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Kayla Mette

South Dakota State University, kayla.mette@k12.sd.us

Katherine Bertolini

katherine.bertolini@sdstate.edu

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Fear, Anxiety, and the 2016 Presidential Election: What are the Effects on Student Achievement?

KAYLA METTE

KATHERINE BERTOLINI

South Dakota State University

Abstract

The student fear and anxiety exhibited in the aftermath of the recent election are unlike anything most teachers have seen. The long-term ramifications of persistent fear and anxiety are too serious to ignore. The academic consequences of living in a perpetual state of fear are dire and affect the most vulnerable students. Current literature relating to the impact fear and anxiety have on achievement is examined with suggestions for teachers and administrators wanting to better inoculate their students against the deleterious effects of stress, fear and anxiety. This article issues an urgent call for increased examination of this phenomenon.

Introduction

Spiders, clowns, monsters under the bed, darkness: These are just some of the common fears among schoolchildren. Fear is an emotion that everyone has felt and one that no one craves. This is not the fear that comes from riding a roller coaster or watching a scary movie. Those are typical fears easily outgrown as children age and mature (NSCDC, 2010). This paper is about fear that keeps people home from school and away from social situations. The kind of fear that physically alters brain chemistry and forges lifelong consequences. This variation of fear chemically affects the brain in ways that are not easily outgrown. This kind of fear sticks with a child throughout his or her life and must be actively unlearned (NSCDC, 2010). Whether fear causes a person to freeze up, fly away, or fight back, there is ample evidence to support the fact that fear inhibits a person from concentrating on anything else in their life: fear can become all-consuming.

Traditionally, schools have been thought of as “safe spaces.” They are a place for students to get away from the trauma of their home life and escape into the world of learning. School is supposed to equalize the playing field and afford all students, regardless of circumstances, the same level of education. But, what about the students who bring their fears into the classroom – the students who cannot escape the persistent fear and anxiety they feel on a daily basis? Prolonged and persistent feelings of fear and anxiety affect more than a child’s mood. Children experiencing these emotions cannot concentrate on schoolwork, become easily distracted, have difficulty forming trusting relationships with teachers, have a higher risk of mental health issues and employment in adulthood, and consistently underperform on measures of academic achievement (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2010, 2011; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Metzler, Merrick, Klevens, Ports, & Ford, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2016). How then, are these children expected to academically succeed?

Component 4.1 of the South Dakota Principal Effectiveness Handbook states that “an effective principal/assistant principal creates a safe school environment that addresses the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of the parents, students, staff, and the community by openly addressing and resolving potential safety issues” (South Dakota Commission on Teaching and Learning, 2015, p.92). After school centered tragedies at Columbine High School, Newtown Elementary, Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech, policies and procedures were established to ensure the physical safety of students and staff members. However, similar measures to ensure emotional and social safety are not nearly as widespread. As administrators, “addressing and resolving potential safety issues” means more than fire drills, lockdowns, and video cameras.

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) states that administrative candidates must “. . . sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning through collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment. . . ” (NPBEA, 2011, p.11). Addressing persistent fear and anxiety, especially among the most vulnerable students, is integral in creating a culture conducive to student learning. Students cannot learn when they are afraid. If students are to truly trust teachers and administrators, they need assurances that their fears will be addressed.

For both of these standards to be met, they must be led by a transformational leader. Lunenberg and Ornstein (2012) detail the Four I’s of transformational leadership as defined by Bass and Riggio: transformational leaders are idealized, inspirational, intellectual, and individualized. Overcoming persistent fear among students can only be done with entrenched organizational support. Taking stock of student and staff capacity related to these issues will be the starting block for creating organizational goals and visions. Unifying around a strategic vision and set of goals is instrumental for creating the type of deep change (Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2012) necessary to combat the increased levels of fear among students.

While research on the origins and effects of fear has been documented extensively, there is now a new source of fear among American students: the 2016 presidential election. Surveys and interviews of school personnel in the wake of the 2016 election describe an increase in fear, anxiety, and hatred among students that has not been seen before. While there is not sufficient evidence to support a causal relationship, the election of President Trump is seemingly associated with an increase of persistent fear and anxiety, especially among nonwhite and low socio-economic status students. A review of the literature details the neurological effects of fear on the adolescent brain, the academic effects of fear in relation to student achievement, and the social effects of fear as a result of the recent election.

