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ZARZĄDZANIE I EDUKACJA	337
Olena Lutsenko. Genesis and futurology of nature education: from academic rationalism to transdisciplinary ecosystem (second half of the 20th – end of the 21st century)	337
Марина Ажажа, Валентина Воронкова, Тетяна Несторенко, Віталіна Нікітенко. Синергія ІІІ та цифрового гуманізму в системі публічного управління повоєнного відновлення України	346
Владислав Ананченко, Юрій Лотюк. Методологія адаптивного оцінювання операційних ризиків програмних релізів із застосуванням агентного штучного інтелекту	358
Віктор Годлюк. Математичне моделювання стійкості освітніх екосистем у кризових умовах з використанням цифрових платформ	363
Олександр Скляренко. Значення та виклики вітчизняної освіти під час військових дій	371
KOMUNIKACJA I EDUKACJA LITERACKA	379
Oksana Melnychuk, Inesa Khmeliar, Lesia Kushnir, Oksana Burban. Models of chemical term formation in an interlingual perspective (Latin / Greek, English, German, and Ukrainian)	379
Ольга Жвава, Анжеліка Зинякова. Формування історичної пам'яті через призму номінації традиційних народних промислів (на матеріалі гончарської лексики Поділля)	390
Катерина Лінєвич, Ірина Атамась. Методологічні засади формування біоетичної культури у підготовці медичних сестер	404
PSYCHOLOGIA I EDUKACJA	414
Tetyana Ivanova, Yuliia Typtiuk. Advantages and limitations of AI counselling compared to traditional psychotherapy	414
Oksana Kikinezhdi, Yaroslava Vasykivych, Mykola Ryk. Features of adolescents' school anxiety in the context of contemporary challenges	431

FEATURES OF ADOLESCENTS' SCHOOL ANXIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Oksana Kikinezhdi, Yaroslava Vasykivych, Mykola Ryk

Annotation

The article presents the results of an empirical study examining the characteristics of adolescents' school anxiety in the context of the contemporary educational environment. The aim of the study was to identify the level and structural components of school anxiety among adolescents. The sample consisted of 40 adolescents aged 10-12 years who were students of a Kyiv lyceum. School anxiety was assessed using Phillips' School Anxiety Test. The findings revealed elevated levels of anxiety in situations involving academic evaluation, fear of failing to meet others' expectations, and interactions with teachers. The results indicate an uneven structure of school anxiety and highlight key directions for psychological support of adolescents within the school environment.

Key words: *Anxiety. School anxiety. Anxiety syndromes. Adolescents. Educational environment.*

Introduction

The issue of studying personal anxiety in children and adolescents has become increasingly relevant in contemporary psychological research due to its close association with emotional and personality development, mental health preservation, and the creation of a safe educational environment. Under conditions of war, the psychoemotional well-being of both children and adults has deteriorated significantly, making this problem particularly acute. According to a study conducted by specialists of the State Service for Education Quality of Ukraine during the 2022/2023 academic year, students' psychological well-being has substantially declined over the past year. In comparison with data from early February 2022, the number of students who frequently experience anxiety and tension has more than doubled, while the proportion of those who feel fatigued has increased by one and a half times. At the same time, the percentage of students who report feeling safe, emotionally balanced, energetic, and satisfied with life has decreased by 20% across all age groups. Educators identify unstable learning conditions, limited opportunities for organizing learning activities, reduced motivation, and an unstable psychoemotional state of both students and teachers as key challenges of the educational process during wartime (*State Service for Education Quality of Ukraine, 2023*).

The problem of school anxiety is particularly salient in adolescence, a developmental period characterized by rapid physical, psychological, and social changes, as well as increased vulnerability to feelings of uncertainty and difficulty in coping with stressful situations. Adolescents are often marked by insecurity, heightened worry, increased anxiety, and emotional instability, manifesting in such emotional states as anxiety, fears, phobias, and depressive symptoms, which frequently require psychological or psychotherapeutic intervention.

