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The Classroom's Calm [Safe] Space for Anxious Youth: Suggestions from the Literature, Interior Designers, and Debilitated Anxious Youth

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Abstract

Anxious youth usually dwell in fear of making mistakes, and thus, flounder in second guessing and procrastination as well as demonstrating a preference for socially withdrawing which deters healthy interpersonal development (Boorady, 2023, April 14; Ehmke, 2023, April 14; Killu, et al., 2016). In order to assist emotionally overwhelmed students in the classroom, school teachers may dedicate space in the classroom purposed as a "Calm" or "Safe" Space in which students, who suffer emotional deregulation can have privacy in order to refocus and reflect. Anxious youth who suffer from debilitating anxiety refer to this room as a "Safe" Space which stresses the need for perceiving safety as a priority before facilitating and maintaining self-control. Although educational websites model classroom-supported spaces which are dedicated for all youth who encounter emotional deregulation, the cozy home-like decor of these spaces was perceived as overstimulating and housing bacteria infestations which served to trigger and escalate anxiety. This paper will provide information on an effectively designed Calm or Safe Space as determined by debilitated anxious students, an interior designer, and from the literature.

Introduction

With environment threats of the pandemic, school shootings, economic distress, and war, some professionals are referring to emotional disorders, especially anxiety, as the new normal for the US. According to The Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report (CDC, 2011-2021), recent data reported that most of middle school students had experienced pressures from bullying, cyberbullying, feeling unsafe on school grounds and surrounding neighborhoods, feeling a lack of connectedness to others, and suffered from suicidal ideations. Additionally, middle school students considered their mental health status as "not good" on a frequency scale of "most of the time" or "always". Similarly, adolescents in high school have reported an increase in violent victimization, sexual coercion, bullying, cyberbullying, suicidal ideations and suicidal attempts. Unfortunately, the proposal of anxiety disorders as the most common mental health disorder in the United States seems apparent (Ryan & Warner, 2012).

Debilitating anxiety is developed from abnormal levels or functions of specific neurotransmitters as well as impaired brain structures (amygdala, prefrontal cortex, etc.) which improperly function and the "fear" brain circuit

is excessively activated (Comer & Comer, 2018). Therefore, this physiological impairment allows distorted cognitive beliefs that the unknown of the immediate future is unsafe and detrimental as well as perpetuates that all attempts to correct the situation are futile and will result in a brutal outcome. Thus, these beliefs serve as a strong distraction and fuel misinterpretation of events as potentially dangerous. Therefore, these children may have inherited a predisposition to anxiety (Comer & Comer, 2018). Additionally, parents, who themselves have debilitating anxiety, would most likely raise their children to be overly sensitive and apprehensive by modeling anxious behaviors to them (Killu et al., 2016).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) describes symptoms of anxiety as intrusive and excessive worry in which the individual usually copes with the debilitating anxiety by avoiding the perceived threat to personal safety. However, the accessibility to avoid perceived threats may prove difficult in the classroom in which academic performance and social engagement are facilitated and expected. With such intense anxiety, these students' minds are so flooded with worry that they are inhibited from concentrating on lessons. Fox-Lopp and McLaughlin (2015) proposed the two most common anxiety disorders reported as prevalent in the classroom are Generalized Anxiety and Social Anxiety. Generalized Anxiety Disorder is an excessive pervasive worry which may be evident in the student who needs constant reassurance, is fatigued from troubled sleep, and can be preoccupied with nervous habits. Social Anxiety Disorder identifies significant discomfort and avoidance of social and performance situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and can affect youth as early as age 5 (Kessler, et al., (2005). Social anxiety triggers include difficulty participating in classroom activities such as asking or answering questions orally in front of the class and participating in group activities as well as avoiding social interactions such as having lunch or play with peers at recess and joining school clubs or sports (Connolly & Bernstein, 2007). Thus, these youth will socially withdrawal which impairs interpersonal experiential knowledge and maintaining friendships which are crucial in youth development.

Description of Anxious Students

Several authors have described the anxious behaviors exhibited by anxious students. In the classroom, the anxious behaviors of students may be demonstrated by frequent physical complaints of headaches, nausea, heart palpitations, sweaty palms, perspiration, enuresis, breathing difficulties, and fatigue. As stated earlier, anxious students' minds are usually consumed with distorted excessive worrisome thoughts which interferes with their ability to concentrate and pay attention on the lesson as well as problem solving and organization difficulties, and oversensitivity. As a result, anxious students may develop a fear of making mistakes resulting in second guessing, perfectionism, as well as procrastination. Therefore, test and evaluative performances which are often executed in schools are usually incomplete and possibly unreliable (Boorady, 2023, April 14; Ehmke, 2023, April 14; Killu, et al., 2016).