Neurological Effects

When children are exposed to threatening or fearful circumstances such as abuse, maltreatment, or poverty, stress levels in the brain go into overdrive. This phenomenon increases the allostatic load on the brain, essentially speeding up the natural bodily wear and tear (Evans & Schamberg, 2009). Research has identified three major areas that are most affected by fear and anxiety: the hippocampus (links fear to context), amygdala (detects threatening circumstances), and prefrontal cortex (responsible for developing executive functions) (Evans & Schamberg, 2009; NSCDC, 2010; NSCDC & National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs [NFECPP], 2011).

The damage to the prefrontal cortex is especially relevant to a child's success in school. Executive functions – remembering directions, making decisions, focusing attention, controlling impulses, transition between tasks/situations, to name a few – are critical to academic success (NSCDC, 2010; NFECPP, 2011). When students are overly afraid for prolonged periods of time, they can no longer control their emotions around peers, follow a teacher's instructions, or concentrate on the task in front of them. These students can quickly become labeled as noncompliant, remedial, or defiant. It is not that these students are choosing to disobey instructions or let their emotions get the best of them; they do not have the capabilities to execute those functions. The constant wearing down of the brain's architecture hijacks how a child reacts to various stimuli.

Another critical executive function controlled by the prefrontal cortex is a person's working memory. Working memory is crucial for keeping track of all of the content and interactions in a given school day. When the prefrontal cortex is overloaded by stress, the capacity of the working memory is diminished. This diminished capacity is not confined to childhood; research has shown that this deficit continues into adulthood and that these children are less likely to go to college, sustain a job, and have a healthy relationship with the community (Evans & Schamberg, 2009; NSCDC, 2010; Metzler et al., 2017).

Several studies have shown that these effects are most prevalent among students who are Black, Hispanic, or come from low-income or impoverished households (Evans & Schamberg, 2009; NSCDC, 2010; Metzler et al., 2017). Poverty and low social capital create chronically stressful environments for children. These children sit in their desks at school and can't help but focus their attention on what they will get to eat later, whether there will be heat when they get home, or if their parents have been picked up by immigration officials. The more stress these students feel, the higher their allostatic load. That increased allostatic load leads to a diminished working memory, which presents in poor academic performance on assessment standards.

Adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, violence, and racial disparity are correlated with higher levels of health problems, lower levels of education, employment, and household income (Metzler et al., 2017). Metzler and associates studied these factors according to the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) reported by adults. Thirty-seven percent of White respondents reported two or more ACEs, whereas two or more ACEs were reported by 47% of Black respondents and 49% of Hispanics (Metzler et al., 2017). Fifty-two percent of respondents

who reported two or more ACEs, regardless of race, never finished high school; conversely, 67% of respondents with a college degree reported zero or one ACE (Metzler et al., 2017). This disparity is also prevalent in adult household incomes. Of adults earning \$ 75,000 or more per year, 35% reported two or more ACEs; of adults earning less than \$ 10,000 per year, a full 61% reported two or more ACEs. Nearly 30% of adults in this lowest income bracket reported four or more ACEs (Metzler et al., 2017). This study of more than 27,000 from across the country supports the idea that childhood stress leads to lower academic performance (or noncompletion). Students who do not do well in school are at a disadvantage in adulthood when it comes to employment opportunities and household income.

Because students of color and low socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to experience multiple adverse childhood experiences, it is logical to correlate these groups to low academic achievement. A heightened allostatic load and damage to the prefrontal cortex in children with these experiences are not conducive to student success in learning. The achievement gap between white and nonwhite students, as well as low- and high-SES students, has been long documented. The next section will delve deeper into the academic effects of living with persistent fear, focusing on how this emotion influences that achievement gap.

Academic Effects

Surprisingly, the role of fear in academic achievement has not been studied in depth. The closest research are those that address students who feel unsafe at school. A perceived lack of safety and security can trigger fear and anxiety in students, which in turn has academic consequences. Lacoë's 2013 study provides similar data to that of Metzler et al. (2017): students who feel unsafe at school are more likely to be poor, Black, and/or Hispanic. These feelings of unsafety lead to increased absences from school (Lacoë, 2013) which has a direct impact on student achievement. Students who are absent more frequently miss new information, in-class practice, and opportunities for teacher tutoring. In Lacoë's (2013) sample of 340,000 middle school students, a full 15% report staying home from school because of feeling fearful and unsafe. That figure represents 51,000 students just in New York City. And, Lacoë notes that this figure may even be an underestimate: survey respondents that chose not to answer the safety questions were largely poor, non-English speakers, and Black, which as Lacoë (2013) notes is "... on par with or lower than students who report feeling least safe" (p. 17).