The need to investigate school anxiety, as well as the conditions and factors contributing to its timely prevention and correction in the life of the developing individual, determines the aim of this article: to conduct a theoretical and empirical study of the psychological characteristics of adolescents' school anxiety in the context of contemporary challenges.

1. School anxiety as a contemporary psychological and educational problem

1.1. Anxiety as a mental trait and psychological state of the individual

Scientific research focused on the study of anxiety and anxiousness has remained relevant for several decades, as anxiety, being an integral component of human emotional life, is closely related to the phenomenon of fear. As one of the most fundamental emotional experiences, anxiety has attracted sustained attention in psychological theory and empirical research.

Among international scholars, the phenomenon of anxiety has been examined by S. Freud, who introduced the concept of anxiety into scientific discourse, as well as K. Horney, A. Adler, R. May, C. Rogers, P. Tillich, I. Yalom, and many other researchers. These scholars identified various sources of anxiety, including significant others (H. Sullivan, K. Horney) and intrapersonal determinants (D. McClelland, R. May, C. Rogers, E. Fromm, C. Jung). Anxiety is generally regarded as a highly subjective phenomenon that manifests through individually meaningful introspective, behavioral, and physiological responses.

In Ukrainian psychological literature, several approaches to the conceptualization of anxiety can be identified. In particular, some researchers consider anxiety primarily within the context of stressful situations, interpreting it as a temporary negative emotional state or as an experience of emotional discomfort arising from the anticipation of danger (Kuznetsov, & Babarykina, 2012; Mahdysiuk, 2019; Tytarenko, 2018; Tomchuk, & Tomchuk, 2018; Yastochkina, 2020).

Most scholars adopt a differentiated approach to anxiety, viewing it both as a situational phenomenon and as a stable personality characteristic, while emphasizing its dynamic nature and transitional states. It is also emphasized that across all developmental periods, anxiety is largely shaped by social interaction.

Thus, anxiety may be conceptualized as a state, an experience, or a relatively stable personality trait, regardless of the objective adequacy of the situation. Experiencing anxiety in objectively threatening circumstances is considered a normal and adaptive response, indicating psychological well-being and healthy social functioning. In contrast, experiencing anxiety without sufficient external reasons reflects a distortion in an individual's perception of reality and difficulties in relationships with the world, which may indicate anxiety as a stable personality trait.

Despite significant terminological differences and conceptual approaches to the classification of anxiety, researchers generally agree that anxiety is an inherent component of human existence. However, excessive manifestations of anxiety may lead to personal disharmony, internal conflicts within the self-concept, emotional discomfort, and a persistent anticipation of danger.

Like any psychological experience, anxiety is closely related to an individual's dominant motives and needs and, under normal conditions, serves a regulatory function by guiding behavior in potentially threatening situations. Nevertheless, in psychological research, anxiety is most often classified as a negative motivational-orientational state (Kuzikova, 2020).

The Psychological Encyclopedia defines anxiety as "an individual's experience of emotional discomfort caused by expectations of unfavorable developments or the anticipation of possible danger. Unlike fear, which arises in response to a specific

threat, anxiety reflects the experience of a vague and uncertain threat and is characterized by worry, apprehension, and distress. It is most often associated with expectations of failure in social interaction and with a lack of awareness of the source of danger” (*Psychological Encyclopedia*, 2006, p. 367). As noted by O. Stepanov (Stepanov, 2006), based on the stability of its manifestations, situational anxiety – characterizing the individual’s state at a given moment – is distinguished from trait anxiety, which manifests as a person’s persistent tendency to experience imagined or real danger (*Psychological Encyclopedia*, 2006, p. 367).

Therefore, anxiety as an individual psychological characteristic is expressed in a person’s predisposition to experience anxiety when anticipating unfavorable events. Importantly, this refers to psychological threat, which is subjective in nature and does not necessarily involve physical danger. Such situations may include interpersonal conflicts, social comparison with others who possess certain advantages, or competition with peers. Both fear and anxiety represent adaptive reactions to danger; however, in the case of fear, the threat is concrete and clearly identifiable, whereas in anxiety it remains diffuse and uncertain.

