Test Anxiety and Evaluation Threat: Children’s Behavior in the Classroom

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Children differing in test anxiety level were observed in two art classes, one immediately preceding a classroom examination, the other when no examination was expected. The observational analyses indicated the following: (a) When an examination was expected there were general increases both in children’s task orientation and in their concern with other’s evaluations, and a decrease in general activity level. It was suggested that future research examine the effects of additional situational variables on children’s classroom behaviors. (b) Highly test-anxious children were generally hardworking and inactive. They reacted to examination expectancy with a decrease in task orientation, reduction in communications, and attentional constriction. Less anxious children reacted to examination expectancy by working harder, eliminating task-irrelevant behaviors, and seeking feedback. These results were interpreted as supporting a cognitive theory of test anxiety.

The effects of test anxiety on task performance have been well documented. The majority of studies indicate an interaction between evaluative stress and test anxiety in their effects on task performance (see Phillips, Martin, & Meyers, 1972; Sarason, 1972; Wine, 1971, for reviews). The highly test-anxious person performs most poorly in highly evaluative situations, and best under nonevaluative conditions, while the reverse is true for the low test-anxious persons. Research with children suggests that this effect is obtained as tasks are varied along a dimension from “gamelike” to “testlike” (Lighthall, Ruebush, Sarason, & Zweibelson, 1959; Sarason, Davidson, Lighthall, Waite, & Ruebush, 1960; Zweibelson, 1956) and with audience absence versus presence (Cox, 1966, 1968).

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Though there is a good deal of evidence regarding systematic variations in task performance as a function of test anxiety and stress, there is little evidence regarding variations in other behaviors. The classroom seems an ideal setting within which to research naturalistic variations in stress and their effects on children's behaviors. However, the effects of situational variables are so strong that it is quite difficult to make comparisons of children's behaviors across classroom situations. For example, it is probably not meaningful to compare a child's behavior while taking a classroom test with that child's behavior during a class in oral reading, because the appropriate behaviors in the two situations are different. These difficulties were noted in classroom observational studies of high and low test-anxious children reported by Sarason, Davidson, Lighthall, and Waite (1958) and Davidson and Sarason (1961). Consequently, these researchers settled for global clinical ratings rather than moment-to-moment systematic behavioral observations.

An alternative to examining children's behavior across all classroom situations is to manipulate evaluative stress within a particular kind of class that makes reasonably consistent demands on children's behaviors, preferably one that allows for a fairly wide range of behaviors and for interactions among the children and between the children and the teacher. Art class is one such situation; it is a regularly scheduled event in most elementary school classrooms; it often takes place in the normal classroom with the regular teacher; and typically, children are given a measure of freedom to move around and interact. It would be difficult, and perhaps inappropriate, to introduce evaluative stress within this situation, but it is possible to introduce the expectancy of an impending examination.

Research has indicated that "worry" regarding a particular evaluating situation tends to remain constant across time and does not fluctuate with contiguity to the evaluating situation (Liebert & Morris, 1967). Barnard, Zimbardo, and Sarason (1961) interviewed high and low test-anxious children, half of them in a permissive atmosphere and half with the instruction that there would be a test following the interview. In the evaluative interview condition the high anxious children used more negative expressions than the low anxious children, while there were no differences in negative expressions in the permissive interview. These results indicate that the expectation of evaluation interacts with anxiety level in affecting children's overt behaviors.

In the present study, the classroom behaviors of children varying in test anxiety level were systematically observed in an art class immediately followed by a difficult classroom examination, and during an art class when no tests were scheduled for the entire day. The following questions were addressed: How are differences in test anxiety level manifested in children's overt classroom behaviors? Do these behaviors change systematically with changes in evaluative stress? The earlier classroom observation studies (Davidson & Sarason, 1961; Sarason et al., 1958) reported that test anxiety related more clearly to the behaviors of boys than to those of girls. Sex differences were investigated further in the present study.