These same student populations consistently score lower on English and math benchmark assessments, supporting the idea that more school absence is negatively associated with test scores. Lacoë (2013) cites a 2004 analysis that states the achievement gap between white and Black students is about .10 standard deviation a year. Adding in her own findings about students feeling of unsafety, Lacoë (2013) suggests that student perceptions of safety "... may contribute to between a quarter and a third of the gap in tests scores between minority and white students" (p. 29). This phenomenon is not strictly confined to the United States either. A 2017 study among Indian high school students found that anxiety, depression, and stress were all "negatively correlated with academic achievement of the participants" (Sharma & Pandey, 2017, p. 86). Put plainly, when students feel highly anxious, depressed, or stressed, their academic achievement levels go down.

If students are staying home out of fear, they are statistically more likely to underperform on standardized tests (if they even show up on test day at all). It is logical to assume that these students are also unsuccessful at other aspects of their education – not just on test scores. Taking into account the neurological effects of fear discussed earlier, when poor or minority students who feel fearful do come to school, they are statistically less likely to interact with peers or teachers, more likely to get into confrontations or arguments, and less likely to keep up on daily homework

and in-class activities. Again, it is not that these are “bad” kids. Their brains are so preoccupied with the constant fear and stress surrounding them; they can’t focus on anything else.

For school districts to combat these detriments, it is critical to understand that student perception is key. Even if others do not see or hear potentially threatening situations, student *perception* of the threat is enough. Students who perceive their schools as unsafe or fear that someone could target them at any moment with struggle with persistent fear and all of the negatives that come with it. Ripski and Gregory (2009) and Thibodeaux (2013) both collected data on student perceptions of safety and its connection to academic success.

In a sample of 15,000 students, Ripski and Gregory found that “non-White students and students of low SES were more likely to perceive their school climate as hostile” (2009, p. 365). Feelings of perceived hostility correlate with feelings of fear and unsafety. The authors also support earlier citations (Evans & Schamber, 2009; NSCDC, 2010; NSCDC & NFECPP, 2011; Metzler et al., 2017; SPLC, 2016) that students who consistently experience these emotions are less likely to exhibit various indicators of academic achievement. Ripski and Gregory also tied student engagement into the equation: even when these students are in school, they are typically less engaged in the classroom. These low engagement levels and high feelings of hostility were found to be in direct correlation with test scores: “for every one point increase in the average students’ ratings of hostility in a school, the schools’ reading achievement score dropped by 1.42 points” (Ripski & Gregory, 2009, p. 368). Similar results were also found in correlation with math test scores. These test scores are another indicator that persistent fear among students is actually altering the way their brain’s process and retain information. It is unlikely this negative correlation will change unless the root cause of student fear is properly addressed.

Thibodeaux (2013) studied a similar topic in regards to student perception of school safety, this time focusing specifically on race. Several studies already cited (Ripski & Gregory, 2009; Laco, 2013; Metzler et al., 2017) found that non-White students are more likely to feel persistent fear, anxiety, hostility, and a general sense of feeling unsafe. These studies also note that non-White students are generally less successful in school and score lower on standardized tests.

Although the decision of *Brown vs Board of Education* in 1954 was meant to ensure the desegregation of schools based on race, American schools are increasingly resegregating (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Resegregation is immensely harmful and overwhelming hurts poor and non-White students and communities. Thibodeaux’s 2013 study took racial stereotypes (Black and Hispanic students are more likely to engage in violent or criminal activity) into account when looking for a correlation between feelings of fear and unsafety and race. For White students in more diverse schools (Thibodeaux uses the terms mostly same-race and mostly other-race), the odds of their feeling unsafe rose 132% as compared to being in a mostly White school. White students feel safer and less fearful in schools where almost everyone is White. Surprisingly, Black (an increase of 196%) and Hispanic (an increase of 134%) students felt significantly *more* unsafe and fearful in schools where almost everyone shared their same race (Thibodeaux, 2013).