Thus, the concept of anxiety is a multidimensional psychological construct used to describe both a temporary state experienced by individuals at a specific moment in time and a stable personality trait. Contemporary research on anxiety is primarily focused on distinguishing situational anxiety associated with specific life circumstances from trait anxiety as a stable personal characteristic, as well as on developing diagnostic methods for assessing anxiety as a result of the interaction between the individual and the environment.

Anxiety may also serve a motivating function in behavior and personality development, acting as a psychological driver that, in some cases, allows individuals to avoid decision-making and responsibility.

1.2. Factors and characteristics of school anxiety manifestation in adolescence

Researchers consider childhood anxiety to be one of the most intriguing phenomena in psychological science and define it both as a situational experience and as a stable personality characteristic of the child. A number of studies by Ukrainian scholars (S. Dmytriieva, O. Machushnyk, L. Matokhniuk, Y. Baranovska, S. Tomchuk, M. Tomchuk) have examined manifestations of trait and school anxiety in adolescents, as well as approaches to providing psychological support for anxiety-related conditions. These studies primarily focus on such factors as the child’s social situation of development, the quality of parent-child relationships, and the specificity of teacher–student interactions during various learning activities.

Adolescence represents a transitional developmental period from childhood to maturity. Changes occurring in the intellectual and emotional spheres of adolescents give rise to a new level of self-awareness, a need for self-affirmation, and a desire for equal and trusting communication with both peers and adults. Adolescent anxiety often disrupts everyday functioning and may lead to difficulties in maintaining social relationships. Common manifestations of anxiety in adolescence include apathy, lethargy, and reduced initiative. Internal conflicts and the contradictory nature of adolescents’ motives – when one strong desire conflicts with another or when one need obstructs the satisfaction of another – are considered key psychological sources of anxiety.

Scholars define school anxiety in adolescents (aged 11-16 years) as an emotionally tense state caused by fear of failing to meet academic demands, interpersonal conflicts, or fear of evaluation. It manifests through somatic symptoms (e.g., headaches, palpitations), behavioral changes (e.g., avoidance, apathy), and decreased academic performance, often

intensifying during examinations, in the context of complex peer relationships, and amid the crisis of self-identity (Dmytriieva, & Machushnyk, 2018; Kraieva, & Nykytiuk, 2017; Krasulia, 2019; Pysmak, 2018; Shatkovska, & Kushnir, 2017; Minenko, 2024).

Among the most common causes of anxiety in children and adolescents, researchers identify excessive demands placed on the child, rigid and dogmatic parenting styles, and intrapersonal conflicts associated with self-evaluation of personal success across different domains of activity. Experimental studies indicate a steady increase in anxiety among adolescents, as well as qualitative changes in its manifestation under contemporary conditions. Empirical evidence suggests that most Ukrainian adolescents demonstrate significantly elevated levels of situational anxiety, whereas levels of trait anxiety remain relatively low.

Anxiety as a mental trait has a clearly defined specificity that is reflected in its content, sources, forms of manifestation, and mechanisms of compensation. At each developmental stage, there are certain aspects of reality that evoke heightened anxiety in most children, regardless of the presence of objective threat or the stability of anxiety as a personality characteristic. In their empirical study, T. Palko and K. Travina (Palko, & Travina, 2024) demonstrated the negative impact of war on the psychoemotional state of adolescents in Ukraine. Specifically, 45% of the adolescents showed high levels of situational anxiety, while 50% exhibited clinically significant symptoms of depression.

