How do Primary School Staff Support Children's Experiences of Anxiety?

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Abstract

In a post-covid world, an increasing number of children of primary school age are experiencing anxiety. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, which for many disrupted their early development, other issues such as wars, natural disasters and increased concerns about global warming are at the forefront of some children's worries. Furthermore schooling, which currently includes formal testing for all, is becoming a source of anxiety for some. Through this research project, impactful work undertaken to support children experiencing anxiety in schools is highlighted whilst identifying arising needs that should be brought to the attention of educational leaders in governments.

Introduction

In a post-Covid world, an increasing number of children of primary school age are experiencing anxiety [1]. Since the pandemic of 2020-21, which for many disrupted their early development [2,3], other issues such as the wars in Europe and the Middle East, natural disasters and increased concerns about global warming have been increasingly at the forefront of some children's worries [4]. Furthermore, schooling, which currently includes formal testing for many, is becoming a source of anxiety for some [5,6]. Through the research project described in this short communication, examples of good practice are highlighted whilst identifying gaps in provision and issues to consider further. This project was undertaken in England; however, the results and recommendations might be applied across other global contexts.

Background

Many British primary schools now employ or train specific staff members to become an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA), with a view to providing on-site support for children experiencing anxiety or emotional issues within a school rather than a clinical setting [7]. This approach is based on the understanding that children will be happier in school if they are supported emotionally, and that a person-centred intervention provided by a known member of staff can allow for ownership of the support structure from within the school's own resources [8]. All trained staff receive supervision. A small bank of articles such as those by Purcell, Kelly and Woods [9] which examine older pupil's perspectives on the impact of ELSA interventions, highlight the importance of this approach to educational research. However, as indicated by a recent change in the inspection framework for England and Wales [10] there is now an emphasis on assessing how schools proactively support pupil mental health, resilience, and emotional safety. To date, there is less literature relating to the day-to-day work of teachers and teaching assistants. Therefore, funded by a small internal university grant, the research outlined here aims to explore this theme.

Research Methodology

The research took place during the Summer of 2025. Using the title of this piece as the primary research question, the aims of the research project were to:

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a) explore how practitioners in English primary schools support children experiencing anxiety
b) identify both good practice and current concerns

The research method, aiming to collect quantitative and qualitative data [11], involved an online survey that contained both closed and open questions. The link was shared with English primary school staff (including teachers, teaching assistants and ELSA practitioners) but was also forwarded to professionals known to schools. The research was undertaken using ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association [12] and ethical approval was given by Liverpool Hope University. 58 participants completed the survey, with 41 from within school settings, and the rest visiting professionals such as educational psychologists, an occupational therapist, a speech and language therapist and a school nurse.

Results

From the closed questions, using a 'descriptive' approach [13], data analysis identified that 83% considered working with children experiencing anxiety a specialist role with 97% stating that their settings invite support from external agencies. However, 93% of participants considered that their role in school involves working with children experiencing anxiety as part of their daily work. The data also indicated that many participants (88%) were aware of the impact of anxiety on children's behaviour and social skills, whilst a smaller yet not insignificant number (66%) noted the impact of anxiety on children's academic development. 97% of responses indicated that children know who to talk to in school about their anxieties. Nevertheless, exceptions were noted, for example, when it is deemed that children are too young to understand what anxiety is, or when children don't know who they should talk to. Therefore, the high scores within the quantitative data indicate that the work of a school leader, teacher or teaching assistant involves and needs to involve pastoral support within the classroom, over and above their teaching and leadership responsibilities, and in addition to the work of the ELSA and pupil support assistants.

In line with the views of Love et al. [11], it was necessary to follow up the quantitative data with open-ended questions in order to identify how practitioners within school classrooms and the wider community support children who experience anxiety, and to provide an understanding of their views on the benefits and challenges of this work. The open questions were analysed using Thematic Analysis [14]. The first asked participants to highlight perceived causes of anxiety for children in primary schools. Themes emerging from this question included global and societal factors such as financial insecurity and climate change; domestic factors were identified such as peer pressure, sibling rivalry, and

abuse. Anxieties induced by educational factors including a demanding curriculum were also noted, with technological factors such as social media and screen time included as a theme. Trauma, exclusion and fear of failure also featured as causes of anxiety, all indicating the wide-ranging influences on children's lives [15].