As schools become more segregated based on funding and community composition, Black and Hispanic students are logically more likely to continue experiencing persistent fear and anxiety. According to Thibodeaux’s findings, Black and Hispanic students feel safer and less fearful when they attend schools in which the student population is made of up several races. This could be attributed to a feeling of anonymity: if there is more diversity, non-White students are less likely to stand out and become an easy target. Unfortunately, the opposite of this is currently happening in American education. Schools are becoming less diverse, not more.

Fixing this issue is a double-edged sword. In our current societal climate, non-White students feel safer with more diversity, whereas White students feel safer with less school diversity. How are schools supposed to address the fears of all students which such a dichotomy? Racial stereotypes,

blatant prejudice, and acts of discrimination are on the rise. Feelings of animosity and hostility between racial and socio-economic groups are headlining the news and have been a major focal point on the political landscape. How do these social interactions affect a student's academic success? Does political and societal rhetorical play a role in creating and maintaining fear among students? Are some students affected by these constructs more than others are? In the continued turmoil over the 2016 presidential election and the inauguration of President Donald Trump, questions such as these are just beginning to be explored.

Social and Political Effects

Without regard to political affiliation, most Americans would agree that the 2016 presidential election was unlike any that has come before it. The prevalence of social media and our increasingly diverse society likely played a large role in setting this election apart from those of the past. With the campaign and subsequent election being so recent, there is a very small pool of scientific data to describe the trends reported by teachers across the country. This dearth of controlled research means there is not sufficient proof to support a causal relationship between the election and an increase in fear among students. However, the studies, surveys, and interviews that have been collected are enough to suggest a correlation.

"The Trump effect" is the term being used to describe increased incidents of racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic behaviors as a result of Donald Trump's rhetoric. It is also responsible for increased anxiety and fear among students of different races (Mitchell, 2016; SPLC, 2016; Wofford, 2017). Nonwhite students are living in a perpetual state of fear, which is detrimental to their academic progress. Teaching Tolerance collected survey results from over 10,000 teachers and school leaders, which describe an increase in fear and concern about the future among immigrant and non-White students (SPLC, 2016). Eight in ten educators surveyed reported heightened levels of anxiety in their students, and nine in ten reported the election has had a negative impact on school climate (SPLC, 2016). The study collected over 25,000 open-ended responses and anecdotes to support these findings: almost all of these depict offensive speech and behavior toward non-White students, even those with legal documentation. Among one of the most common connections to President in these responses is verbal prejudice: students, as well as adults, are beginning to feel that if the President of the United States can espouse prejudice and discrimination, they can too.

The SPLC study not only illuminates students' fears of the government: students are showing increased fear and anxiety about students, teachers, and administrators from a different race than themselves. The authors of the study indicate that "... student distrust of a majority-white teaching force may loom as a new issue. . . it's impossible to know how long added support will be needed or when trust will be restored" (SPLC, 2016, p. 9). A diverse student population in a non-diverse educational institution is a conundrum that many educators are not equipped to face.

These newly prominent fears are being noticed not only by the teachers on the front lines, but by administrators and health care professionals as well. In California, family doctors and pediatricians have seen a spike in symptoms of panic attacks and anxiety, especially among immigrant children and families (Gumbel, 2016). News articles report cases of immigrant and non-White students staying home from school for fear of violence or hateful taunts (Mitchell, 2016; Gumbel, 2016; Balingit & Brown, 2017) – sometimes for a week at a time.

Fears of deportation and arrests from immigration officials are on the rise. Some school districts are hosting information nights for families to educate them on their rights and encouraging them to have a plan in place for the children if the parents are detained by immigration officers (Balingit & Brown, 2016; Manrique, 2017). If Pew Research Center estimates are correct, 3.9 million students in this country have an undocumented parent – 725,000 of those students are themselves

undocumented (Balingit & Brown, 2016). That is a significant number of children in need of support: a significant number of children unable to learn and concentrate on anything but the looming fear of deportation.

