Test Anxiety Among Chinese Master of Education Students in a Malaysian Private University: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Test anxiety is a pervasive issue affecting students' academic performance and well-being across various educational settings. This study investigates test anxiety and coping strategies among Chinese Master of Education students, filling a gap in the literature. A quantitative approach was employed, surveying 48 participants from a Master of Education program using a Test Anxiety Inventory and a Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire. Results from the Test Anxiety Inventory reveal a substantial prevalence of test anxiety among these students, with high mean scores across multiple anxiety-inducing statements. Notably, feelings of apprehension and uncertainty during examinations were prominent, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions. In contrast, the analysis of coping strategies shows a preference for active and positive approaches, such as addressing challenges directly, seeking social support, and maintaining a positive outlook. These findings suggest a resilience and adaptability among Master of Education students in managing stress. The study's outcomes align with some previous research while highlighting nuanced variations in coping efficacy across different educational stages and cultural backgrounds. Notably, the preference for active coping strategies in this population diverges from certain earlier studies, indicating the importance of context and individual coping preferences. In conclusion, this research underscores the significance of recognizing and addressing test anxiety while promoting effective coping mechanisms among Master of Education students. Tailored interventions and supportive educational environments can enhance academic performance and overall well-being, contributing to students' personal growth and success. These insights have implications for educators and policymakers seeking to create conducive learning environments for students facing test anxiety challenges.

Keywords: Test anxiety, Coping strategies, Quantitative approach, Questionnaire survey, Likert-scale questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

A student's academic journey often involves various assessment situations that assess their acquisition of professional and scientific knowledge and skills. These assessments have a significant impact on the student's future, both professionally and personally.[12] One common outcome of these assessments is test anxiety (TA), a specific form of anxiety that arises in evaluative situations such as exams. [4] Test anxiety is a well-studied psychological phenomenon that can negatively affect students' performance and academic achievement, both in formal classroom settings and in standardized tests. [17]

According to Steinmayr et al. [14], test anxiety manifests as elevated levels of concern, recurrent intrusive thoughts, disorganized mental states, and intensified physiological responses in assessment

environments. Research indicates that students experiencing high test anxiety tend to score lower on knowledge-based examinations and exhibit a decline in overall academic performance. This negative relationship between test anxiety and educational outcomes has been consistently observed. [17]

Various factors contribute to test anxiety, including coping mechanisms. Research by Genc [2] suggests that the coping strategies employed by students can significantly influence their cognitive performance. Students who use task-focused coping mechanisms tend to perform better on tests, while those who rely on emotion-focused coping or avoidance strategies experience less. [8]

Numerous studies have explored test anxiety from different angles and with various student groups. Some research has focused on the mediation role of coping strategies in the relationship between test anxiety and academic achievement, [2] while others have examined the effects of interventions on reducing test anxiety. [6]

Furthermore, research has investigated test anxiety among nursing students, [10] its impact on academic achievement at the secondary school level, [13] and the effects of study preparation on test anxiety and performance. [19] Studies have also explored test anxiety among students of different nationalities [4] and its relationship with academic stress in a Chinese High School. [18]

Despite the wealth of research on test anxiety, there is a notable gap in studies examining test anxiety and coping strategies among Chinese Master of Education students. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate test anxiety and coping mechanisms in this specific population, as it can have significant implications for their academic performance, future careers, and personal growth.

To address these gaps in the literature, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

a. What is the level of test anxiety among Chinese Master of Education student?
b. What coping strategies do Chinese Master of Education students employ to manage test anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Xiao [18] embarked on an extensive research project to explore the intricate dynamics influencing Chinese high school students, with a focus on academic stress, test anxiety, coping methods, perceived social support, and academic test performance. The study involved 450 high school students who were surveyed to evaluate their levels of test anxiety, academic stress, coping strategies, and perceived social support. The principal aim of this investigation was to elucidate how coping mechanisms and perceived social support affect the interrelations between academic stress, test anxiety, and test performance. The findings from hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed several noteworthy outcomes. The research identified a positive association between academic stress and test anxiety, and conversely, a negative correlation between academic stress and academic test performance. Moreover, it was established that test anxiety adversely affected test performance. Notably, the research contradicted initial expectations by showing that active coping did not significantly alter the relationships among academic stress, test anxiety, and academic performance.