Contemporary empirical studies on the psychological determinants and manifestations of anxiety, anxiousness, and fear predominantly focus on preschool, primary school, and adolescent developmental stages. Researchers emphasize that anxiety as a stable personality trait is formed during adolescence in combination with the development of self-concept and adolescents' attitudes toward themselves. Adolescence is characterized by uneven and contradictory development at both interindividual and intraindividual levels of personality (Kuzikova, 2020; Baranovska, 2019; Matokhniuk, & Shportun, 2020). In particular, studies have shown that adolescent anxiety is often masked by behavioral manifestations of other problems, such as aggression, dependency, submissiveness, deceitfulness, passivity resulting from learned helplessness, pseudo-hyperactivity, withdrawal into illness, and other maladaptive patterns. It has also been found that adolescents in different peer groups tend to experience anxiety of varying intensity (Matokhniuk, & Shportun, 2020).

N. Bulatevych and O. Selezniova (Bulatevych, & Selezniova, 2021) examined the influence of parent-child relationships on the manifestations of adolescents' school anxiety. M. Teslenko (Teslenko, 2016) investigated the impact of adolescent anxiety on peer group status, while T. Shcherban and I. Bretsko (Shcherban, & Bretsko, 2018) described factors contributing to adolescents' emotional burnout in interactions with adults. The study by O. Voloshok (Voloshok, 2012) focused on the relationship between adolescent anxiety and psychological-pedagogical factors. In more recent research, O. Shumeiko (Shumeiko, 2023) identified and analyzed specific features of adolescents' anxiety experiences, as well as the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety in the context of war, which enabled the author to propose optimal strategies for further psychocorrection and psychoprevention, taking into account motivational and cognitive aspects.

Thus, adolescence is primarily characterized by a strong drive for personal expansion and self-expression. During this period, individuals begin to construct their life strategies based on reflection and the alignment of personal abilities, social status, age-related and individual characteristics, and aspirations with societal demands. In this context, anxiety functions as a warning mechanism that signals the need to prepare for significant challenges and to quickly restore adaptive functioning. However, when anxiety transforms into chronic anxiousness and results in excessive worry, fear, panic, aggression, or depression, it begins

to interfere with communication processes and becomes a threat to mental and physical health.

2. An empirical study of adolescents' school anxiety in the contemporary educational environment

2.1. Analysis of the results of the study on psychological features of adolescent anxiety development in the context of war

The empirical study of adolescents' school anxiety was conducted using *Phillips' School Anxiety Test*, which enables the assessment of overall anxiety levels as well as eight structural components (syndromes) of school anxiety. The sample consisted of 40 students aged 10-12 years. Data collection was carried out within the school environment of Kyiv lyceums during the period of martial law, which constitutes an important contextual factor for interpreting the results.

Analysis of the group mean scores of adolescents' school anxiety showed that the general school anxiety factor was at an elevated level ($M = 11.25$), indicating the presence of emotional tension associated with being in the school environment. At the same time, the integral index of overall anxiety according to the Phillips test ($M = 24.6$) corresponded to a low level, which may indicate the absence of generalized anxiety but the presence of specific problem areas within the structure of the school experience.

The most pronounced anxiety factors were fear of knowledge evaluation situations ($M = 3.75$), fear of not meeting others' expectations ($M = 2.75$), and problems and fears in relationships with teachers ($M = 4.25$), all of which were at elevated levels. This suggests that, for a significant proportion of adolescents, emotional tension primarily arises in situations of academic assessment and interpersonal interaction with teachers.

In contrast, such factors as experiences of social stress, frustration of the need for achievement, fear of self-expression, and low physiological resistance to stress demonstrated low levels of expression according to group mean scores. This may indicate relatively adequate adaptation of adolescents in peer interactions and a sufficient level of psychophysiological resources.

The analysis of the distribution of anxiety levels (Table 1) provides a more detailed characterization of the internal structure of adolescents' school anxiety. Specifically, 35% of the participants demonstrated a high level of overall school anxiety, indicating the presence of a high-risk group for emotional maladaptation in the educational environment. At the same time, only half of the sample exhibited a low level of this indicator.