Responding to the question inviting participants to describe their own setting's provision, three approaches emerged: the whole-school approach, classroom-based activities, and specialist interventions. It is the first two that have significance here. Examples of a whole-school approach include having weekly mindfulness programmes, access to a sensory room and whole-school wellbeing surveys. Some schools engender a whole-school trauma responsive culture and others teach emotional regulation and coping skills to children of all ages. Classroom based activities and interventions include small-group emotional literacy sessions and Teaching Assistant-led mental wellbeing activities, in-class support tailored for anxious learners, Visual timetables or Now and Next boards to reduce uncertainty, and Circle time with mental health themes. In some cases, teachers are trained to recognize signs of anxiety and provide a safe, understanding environment, with regular wellbeing check-ins built into the school day. Staff monitor pupils' wellbeing and highlight identified pupils in order to refer to a specialist or for individual classroom support.

In relation to the perceived positive outcomes of this work, there was an overwhelming sense that provision allows children to feel happy in school – valued and respected, safe and supported. In some cases, this had a positive impact on attendance and attainment. Some interventions helped both parents and children to understand the cause of their anxieties and how to help themselves in developing coping strategies. There has also seen an increase in children's self-esteem and resilience, as well as more support for others and in some cases, bullying has reduced. An improvement in behaviour has been noticed and teachers report more sustained concentration in lessons with one participant stating: 'our school culture is more inclusive and understanding.'

Discussion

It is clear from the data that supporting anxiety-experienced learners is a significant part of primary school provision in England. From this research, it is evident that each setting offers bespoke provision within classes or across the whole school, with little standardisation except for any specific programmes adopted by the school. Such individualisation allows schools to provide contextualised responses, thus meeting the specific needs of the school community. However, this relies on teachers to increase their already demanding work-load in order to provide such targeted interventions. Specialist provision is available in many

cases but due to funding restrictions, often it is the localised school-based work that is prioritised.

This raises a number of issues for schools and Initial Teacher Training (ITT). First, it highlights the impact of working with anxiety-experienced learners on teachers' workload and emotional loads. It is imperative that students of Teacher Education are made aware of this within their training, with attention given to this within their own curricula. Further research is required to ascertain provision across ITT providers; however, it is recommended here that students enter the teaching profession aware of this aspect of classroom responsibility. It also raises the question of whether senior figures in the Department for Education are aware of the significance of this work to teacher workload, and if so, one might question how the current funding model responds to this.

Additionally, the research data raises the issue of the impact on children's emotional well- being of the high expectations on children in schools, through a demanding curriculum and standardized testing. A reduced priority on play and access to natural spaces in the Early Years were seen as impacting on children's mental health, whilst friendship issues, which are often worked out in risky and collaborative activities outdoors, were highlighted as factors that induce anxiety. A lack of support for children with some learning difficulties, social/cultural bullying and an over-emphasis on homework were also noted. It is necessary therefore to draw attention to these issues with the Department for Education, to ask them to consider if some changes and concessions might be made going forward in 2026.

Next Steps and Conclusion

Again, in line with Love et al. [11], this research necessitates a mixed methods approach. Following the survey data, the next step will involve semi-structured interviews with teachers to identify their concerns and ideas for recommendations to share with Government. It will also include discussions with practitioners within the Early Years Foundation Stage in England to ascertain how their practices with young children might inform a more pastoral pedagogy for older children. Finally, the research will survey ITT providers in England to identify the provision offered to students in preparation for their role working with anxiety-experienced learners in their classrooms. As educators we have a role to play in inspiring change. Often, teachers are the most trusted and significant adult in a child's life. The research data presented here illustrates the significant impact of the work of schools in supporting children with anxiety. However, the burden on teachers for this should not outweigh their primary role of educating children. It is important that the relationship between education, health and social care is strengthened for all children, not just those with special educational needs and disabilities, and

that more support and funding is made available for schools, many of whom are delivering impactful provision.

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