However, the study did observe moderation effects related to perceived social support. Both perceived support from parents and support from other sources moderated the relationships between test anxiety and test performance, as well as between academic stress and test anxiety. Surprisingly, higher levels of perceived support from parents or other sources intensified the connections between test anxiety and test performance, as well as between academic stress and test anxiety. The study contributes valuable insights to the existing body of literature by conducting a comprehensive exploration of

the intricate dynamics among academic stress, test anxiety, test performance, coping strategies, and perceived social support in the specific context of Chinese high school students. The findings have important implications for public policy and the development of training programs aimed at assisting Chinese high school students in effectively managing academic stress and test anxiety.

Next, Moore [10] conducted a study addressing the widespread issue of test anxiety among nursing students, a problem acknowledged by Driscoll, Evans, Ramsey, and Wheeler (2009) in both educational and professional settings. Notably, nursing students exhibit a significantly higher rate of moderately high to high test anxiety (55-60%) compared to the general population (17%) and high school students. Cognitive test anxiety, as highlighted by Cassady and Johnson (2001), can lead to a substantial drop (7-8%) in test grades, equating to a full letter grade reduction. The research aimed to assess the extent of test anxiety specifically within East Tennessee State University (ETSU) nursing students using the Cassady Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale. The study was conducted in a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at a large regional university, with 220 nursing students voluntarily participating in the survey one week before a significant test. Data analysis, performed using IBM Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 18.0.2, confirmed the earlier findings of Driscoll et al. (2009) and Cassady et al. (2001), underscoring the heightened prevalence of test anxiety among nursing students.

The implications of the research were significant, as addressing test anxiety through intervention has the potential to enhance test scores, ultimately contributing to improved first-pass rates on the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) and higher student retention rates at ETSU. Furthermore, the study opens avenues for further research and interventions aimed at mitigating test anxiety among nursing students, thereby fostering a more conducive learning environment.

Genc [2] conducted a comprehensive study examining the significant influence of assessments on modern societies, particularly focusing on their impact on stress levels. Centering on mid-term exams, the research involved 263 students from the University of Novi Sad and delved into the complex relationships among test anxiety, coping strategies, and academic outcomes. Genc's [2] study not only assessed the direct connections between test anxiety, coping methods, and academic success but also explored the potential intermediary role of coping strategies in this context marked by stress. The findings highlighted a complex scenario; among the various coping mechanisms considered, only those targeting emotional management stood out as statistically significant mediators in the relationship between test anxiety and mid-term exam results. This suggests that students who predominantly use emotion-focused coping methods in response to high test anxiety are more likely to score lower in pre-exam evaluations, underscoring the pivotal role of emotional regulation in evaluative situations and offering essential insights for educators and psychologists.

Similarly, Fulton [1] investigated the relationship between anxiety and academic performance in a group of 50 fourth graders. This study employed pulse rates and test anxiety questionnaires as indicators of anxiety, measured just before a standardized test. Through two Pearson correlations, the study analyzed the relationship between questionnaire responses and test scores and between pulse rates and scores. The results indicated a significant correlation between anxiety, as measured by pulse rate, and performance in the New York State Standardized Science test, whereas the questionnaire data showed no significant connection. These findings highlight the impact of test anxiety on student performance, emphasizing the importance

of developing strategies to mitigate such anxiety for educators and parents.

In a related vein, Subotic and Marinković [15] explored the dynamics of test anxiety (TA) and coping strategies among university students over three time points: before a midterm exam (t1), during the exam (t2), and a week after the exam (t3). This study, involving 76 university students, primarily female, in t1 and t2 and 68 in t3, revealed fluctuations in TA levels, with the highest at t1 and significant decreases at t2 and t3. Statistical analyses indicated significant differences across the three TA levels. Both task-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies were correlated with TA at t1, but only emotion-focused coping correlated with TA at t2 and t3. This suggests that emotional regulation as a coping mechanism might influence TA levels more profoundly during and after exams.