Table 1. Distribution of adolescents' anxiety levels across factors (syndromes) of Phillips' school anxiety test

Factor (Syndrome)	Anxiety Level		
	Low	Elevated	High
General school anxiety	50	15	35
Experience of social stress	95	5	0
Frustration of the need for achievement	75	25	0
Fear of self-expression	65	25	10
Fear of knowledge evaluation situations	40	40	20
Fear of not meeting others' expectations	40	55	5
Low physiological resistance to stress	60	35	5
Problems and fears in relationships with teachers	55	40	5
Overall anxiety level	50	50	0

Particular attention should be paid to the factor of fear of knowledge evaluation situations, for which 20% of adolescents demonstrated a high level of anxiety, while

an additional 40% showed an elevated level. This distribution may indicate a predominance of external evaluation orientation among students, fear of making mistakes, and a high sense of responsibility for academic outcomes. These characteristics are typical of adolescence but tend to intensify under conditions of instability and an overall elevated stress background.

Regarding the fear of not meeting others' expectations, 55% of adolescents exhibited an elevated level of anxiety, indicating high sensitivity to social approval and the perceived importance of adults' opinions. This finding is consistent with developmental features of adolescents' self-concept formation and their increased need for recognition.

At the same time, such factors as experiences of social stress and frustration of the need for achievement were predominantly represented at low levels among most participants. This may indicate an adequate level of peer support and the absence of pronounced difficulties in the domain of social interaction.

2.2. Interpretation of the results in the context of the educational environment during war

The results of the empirical study indicate that adolescents' school anxiety has an uneven structure and is manifested primarily in relation to academic evaluation situations and interpersonal interactions with teachers. This pattern can be explained by the fact that, during adolescence, the leading factors of school anxiety include fear of negative evaluation, testing situations, and failure to meet the expectations of significant adults.

Fear of knowledge evaluation situations emerged as one of the most pronounced anxiety syndromes among adolescents and was directly associated with orientation toward external evaluation and school performance demands. Testing and examination situations act as key triggers of emotional tension, particularly under conditions of increased social stress and instability within the educational environment.

The elevated level of fear of not meeting others' expectations identified in this study further confirms the heightened sensitivity of adolescence to social approval. Evaluation by adults and significant others becomes particularly important during this developmental period, while academic achievement often serves as a core criterion of self-worth. This, in turn, contributes to increased anxiety in situations involving the risk of losing the positive image of a "successful student."

The findings related to problems and fears in relationships with teachers can be explained by the significant impact of pedagogical interaction styles on students' emotional well-being. Directive, formalized, or evaluative-controlling communication styles tend to intensify students' anxiety, whereas a supportive teacher stance reduces emotional tension and facilitates adaptation.

At the same time, the relatively low levels of social stress and frustration of the need for achievement observed in most adolescents suggest that, in the presence of a supportive peer environment, social factors may serve a compensatory function, reducing overall anxiety. This supports the assumption that interpersonal relationships with peers constitute an important resource of psychological resilience.

Under conditions of martial law, chronic external stressors – such as concerns about safety and life uncertainty – may modulate emotional reactions, displacing or modifying traditional school-related anxiety triggers. Prolonged stress associated with wartime experiences increases the general level of anxiety in children and adolescents and heightens sensitivity to situations involving control, uncertainty, and evaluation. In this context, the elevated levels of specific school anxiety syndromes identified in the study may be interpreted as adaptive psychological responses to prolonged stress exposure.

Based on the analysis of the empirical findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Adolescents' school anxiety is characterized by an uneven structure, with dominance of anxiety related to academic evaluation and teacher–student interactions.
2. A substantial proportion of adolescents demonstrate elevated and high levels of specific anxiety syndromes, indicating the presence of a risk group.
3. The obtained results underscore the need for systematic psychological support for adolescents within the school environment, particularly under conditions of social and wartime instability.

