

Do secondary school PE teachers feel as though they receive enough training to provide support for students with anxiety?



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Background and Context: -

Anxiety is defined as a “**negative emotional feeling caused by an increase in arousal levels when a performer is faced with a situation in which they feel threatened or fear failure**” (James *et al*, 2003, pg. 20). Recent studies have shown there is a risk of a range of mental health problems for UK students. It is said that one-third of secondary school students aged 12 to 16 suffer from mental health problems (Tutorhouse, 2020).

This research project aimed to **investigate the extent** to which secondary school teachers feel adequately prepared to support students with anxiety and using a survey will allow me to determine whether secondary school PE teachers in the Northwest of England can support the statement.

Overview of Literature: -

Research has found that **one in three UK secondary school students that partake in Physical Education** suffers from various mental health issues such as **anxiety or depression**, with **62% suffering from this at the start of the new school year** (Tutorhouse, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that **secondary school PE teachers receive adequate training** to effectively support their students' short-term and long-term mental health disorders such as anxiety (Headley & Campbell, 2011). Hence there is an increased focus on improving mental health services for children and the role of schools (Attride-Stirling *et al*, 2001).

Gowers, Thomas & Deeley (2004) have found that **although teachers receive ongoing training in their professional development, they receive little to no training in supporting and understanding children's mental health** and the appropriate strategies they should use. This differs from the statistics on how many secondary school PE students in the UK have anxiety. It would be assumed that teachers would be more likely to receive training in supporting their student's mental health conditions and potentially impact their academic achievements (Headley & Campbell, 2011). For example, some PE teachers may find that **some students doubt their ability in sporting contexts and compare themselves to other pupils**. It could also be because of **fears of evaluation** from both the teacher and pupils, for example, demonstrating skills learned, creating feelings of anxiety (Barkoukis *et al*, 2012). As a result, indicating that high anxiety impacts their PE performance (Pérès *et al*, 2002).

Other research shows that students are expected to manage their anxiety by using various anxiety strategies and techniques (Capel, 1997). For example, group or creative activities, having consistent daily routines or positive coping skills (Moran, 2016). This insinuates rather than the teachers receiving ongoing training for supporting anxiety, the students should, as teachers would have fewer interruptions when they are trying to teach their class (Napoli, 2004).

In contrast, Headley & Campbell (2011, pp.2) found that “**teachers are in a key position to identify mental health problems such as anxiety**” specifically with children who show moderate to severe anxiety signs and symptoms. Consequently, if teachers are trained to support this or have the knowledge and understanding in spotting the signs and symptoms of anxiety, they will feel adequately prepared for supporting their students' mental health (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015).

Overall, these are concerning findings in light of whether secondary school PE teachers receive enough training in supporting their students with anxiety. Some researchers claim that the students should be the ones to support their mental health. Other researchers claim that they feel inadequately prepared to support their students' anxiety if they have not received any training.

Research Question and Aim: -

Question: Do Secondary school PE teachers feel as though they receive enough training to provide support for students with anxiety?

The aim: To research the extent to which secondary school teachers are given training to be able to support students with anxiety.

Data Collection: -

A variety of methods can be used when conducting research, our chosen methodologic approach is survey research, which is described as “**the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions**” (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 160).

Within survey research there are a variety of data collection methods that exist. This study utilises online questionnaires. Online questionnaires were useful in our research as they are **relatively quick** and **easy to conduct**, with the questionnaires being online this meant that responses were even easier to obtain and were less time consuming for both researchers and the participants themselves in comparison to paper questionnaires or other data collection methods like interviews for example. Another reason for the use of questionnaires is that they can be **completed privately** and this allows for anonymity. This is useful for research as responses are less likely to show socially desirable answers (Nayak & Narayan, 2019).

There are some potential issues with surveys that have been considered. One potential problem with surveys is that they **rely on responses to be returned**, once sent they are no longer in the hands of the researchers. To attempt to reduce the impact this would have on our research we included a time frame within which we would like responses to be completed. Another issue with surveys that could arise is that if **questions are misunderstood** participants are unable to gain clarification, this could lead to questions being answered incorrectly. To limit the impact this could have on our research we conducted a pilot survey to identify any parts of the questionnaire that could be misinterpreted or be seen as hard to understand.

To analyse our data, we will be using thematic analysis, thematic analysis is a type of analysis used when presented with qualitative data. It is used to analyse classifications and present themes relating to the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis was chosen as our analysis method due to its **flexibility**; it allows researchers of every level to use this analysis technique and every researcher can have their own technique to conduct thematic analysis (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). As well as this thematic analysis is a helpful data analysis method when dealing with copious amounts of data quickly.

Findings & Critical Discussion: -

After surveying six teachers (5 males and 1 female). The findings were as followed:

1. **All** those surveyed had supported students with anxiety, which shows how common anxiety is within secondary schools throughout Northwest England. This is also reflected in research done by Tutorhouse (2020), which found one in three UK secondary school students that partake in Physical Education suffers from various mental health such as anxiety or depression.