Additionally, Krispenz and Dickhäuser [6] conducted a study to assess the impact of an inquiry-based short intervention on state test anxiety, within the framework of the control-value theory of achievement emotions. The study, involving 162 participants in a randomized control trial, compared the intervention with other coping strategies among 53 university students. The findings revealed that the inquiry-based intervention significantly reduced test anxiety immediately and two days post-intervention, providing initial evidence of its effectiveness in reducing test anxiety and the importance of cognitive appraisal modification.

Moreover, Harjanto et al. [3] undertook a descriptive study focusing on the coping strategies of nursing students during the national nurse competency examination. The study included 80 nursing students and employed tools like the German Test Anxiety Inventory, Perception Questionnaire, and Coping Strategy Indicators. The results showed varying levels of perception, anxiety, and coping strategies among students, emphasizing the need for early and adequate preparation for such exams.

Finally, Hu, Wu & Cheng [4] surveyed 251 junior middle school students in Minhe County, Qinghai Province, using stratified cluster random sampling. The study, employing the Students' Test Anxiety Factors Questionnaire and Middle School Students' Coping Styles Scale, found an increase in test anxiety with age and grade, particularly among students of different nationalities. Significant correlations were observed between test anxiety and coping styles, with certain coping strategies like "escaping," "seeking social support," and "endurance" identified as key contributors to exam anxiety in junior high school students. The study underscores the importance of guiding students towards more effective coping strategies to manage test anxiety.

Yusefzadeh, Iranagh, & Nabilou [19] conducted a quasi-experimental study at Urmia University of Medical Sciences, Iran, during the 2016-2017 academic year, investigating the impact of study preparation on test anxiety and academic performance among public health students. The study included second and third-year bachelor's students in public health, divided into intervention (n=20) and control (n=25) groups based on study preparation levels. Stress and test anxiety levels were measured using self-assessment surveys at the beginning and end of the semester. Results showed that the intervention group experienced significantly lower test anxiety (47.90) than the control group (34.64) at the end of the semester (p=0.001), and also achieved higher exam scores (p=0.015). These findings indicate that focusing on study preparation can effectively reduce test anxiety and improve academic outcomes, suggesting that faculty and department heads should promote study preparation through engaging, learning-oriented class activities.

In the same year, Krispenz et al. [7] explored the effectiveness of Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) in reducing test anxiety and academic procrastination. This

approach was grounded in the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, which emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisals, particularly academic self-efficacy, in test anxiety. The study, a longitudinal quasi-randomized control trial, involved university students who identified anxiety-inducing thoughts related to tests. Participants were divided into an intervention group (40 students) engaging in IBSR and an active waitlist control group (31 students). The study measured various factors before and after the intervention and at term's end. The findings demonstrated that IBSR significantly reduced test anxiety and procrastination, with the reduction in anxiety partly due to improved self-efficacy beliefs, suggesting IBSR's potential as an effective method for managing test anxiety and procrastination.

Recently, Nurney [11] employed a nonexperimental cross-sectional causal-comparative research design to study the relationship between grade levels and test anxiety among elementary school students. The study used the Children's Test Anxiety Scale (CTAS) and involved students from two rural elementary schools in southeastern Virginia, spanning second to fifth grades. ANOVA analysis indicated significant differences in test anxiety levels across grades, with third graders reporting the highest and second graders the lowest levels of anxiety. The study calls for further research with diverse demographics and a longitudinal perspective to better understand test anxiety's variations across grade levels.

In summary, test anxiety has been extensively researched in various educational settings, involving diverse student populations such as nursing students, [10] secondary school students, [13] and students from different national backgrounds. [4] These studies highlight the prevalence, causes, effects, and possible interventions for test anxiety, underlining its significant impact on academic performance and mental health. Continued research in this field is crucial for developing effective strategies and support mechanisms for students experiencing test anxiety.