2.3. Psychological support for adolescents in the school environment

The results of the empirical study on the characteristics of adolescents' school anxiety indicate the need for targeted psychological support for students within the school environment, particularly in aspects related to evaluation situations, adults' expectations, and interactions with teachers. Based on these findings, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

1. Implement psychocorrective programs aimed at reducing emotional tension in knowledge evaluation situations, with an emphasis on developing self-regulation skills and a constructive attitude toward mistakes as an integral part of learning.
2. Optimize assessment procedures in the educational process by strengthening formative feedback and reducing excessive emphasis on the controlling function of evaluation.
3. Conduct psychoeducational work with students and their parents aimed at reducing external pressure and fostering internally motivated learning.
4. Promote a supportive and partnership-oriented style of pedagogical interaction that contributes to lower emotional tension and enhances students' psychological safety.
5. Utilize peer interpersonal support as a resource in group-based psychological interventions as a preventive factor for school anxiety.
6. Integrate systematic psychological support into the school environment, taking into account the impact of chronic stress and adolescents' increased vulnerability to evaluation and control situations.

1. Recommendations for school psychologists:

- Conduct regular psychodiagnostic monitoring of adolescents' school anxiety, with particular attention to the most pronounced syndromes: fear of knowledge evaluation situations, fear of not meeting others' expectations, and difficulties in interactions with teachers;
- Identify adolescents with elevated and high levels of specific school anxiety syndromes as a psychological risk group and involve them in individual or group corrective and developmental programs;
- Apply intervention programs aimed at reducing anxiety in evaluation situations, including training in emotional self-regulation, stress coping skills, and the development of an adaptive attitude toward mistakes as part of the learning process;
- Implement psychoeducational activities with adolescents focused on increasing awareness of emotional states, developing self-support skills, and strengthening psychological resilience under conditions of social and wartime instability.

2. Recommendations for teachers:

- Optimize approaches to the assessment of academic achievement by reducing the excessive focus on the controlling function of evaluation and enhancing its formative and supportive role;

- Pay close attention to students' emotional states during evaluation situations by creating a psychologically safe learning environment in which mistakes are viewed as learning resources rather than grounds for negative personal evaluation;

- Develop a partnership-oriented interaction style with adolescents that includes respect for their opinions, support for autonomy, and a reduction of authoritarian communication practices that may intensify anxiety;

- Collaborate with school psychologists to enable early identification of elevated school anxiety and to coordinate individualized approaches for students experiencing heightened emotional tension.

3. Recommendations for parents:

- Foster a supportive attitude toward the child's learning activities within the family environment, avoiding excessive pressure and unrealistically high expectations regarding academic performance;

- Focus not only on learning outcomes but also on the child's efforts, emphasizing individual achievements and personal strengths;

- Encourage open discussion of adolescents' emotional experiences related to school, including fears, anxiety, and tension that arise in learning situations;

- In cases of persistent anxiety manifestations, involve school psychological services or mental health professionals to ensure timely support for the child.

4. General recommendations for the educational environment:

- Create a psychologically safe educational environment that minimizes chronic stressors and supports students' emotional well-being;

- Take into account the impact of wartime conditions as an additional stress factor that may increase adolescents' sensitivity to situations of control, uncertainty, and evaluation;

- Integrate psychological support into the educational system, viewing it as an essential component of adolescents' academic and personal adaptation.

The proposed practical recommendations may be applied in the work of school psychologists, educators, and parents to prevent and reduce adolescents' school anxiety, as well as to enhance the effectiveness of psychological support for students under contemporary educational conditions.

Conclusion

The obtained findings indicate that adolescents' school anxiety has an uneven structure and is primarily associated with evaluation situations, adults' expectations, and the nature of teacher-student interactions. The presence of elevated and high levels of specific anxiety syndromes alongside a relatively low overall anxiety level may indicate the functioning of compensatory adaptation mechanisms, as well as uneven emotional responding across different domains of school life.

It is important to note that the study was conducted under conditions of martial law, which may have intensified general emotional tension and increased adolescents' sensitivity to situations of control and evaluation that symbolize additional responsibility and uncertainty.

The empirical findings highlight the need for comprehensive psychological support for adolescents within the school environment, aimed at reducing anxiety in evaluation contexts and optimizing interactions between students and teachers.

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