment policies/ The community

Figure 1. Proposed levels of intervention.

This paper recognises the laudable work of the ESW and psychologists and thus argues that they should be empowered to be more proactive in their role by organizing talks and workshops to sensitize adolescents to the signs and symptoms of anxiety. It is also suggested that educators be provided with targeted and specific training for counselling, as they are often the ones most likely to care for their students and the latter are more receptive to their advice.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, anxiety-related issues among students are undeniably a pressing concern that necessitates actions at multiple levels to ensure a positive and memorable college experience. This matter calls for collaborative efforts from individuals, institutions, and policymakers to address the underlying causes and provide effective support systems. By promoting open dialogue, destigmatizing mental health issues, implementing preventive measures, and offering accessible resources, we can create an environment conducive to student well-being and success. Only then can we truly foster a holistic educational experience that allows our students to thrive personally and academically. This paper comes with some limitations such as it represents the voice and opinions of one group, it addresses a selected sample from this group and the results cannot be generalised and the research is limited to one country. Future research could extend it to the national level and include maximum participation of respondents through quantitative research and triangulate the data collected from the adolescents and their families as well.

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