MATERIALS & METHODS

In this study, a quantitative methodology was applied, utilizing an online survey, a method similar to that used in Xiao's [18] survey among Chinese students. The researchers employed purposive sampling to select participants, resulting in the inclusion of 48 individuals from the Master of Education (Coursework) program. This approach entailed inviting every student in the program to participate. The survey was distributed via a Google form and comprised two parts: the first, labeled "Test Anxiety Inventory," included 20 questions, and the second, titled "Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire," also contained 20 questions.

To evaluate the responses in both sections, a five-point Likert scale was used, with "1" indicating "strongly disagree" and "5" indicating "strongly agree." All participants from the Master of Education (Coursework) program were asked to complete the survey within a one-hour timeframe. The data gathered were then analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), with a focus on descriptive statistical analysis. The responses from both sections of the questionnaire were examined for their mean and standard deviation and were presented in a tabular format. The mean scores and standard deviations for each section were calculated and interpreted to ascertain the outcomes of the study.

RESULT

Table 1 shows the findings for the Test Anxiety Inventory.

Table 1: Test Anxiety Inventory

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Neutral (N)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)	Total	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Level	Rank
1	I don't feel confident	25	2	7	11	3	48	3.73	3.50	High	14

	and relaxed while taking tests.										
2	While taking final examinations I have an uneasy upset feeling.	29	9	2	6	2	48	4.19	3.85	High	4
3	Thinking about the grade I may get in a course interferes with my work on tests.	21	15	7	4	1	48	4.06	3.68	High	7
4	I freeze up on final exams.	24	13	6	3	2	48	4.13	3.76	High	6
5	During exams I find myself wondering whether I will ever get through school.	27	12	5	2	2	48	4.25	3.87	High	3
6	The harder I work at taking a test, the more confused I get.	23	8	11	2	4	48	3.92	3.61	High	11
7	Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with my concentration on tests.	27	11	4	3	3	48	4.17	3.82	High	5
8	I feel very jittery when taking an important test	28	12	3	3	2	48	4.27	3.89	High	2
9	Even when I am well prepared for a test, I feel very anxious about it.	26	9	8	3	2	48	4.13	3.77	High	6
10	I start feeling very uneasy just before getting a test paper back.	26	12	6	0	4	48	4.17	3.82	High	5
11	During tests I feel very tense.	25	13	5	3	2	48	4.17	3.80	High	5
12	I wish examinations did not bother me	35	4	3	1	4	47	4.38	4.04	High	1

	so much.											
13	During important exams I am so tense that my stomach gets upset.	21	8	11	4	5	49	3.73	3.47	High	14
14	I seem to defeat myself while working on important tests.	21	7	12	4	4	48	3.77	3.49	High	13
15	I feel very panicky when I take an important exam.	23	11	4	5	5	48	3.88	3.61	High	12
16	If I were to take an important exam, I would worry a great deal about taking it	28	8	7	3	2	48	4.19	3.83	High	4
17	During tests I find myself thinking about the consequences of failing.	21	17	4	4	2	48	4.06	3.70	High	7
18	I feel my heart beating very fast during important tests.	24	11	5	6	2	48	4.02	3.69	High	8
19	As soon as an exam is over I try to stop worrying about it, but I just cannot.	25	9	6	5	3	48	4.00	3.69	High	9
20	During a course examination I get so nervous that I forget facts I really know.	26	8	5	5	4	48	3.98	3.70	High	10
	Total	505	199	121	77	58	960	4.06	3.73	High	

The examination of the Test Anxiety Inventory, detailed in Table 1, offers critical insights into the extent of test anxiety among Chinese Master of Education students. This inventory consists of 20 items, each representing a statement about feelings and reactions during testing and examination scenarios. Participants expressed their level of agreement with each statement using a 5-point scale from "Strongly Agree" (SA) to "Strongly Disagree" (SD).