Anxious students usually develop a pervasive tendency to give up rather than persevere when failure is perceived as imminent. Accompanying this pattern, these youth often engage in self-debasement and ruminate over their incompetencies. Oftentimes, symptoms of depression can be associated with anxiety as a comorbid mental health tendency (Comer & Comer, 2018), especially if the students feel helpless and hopeless in controlling their anxiety.

These anxious thoughts can flood the student with negative self-talk such as, "You are no good, too stupid, and too ugly. No one really cares about you; not even your parents, and they are going to dump you." Thornton (2020, June 9) concurred and described that the anxious student is consumed in negative and critical thoughts such as, "Will I throw up in class? Will I faint in front of everyone, and if so, will my skirt fly up? Who will touch me if I faint? Am I dying?" Anxious students may be reluctant to approach teachers for help because of inhibitive fears, and as a result, these children may become clingy around parents or caregivers, need consistent reassurance, and will avoid situations which are anxiety triggers. Due to these ill feelings, absenteeism or drop-out rates increase as well as incompletion of coursework and lack of classroom participation as social relationships have a deficit foundation (Miller, 2023, May 4).

Stack (2018, December 12) recommends the importance to remember that the anxious student is the expert of his/her anxious symptoms and triggers. The state of being overwhelmingly anxious or panicky can be dependent on the context of the present moment, thus, a student may struggle significantly in one context and not in another. This inconsistency confuses and frustrates teachers, parents, and the student (Smith et al., 2018). Stack (2018, December 12) warns that teachers may think if a student completes a task without anxiety-laden obstacles, then teachers will usually assume the student has conquered the anxiety and can keep performing forward. However, the task completion should not be grounds for confirmation that the fear or excessive anxiety no longer exists or impacts the student, but rather, the student is able to handle the struggle long enough to complete the task at that given moment. The internal distress and struggle may not be worth future efforts and success of a task is not guaranteed. The anxiety, itself, is usually an invisible internal struggle in which the student avoids attention and help from the teacher. Rather, anxious youth poise themselves as shy or inattentive, but their brains are actually being consumed with worrisome energy. In addition, teachers, themselves, are often recognized as contributors to the social and emotional development of the students, and thus, are stressors to anxious students. As Yoon (2002) reports, stress and emotional negativity can interfere with a positive relationship between the teacher and students, and emotional negativity are associated with students' problematic behaviors and perceptions of detachment and disinterest. The interference of debilitating anxiety in students' education and development has resulted in challenges for classroom teachers to meet the academic and social needs of anxious students (Ryan & Warner, 2012). In addition, the evaluative component of grades inherent in teachers' job responsibilities has proven to stimulate anxiety and avoidance among students (Chamberlin et al., 2023). Therefore, a recommended initial step is for the teacher to communicate with the parent, the school counselor or school psychologist, and especially, to speak frequently with the student regarding anxious triggers experienced in the classroom. Because anxiety levels fluctuate (Stack, 2018), private talks between the teacher and student can facilitate a sense of understanding and collaboration. Especially important for the teacher and school personnel is to learn the student's coping strategy to help distract and regulate breathing, and therefore, reduce further fear induced by choking and struggling for breath. The student may also pinpoint situations that may cause anxiety levels to elevate, i.e., today, does the student have the ability to work in small groups or in a dyad or does the student have the control to read aloud (i.e., How long? If prompted beforehand?), and does the student need to give a teacher a special hint that he/she is having difficulty and needs assistance. This communication will facilitate a positive collaboration between the youth and teacher.

As stated earlier, this intense uncontrollable emotional state of worry has proven to interfere with a student's peer

development and school performance (Green et al., 2016; Grills-Taquechel et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2008; Kendall et al., 2003; Stack, 2018). Green et al. (2016) found (66%) of elementary students who had anxiety reported usually or always feeling anxious in a school-based situation with (40.4%) in oral performance in front of peers and (30.4%) in test taking. In comparison, middle school students (90.9%) reported feeling anxious in oral performance in front of peers and test taking. Research conducted by Van Ameringen, Mancini, and Farvolden (2003) found that about 24% (n = 98) identified anxiety as the primary reason for leaving school prematurely. Additionally, Woodward and Fergusson (2001) reported the comorbidity of the increased risk of substance abuse, self-harm, suicidal behavior and other impaired developmental issues.