2. **Two-thirds** of teachers that were surveyed received no training concerning supporting students with anxiety. Those that were surveyed and received training, had not received training that was specific to anxiety, rather mental health in general. All those who received no training regarding supporting students' anxiety felt that they would benefit from training related to anxiety. Considering that 1 in 3 students suffer from anxiety and mental health problems having some training could lower these statistics. This links to the work from Gowers *et al* (2004) where they learnt from their participants that most of them received little to no training during their teacher training so having this become part of the training specification could potentially lower the number of students suffering from anxiety (Gowers, , Thomas & Deeley, 2004).

3. After completing the survey, it was found that the most common form of support strategy, used by those who haven't received any training in the field of anxiety or mental health, was trying to help in **controlling their breathing**. Those who received training also mentioned that controlling breathing was an important part of supporting students with anxiety. They also mentioned that talking to the student and understanding what was causing them to be anxious was how they supported students suffering from anxiety. This is in line with a study done by Chiang *et al* (2009), which identified that relaxation, breathing and self-management training improves an individual's psychological state.

4. Within the survey, physical education teachers were asked what they understood to be signs of anxiety in students. The majority of those surveyed stated that avoiding PE was a huge indicator that a student is struggling with anxiety. Avoidance behaviours mentioned are – **Forgetting the kit, bringing in notes, not getting involved in the session. Other signs of perceived anxiety include heavy breathing or low self-confidence during sessions**. Research has found that students may suffer from anxiety more in PE as the execution of tasks takes place in front of the other students, which can often result in fear of failure/ evaluation, body image concern, injury fears. (Barkoukis *et al*, 2012). So, PE teachers spotting signs of students suffering from anxiety is significantly important.

5. The research findings suggest that **physical education teachers feel confident** in their ability to support students with anxiety, and they face this challenge regularly. The collected qualitative responses from physical education teachers in the Northwest of England found that teachers felt confident in supporting students, despite the majority receiving no training. This finding contradicts current literature stating that teachers who have not been trained feel inadequately prepared to recognize and manage students' mental health (Headley and Campbell, 2011).

6. Research found that those who had received mental health training were willing to further their understanding of anxiety yet were unaware of any other courses or additional resources for them to access to better their ability to understand and support students with anxiety.

Conclusion: -

In conclusion, this poster aimed to investigate whether PE secondary school teachers, within the Northwest, feel as though they receive enough training to support their students with anxiety. In investigating this aim, a qualitative online survey was conducted and sent to six PE teachers across the Northwest of England. Successfully, there were six out of six responses from the survey. Common themes were picked out from the responses, attempting to find out if PE secondary school teachers are receiving the right amount of training in supporting their students who suffer from anxiety.

Overall, this was a successful qualitative study as it found that all those who were surveyed had supported students with anxiety in school and had felt confident in supporting their students' anxiety, although four out of the six had received no training in doing this. One of the most common strategies which each of them used was controlling their students' breathing. Managing breathing as a method of coping with anxiety is an effective strategy according to Abraham (2020), as it helps to control or reduce anxiety symptoms.

One of the most common strategies which each of them used to was controlling their students' breathing. Managing breathing as a method of coping with anxiety is an effective strategy according to Abraham (2020), as it helps to control or reduce anxiety symptoms. Therefore, this may make teachers feel more competent in supporting their students' anxiety as it is seen to be one of the most effective methods (Beauchemin, Hutchins & Patterson, 2008), especially for those who have not received any training relating to children's mental health.

A limitation that should be considered is that a small sample size of participants within the Northwest of England were used within the study. Therefore, the research study lacks generalisability to the wider population because it is only representative within the Northwest of England and not across the entirety of the UK.

A future recommendation to improve this study would be to focus on the entirety of the UK, rather than in just one specific part of the UK. Also, using a large sample size of participants may be beneficial in generating more accurate data. Therefore, this would increase the validity and reliability of the data, meaning we can generalise our aim across the UK (Biau *et al*, 2008).

Another future recommendation for future research would be to look at the available courses relating to mental health. Consequently, this can extend their knowledge and understanding regarding children's mental health and how they can apply it in supporting their students' anxiety.

The reason why this is a future recommendation for future research is that the need for mental health services, especially in schools, is increasing (Attride-Stirling *et al*, 2001) as according to TutorHouse (2020), there are one in three UK secondary schools students suffer from anxiety. Therefore, this would strengthen the research more.

The last future recommendation for future research would be to focus on what, why and how students may suffer from anxiety more within a specific PE context or situation. For instance, students may feel uncomfortable getting changed within the PE changing rooms, potentially increasing their anxiety levels (Fisette, 2011). Another instance may be that students suffer from anxiety when they have to demonstrate something, for example, physical sports skills, a discrete skill or within a game setting (Barkoukis *et al*, 2012). The importance of this recommendation for future research means that secondary school teachers, especially in PE, can further support and address their student's anxiety and needs within a PE lesson (Barkoukis *et al*, 2012).

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