The analysis reveals a notable prevalence of test anxiety among the respondents. This is

evident from the elevated mean scores for the majority of items, all averaging above 3.5 out of 5. This indicates a general inclination towards acknowledging anxiety-inducing statements. The highest mean score was for item 12 ("I wish examinations did not bother me so much."), recording a mean of 4.38, suggesting a significant agreement with this sentiment among the participants. Certain statements, such as item 5 ("During exams, I find myself wondering whether I will ever get through school.") and item 8 ("I feel very jittery when taking an important test"), registered high mean scores of 4.25 and 4.27, respectively. These scores indicate these feelings are widespread among the respondents.

On the other hand, items such as 1 ("I don't feel confident and relaxed while taking tests.") and 13 ("During important exams, I am so tense that my stomach gets upset."), although still reflective of high anxiety levels, had comparatively lower mean scores of 3.73 each. The uniformity of high scores across diverse statements emphasizes a widespread issue of test anxiety. This situation bears implications for educational practices and student support mechanisms, indicating the necessity of interventions specifically targeting test anxiety. The findings underscore the critical need to comprehend and alleviate the contributing factors to test anxiety, as it represents a significant barrier to the optimal performance and well-being of many students.

Table 2 presents the coping strategies employed by Chinese Master of Education students to manage test anxiety.

Table 2: Coping Strategies Used to Overcome Test Anxiety

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Neutral (N)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)	Total	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Rank
1	Get relieved by studying or substitute activities.	17	11	12	1	7	48	3.63	3.37	3
2	Talk with people, and share personal worry with people.	17	14	8	3	6	48	3.69	3.42	2
3	Try to look on the bright side of things.	16	14	9	5	4	48	3.69	3.39	2
4	Change your mind, and rediscover what the important thing is in your life.	13	14	11	6	4	48	3.54	3.25	5
5	Don't take the problem too seriously	9	11	10	11	7	48	3.08	2.87	12
6	Stand your ground, and fight for what you want to get.	18	14	5	7	4	48	3.73	3.45	1
7	Try to come up with a couple of different solutions to the problem.	15	17	7	6	3	48	3.73	3.41	1
8	Seek for suggestions from relatives, friends, or peers.	12	15	10	7	4	48	3.50	3.21	6
9	Change something about yourself	14	12	13	5	4	48	3.56	3.27	4

	to deal with the problem									
10	Use the experience of other people to deal with similar problems.	13	14	11	7	3	48	3.56	3.25	4
11	Seek for hobbies, and actively join in variety of recreational activities.	11	16	10	6	5	48	3.46	3.18	8
12	Try to control your disappointment, regret, sorrow and anger.	12	15	11	4	6	48	3.48	3.21	7
13	Try to rest or take a leaving to temporally ignore the worry.	13	12	12	6	5	48	3.46	3.19	8
14	Get rid of worry by smoking, drinking, taking drug, or eating	5	4	8	4	27	48	2.08	2.06	15
15	Believe that time will change current status, and waiting is the only thing you should do.	11	12	12	8	5	48	3.33	3.07	11
16	Try to forget the whole thing.	6	10	15	6	11	48	2.88	2.67	13
17	Depend on others to solve the problem.	6	9	16	7	10	48	2.88	2.65	13
18	Accept the reality because there is no other way to solve the problem.	7	8	16	5	12	48	2.85	2.67	14
19	Imagine that there is a miracle, which can change current problem.	13	11	13	6	5	48	3.44	3.17	9
20	Self-comfort.	8	15	17	2	6	48	3.35	3.05	10
	Total	236	248	226	112	138	960	3.35	3.11	

The study involving 48 Chinese Master of Education students concentrated on their coping strategies, demonstrating a range of preferred methods as illustrated in Table 2. The most popular strategies among the students were 'standing ground and fighting for one's desires' and 'developing various solutions to a problem', both achieving an average score of 3.73. Not far behind were 'engaging in discussions and sharing concerns with others' and 'maintaining a positive outlook', each scoring 3.69. Significantly, the least favored strategies were 'resorting to smoking, drinking, drug use, or overeating to alleviate worry' and 'resigning to reality due to lack of alternatives', with respective scores of 2.08 and 2.85. This suggests a general inclination away from negative coping methods towards more constructive approaches.