As anxiety disorder diagnoses have increased in youth, concerns to investigate and pinpoint the cause became significant research for neuroscientists. To investigate the difference of thought processes among youth and anxious youth, Warren et al. (2020) used functional MRI technology and found that normally-developed youth's amygdala (which is responsible for emotions, especially in regards to a fear response to a perceived threat) worked in conjunction with the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (which is involved in cognitive control and can reason and process the need for alarm or reaction to a perceived threat). However, among anxious youth, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex was not able to regulate the fear response from the amygdala as well, thus, the internal mechanism of fear/alarm is continually being stimulated. In other words, the mind's fear circuitry is unable to reason the perceived threat as benign, and thus, cease. Strawn et al. (2014) and Phillips et al. (2003) concurred that overwhelming anxiety was a result of functional deficits involving the amygdala-based circuitry. Future research on the amygdala-based circuitry may prove fruitful for the potential benefit of exact learning strategies and improved well-being.

Literature Review of Suggested Interventions

Fortunately, educators and families have access to online resources and supports that assist them in understanding the pervasiveness of anxiety, as well as in developing and implementing interventions to assist them with educational programming. Many educational websites have referenced using an individualized coping toolbox containing strategies or distractors in which a student may use when the anxiety is becoming too difficult such as the student can "signal" or use a "pass to walk down the hall". Distractors actively requires some focus, and that focus may pull the student's attention away from worry. These distractors can be working puzzles, solving brainteasers, and coloring as well as allowing the student to have a self-calming object or family pictures on hand and cell phone/laptop breaks to contact parents (Morin, n.d.).

Neuroscience literature also recommends mindful meditation as a strategy. For example, while deep breathing, students can refocus from the irrational beliefs to more positive features in their current context. Students with anxiety often focus on negative inner dialogue ("I am so stupid"), but can switch to a positive ("I am strong now") which may ground students in the present moment as opposed to the fearful unknown of the future (Pernet et al., 2021). Other strategies include petting and grooming pets or stuffed animals which have been shown to lower levels of anxiety and stress in animal-assisted therapy research (O'Haire et al., 2014). In addition, Wieck (et al., 2017) reported that allowing electronic access (cell phone, laptop) to parents and/or caregivers were facilitative

to the ease of anxiety and stress. Mindfulness and deep breathing can include the Mindful Sigh; when anxious, students will likely tighten up and breathe shallow inhibiting oxygen flow from releasing all of the carbon dioxide. Therefore, the Mindful Sigh is an activity in which students sit comfortably, inhale deeply through the nose for a few seconds, followed by a slow exhale or sigh through the mouth. Carsley and Heath's (2020) study on mindfulness-based coloring reported significant decreases in test anxiety. Because coloring sheets contain pictures and set the expectation of what to color, many students are not intimidated by them. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) have reported numerous research findings on mindfulness-based interventions which the focus on breath work and self-reflection produces more control over one's emotional state, and thus promoting psychological balance and compassion. Garey (2023, March 17) had reported on research involving the practice of mindfulness in the classroom which supported that students have increased their ability of self-regulation in reducing anxiety, promoting calm, and thus reducing avoidant behavior. Thus, incorporating mindfulness practice at the beginning of the school day and after recess may help the entire class feel relaxed, focused, and connected.

Practicing strategies and interventions that the anxious students have done at home (i.e., deep breathing exercises) may provide a continuity of self-care and build self-security if students know it is acceptable to practice their chosen strategy at school or in the designated "safe" place. After a student has experienced or is experiencing elevated anxiety, oftentimes, the student will need a quiet place to recover, and possibly with a calm companion who can offer reassurance (Thornton, 2002, June 9). Creating safe and successful classrooms for students with anxiety often involves the use of various accommodations and décor strategies for challenging maladaptive or unrealistic anxious thoughts. (Killu et al., 2016). Kennard (2020, June 15) advocated for creating a "safe" place equipped with calming activities for youth. Having a "safe" place to go allows for a distraction from the escalating feared belief so that the youth can attempt to refocus and achieve control.

Suggestions by Interior Designs and Debilitated Anxious Youth

Although many educator resources recommend an area of the classroom or space for students to retreat to when their emotions and behaviors need interventions, there is nothing in the literature to suggest guidelines for such as area. Many of the models on educational websites have photos of these space which may represent the coziness and familiarity of home, however, to an anxious youth with escalating emotions, these spaces may appear "busy" and too stimulating to the anxious student as opposed to a place where they can work on themselves to produce as much calm and control as they can. Interior designers, who understand the uniqueness of healthcare environments and the anxiety that exists in these surroundings, use their skills to protect and enhance the health, safety, and welfare of the public. The same guidelines may apply to the environment of the classroom, and more specifically, the "safe" place as well. Thus, the design and analyzation of environments need to accommodate people who have health concerns to improve the quality of life, allow for autonomy, and lessen harm (Nussbaumer, 2009).