Supporting these children is the key to success. Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) studied the relationship between support structures and academic success among undocumented Latino students. Students considered at the most risk of academic failure are those with high risk factors (“... low levels of parental education, large family size, high employment work hours during high school, and a high sense of social rejection due to undocumented status...”) and low levels of personal and environmental support systems (Perez et al., 2009, p. 167). Personal supports could be a high sense of self-efficacy, good coping and communication skills, and a sense of control over success and failure. Environmental support systems could be strong parental support and involvement, adult mentoring, community membership, and supportive friends, neighbors, or teachers (Perez et al., 2009).

Students with high risk factors and high levels of support systems were identified as “academically resilient.” These students had higher GPAs, earned academic awards, and completed higher levels of schooling than the high-risk students without support systems (Perez et al., 2009). This study suggests that it is possible to overcome the risk factors inhibiting academic success among this student population. However, these support systems are not widespread. Of the sample population of this study, 58% of students were identified as having high-risk factors, but only 22% had high levels of support to make them resilient (Perez et al., 2009).

It is important to note that there is not yet enough data to suggest this behavior is occurring in every school across the country. The SPLC study also included responses and survey results from educators who have not seen these behaviors increase in their schools. There are schools – albeit majority-White schools – that do not have any evidence from their students to support an increase in fear and anxiety directly related to the election. A superintendent in Pennsylvania emphatically believes that Donald Trump did not create these behaviors or issues in society. In her words, “This preceded Donald Trump even as a candidate. But this election kind of took the lid off something that was kind of... I don’t think it was never not there. I believe it’s been there all along...” (Wofford, 2017). Her sentiments are echoed by students as well. While Donald Trump is definitely associated with increases in fear and aggressive behavior, it is possible that is where the relationship ends. There is not yet evidence to suggest that Donald Trump is the *cause* of these issues; perhaps he was merely the catalyst that emboldened people to speak the thoughts that have always been in their minds.

The Role of Schools

There are districts across the country actively combating these social causes of student fear and anxiety. Schools in California are creating DREAMer (development, relief, and education for alien minors) clubs, teaching meditation courses, dealing with emotions through art, creating soccer clubs, and hiring more mental health staff (Manrique, 2017). SPLC and Teaching Tolerance (2016) suggest districts and teachers set a tone of inclusion create programs to support the most traumatized students, educate on all forms of bullying, encourage staff and students to speak up in the face of hateful actions, and creating a district plan for future crisis.

Teachers and administrators have a new predicament. The kind and levels of fear and anxiety exhibited in the aftermath of the recent election are unlike anything most teachers have seen in their students. Teacher preparation programs could never have prepared teachers for this. But the research is clear. The long-term ramifications of persistent fear and anxiety are too serious to ignore. The academic consequences of living in a perpetual state of fear are dire and affect the most vulnerable students. Support systems and district initiatives need to be created

and disseminated in order to make all vulnerable students more resilient. Teachers can begin in their own classrooms with inclusive curriculum and the courage to speak up in the face of student hatred toward peers. Administrators can begin in their building by creating inclusivity initiatives and updating bullying/harassment policies. Superintendents can begin in their district by educating the community and leading them in celebrating the diverse strengths of the schools.

Conclusion

There is a dearth of research on this topic. It will take years of scientific study to determine significance in regards to “The Trump Effect.” One thing is clear, the impact that fear has on children’s developing brains and academic achievement. Educators urgently need more research on these concepts to create recommendations for combating the deleterious effects of stress and fear in school districts across the nation.

Creating a safe school environment means more than security cameras, metal detectors, and school resource officers. Creating safety from fear and anxiety, and actively combating the causes, is just as important as ensuring physical safety. School and community education on what emotional and cognitive safety really means will be an important part of that. Regardless of the political landscape, school should be a truly safe space for children. If it is not, too many students will have their opportunity at a better life snatched away from them.

Even if we have not seen the behaviors and fears illustrated in this research, we must work to ensure safe spaces for children. We begin by opening our ears and eyes for prejudice and discriminatory acts and words from our students. If a district is majority-White, it does not mean the students are not harboring negative beliefs and attitudes toward minority populations. We begin by making sure our students know that we are on their side, regardless of their political affiliation or attitudes or the things they see on TV. We begin by including more people of color in the curriculum and actively discussing our current political climate. It is our responsibility as educators to not only teach content, but also how to be good people and caring citizens. This shared responsibility carries over into the role of all stakeholders in our democratic educational system.

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