Other notable preferences included 'finding relief through studying or participating in

alternative activities' and 'altering one's perspective to reevaluate essential life aspects', scoring 3.63 and 3.54, respectively. This indicates a tendency among the students towards positive engagement and introspective reflection. Overall, the trend among these students leaned towards active coping strategies such as problem-solving, seeking social interaction for support, and adopting a positive reframe of situations, as opposed to passive or avoidance tactics. These findings provide valuable insights into the coping mechanisms favored by this particular group in academic contexts.

DISCUSSION

This research delved into test anxiety experienced by Chinese Master of Education students at a private university. The study's results, juxtaposed with the literature review, unveil both parallels and divergences within the domains of test anxiety, coping mechanisms, and academic achievement. Notably, the study revealed a high incidence of test anxiety among these students, coupled with a predilection for active coping strategies such as tackling problems head-on, seeking social backing, and sustaining an optimistic mindset.

This inclination towards active coping corroborates with the findings of Xiao, [18] who observed that in Chinese high school students, active coping did not significantly alter the interplay between academic stress, test anxiety, and academic performance. However, the current study suggests that Master of Education students might derive more benefit from these active strategies, indicating a possible difference in coping efficacy across developmental or educational stages. The study's outcomes also echo Moore's [10] research, which highlighted the widespread nature of test anxiety among nursing students. Yet, unlike Moore's [10] study, which stressed the detrimental impact of test anxiety on academic performance, this investigation did not establish a direct correlation between levels of test anxiety and academic outcomes.

Furthermore, the study contrasts with Genc's [2] research, which found that emotion-focused coping often led to lower academic achievement. In this study, positive engagement and introspection, elements of emotion-focused strategies, were preferred. This points to the possibility that the effectiveness of coping strategies may vary based on cultural or contextual nuances.

Fulton's [1] study, examining the link between anxiety indicators and performance in fourth graders, differs from the present findings. Fulton identified a significant relationship between physiological signs of anxiety and test performance, a component not measured in this study, which concentrated on self-reported anxiety and coping methods. The research did not explore the dynamic nature of test anxiety as seen in Subotic and Marinković's [15] study, which showed fluctuating anxiety levels over time. The current study's focus on static self-reported anxiety and coping at a specific moment might overlook temporal shifts in anxiety levels. Additionally, the research did not include an examination of interventions like the inquiry-based methods assessed in Krispenz and Dickhäuser's [6] study. Their research suggested that altering cognitive appraisals could effectively lessen anxiety, a strategy potentially useful for participants in the current study.

In summary, the study's findings reinforce the idea that test anxiety is a significant and multifaceted issue in educational environments. The preference for active coping strategies among Chinese Master of Education students aligns with certain aspects of existing literature but also underscores the nuanced variances across educational levels, cultural backgrounds, and individual coping preferences. This highlights the necessity for customized interventions and support systems, taking into account these varied factors, to effectively tackle test anxiety and improve academic performance.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the detailed examination of the Test Anxiety Inventory and coping strategies among Chinese Master of Education students provides a detailed perspective on test anxiety and coping preferences within this group. The results from the Test Anxiety Inventory reveal a widespread and notable level of test anxiety, as evidenced by elevated mean scores for the majority of items. This extensive anxiety, particularly regarding feelings of apprehension and uncertainty during examinations, highlights the necessity for targeted educational and psychological interventions to address these issues.

Conversely, the investigation into coping strategies shows a tendency among the students to favor active and affirmative approaches. Techniques such as directly addressing challenges, exploring diverse solutions, discussing concerns with others, and retaining a positive attitude are predominantly used. This active stance, distinctly contrasting with the minimal preference for negative coping methods like substance abuse or acquiescence to situations, demonstrates resilience and flexibility in stressful circumstances.

These findings emphasize the significance of creating environments that both recognize and alleviate test anxiety while also promoting effective coping mechanisms. Adopting such strategies can improve the educational experience and overall well-being of students, thereby facilitating their academic achievement and personal development. The insights gleaned about the specific challenges and coping methods preferred by these students are invaluable for educators and policymakers in shaping supportive educational environments.

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