Specifically, interior designers realize that when an individual or youth is already having an anxiety episode and physically moving to another physical space such as the "safe" place, the autonomic nervous system (ANS) arousal is already activated which can lead to increased blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rate. The youth

is feeling nervous, weak, nauseous, and sweating, and therefore, the youth's cognitive abilities will most likely be negatively impacted by anxiety resulting in mental and physical discomfort (Fenko & Loock, 2014). In addition, ten anxious youth were consulted regarding their specific needs to facilitate their need for safety during a panic or escalating episode. Anxious youth who suffer from debilitating anxiety refer to this room as a Safe (as opposed to Calm) Space which stresses the priority requirement for safety followed by self-work on control. A group of ten youth who suffered from debilitating anxiety disorders had provided the following suggestions which they believed helped them to refocus and cope when levels of emotional distress became debilitating:

> Our environment affects us all. What we know is that our senses pick up on everything intensely fast so first impressions matter. The interior needs to give off the impression that we can be comfortable there and that we are in the right [safe] place (Atkinson, 2019).

The following sections provide a summary of the elements in anxiety-reducing environments for the classroom, the school interior, and the school exterior that are present in Interior Design Literature as well as commentary from the interviewees.

Overall Floorplan

Usage of home-like interiors that include natural materials (e.g., stone, brick, and wood), comfortable seating, and lamps, may contribute a feeling of familiarity which would help decrease anxiety (Jiang et al., 2017). By avoiding institutional white ceiling tiles and white walls, the youth may not become disoriented from being at a "safe" place at school (Lincourt, 2002). Rather, soft draping material, wind chimes, or crafted wall and ceiling hangings would provide an appealing and calming visual comfort level. Floor coverings and surface materials which are applicable to frequent cleaning will minimize the possibility for bacteria growth, and thus, infections. However, although carpets and area rugs contribute to a homelike ambience, they should be avoided due to bacteria growth since anxious students may fixate on filth and infections (Salonen et al., 2013).

Commentary by Anxious Youth

The interviewees supported the use of natural materials of stone, brick, and wood which produces a familiarity *of their home*. However, they stressed that the "coziness" that some people perceived in fuzzy material is, in fact, an obstacle and potential anxiety trigger due to the association of bacterial infestations. The literature by Salonen (et al, 2013) was adamantly supported, however, Lincourt's (2002) proposal of using soft draping material, wind chimes, or crafted wall and ceiling hangings was opposed. Perceptions of calming features suggested by individuals who do not suffer from anxiety issues are not the same perceptions of individuals who do suffer; therefore, the anxious youth viewed these items as harboring dust and bacteria. "If the items are not found naturally outside such as soft drapes hanging in the sky or wind chimes hanging from clouds, then it will not fit well with us."

"Do not have unfamiliarity. Rather, show students everything, especially everything housed in the "safe" place and review the rule sheet. Give anxious students the ability to have their coping material "safe" and confidential as well. The worst thing that could happen, even worse than being bullied, is to have someone touch your stuff."

Students could bring their "safety" materials with them from home but may need their material locked in the "safe" place or kept at the student's desk.

"Focus on positivity and calm." Some examples included comfortable furniture such as high-back chairs (easy clean material and designed to support the head and neck), maintain a comfortable temperature with individual weighted pillows or throw blankets (students can provide their own if items can be housed in locked storage for personal security), maintain personal space without feeling separated out, avoid hard and cold surfaces, use familiar materials ["familiar" as defined by anxious students].

Ambient Environment

Environmental psychology has suggested producing an ambient environment inclusive of elements such as acoustics, music, and scents which would contribute to a peaceful surrounding area. Research has shown that music alone can significantly reduce anxiety (Fenko & Loock, 2014; Laursen et al., 2014) by using slow musical tempos when aiding individuals to cope with pain, promote deep breathing, to lower their blood pressure, decrease anxiety and distress, and decrease heart rate (Salonen et al., 2013). Research has shown that cortisol, which increases stress levels, actually decreases while listening to music by releasing the neurotransmitter, dopamine, which influences pleasure and motivation (Thoma et al., 2013). Therefore, listening to slow music (60 to 80 BPM) will moderate the body's functioning and ease anxious states (Ferraro, 2021).

Some scents could also have relaxing effects, improve satisfaction, and reduce anxiety (Fenko & Loock, 2014). Although research on scents influence is extremely limited in schools, aromatherapy as an environmental feature has been studied extensively in the context of consumer behavior. For example, Fenko and Loock (2014) reported that women exposed to a pleasant scent were able to produce a greater percentage of happy memories than did women exposed to an unpleasant or neutral scent condition. In addition, orange and lavender scents were found to improved mood, increased calmness, and reduce anxiety. Perhaps the use of aromatherapy in the classroom and the impact upon youth at various ages is worth investigating.

Commentary by Anxious Youth

Regarding music and scents, it was suggested that a soft instrumental should be used as a background in common areas. "I like to have music all the time and I like a variety of music. But it would be nice if you had an opportunity to have some background music. Not always elevator music but something you know, your genre, that'd be good as long as, again, if it's not bleeding very much into another space that's bothering somebody." Regarding scents, the smell should be clean and unpleasant odors as well as cleaning chemical odors should be eliminated. Although it was believed scents have some perceived healing affects, essential oils may not be tolerable for everyone, and the interviewees were unsure on an effective distribution method. Some of the interviewees wanted the environment to be easily cleanable because of the exposure to the other's germs as well as quality air care. Interviewees referred to selecting materials and finishes that were safe for human interaction and had low VOCs [volatile organic compounds] because, "if there are chemicals in those products, which are off gassing or breaking

off on a molecular level then they are interacting with their body."

Interviewees mentioned the importance of visual distractors and auditory distractors. Some of the interviewees referred to a form of food as a necessary component which can be quickly implemented and easy to have on hand [if kept out of the reach of bullies]. Activities help get their mind off mortality and what they are going through, "I think it's important for us to have something to occupy ourselves. Having something to do can be relaxing, help calm the nerves, lighten the mood, and occupy our minds during long waits and stretches of time." Some examples of distractors mentioned included laptop/TV, music, puzzles/games, food and vending machines, an interesting exterior view, public spaces to walkabout, an interactive rock garden, outdoor photos on the ceiling, and activities for small children.

Visual Environment

The visual environment relates to lighting, natural daylight, exposure to nature, color, and artwork. Lighting is positively linked to anxiety reduction specifically enabling the ability to see clearly and natural lighting adds to the feeling of normalcy. Salonen (et al., 2013) reported that daylight exposure improves sleep, reduces stress, alleviates pain, increases feelings of freedom, improves mood, and increases life satisfaction. Having access to a window to view nature has been associated with reduced levels of stress, anxiety, depression, pain, blood pressure, heart rate, sleep disturbance, and improved psychological wellbeing. Color is associated with physiological, psychological, and social reaction in humans. Generally, warm colors tend to enhance feelings of arousal while cool colors tend to produce a calming effect (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Salonen et al., 2013). Evidence regarding the effects of color is more facilitative if the color is based on the area topography and culturally learned associations. Artwork can lower stress and anxiety levels, improve moods, lower blood pressure and heart rate, and offer a positive distraction. The image preference for paintings included landscapes, natural scenes, and animals especially birds in flight (Cusack et al., 2010), while abstract art was not preferred (Salonen et al., 2013). A "safe" place environment fits culturally inclusive of natural artwork of area topography may allow the most familiar environment to a youth, and the addition of rich earthen tones, raw materials, and plants creates warmth and a connectedness with the cyclical process of growth in nature which mentally reinforce vitality and soothes anxiety (Bear, 2012). Beukeboom, Langeveld, and Tanja-Dijkstra (2012) proposed adding real or artificial natural elements provides a discreet and cost-effective stress and anxiety management strategy. Individuals exposed to indoor plants show more positive physiologic responses, report lower levels of anxiety, fatigue, and stress. In addition, receiving natural light from windows were viewed as favorable (Jiang et al., 2017). Forest bathing activities may significantly improve people's physical and psychological health (Wen et al., 2019). Forest bathing is being outside to consciously observe and focus on the elements of nature (trees, mountains, sky, clouds, water) in the present moment while deep breathing and being quiet. Research has revealed that this practice has shown outcomes of lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduced stress and depression, and decreased fatigue and anxiety. If being outside is not a possibility, then the display of colorful nature programming on the classroom screen can achieve the same effect of looking at photos of green and blue natural elements (trees, sky, water) while deep breathing.

Commentary by Anxious Youth

When asked what the most important elements of a well-designed environment, the suggestions were, "The aesthetic of the space. Whether it's calming and inviting." The color schemes suggested were made up of natural colors like variations of green, blue, brown, and gray (matches area topography). They believed that these colors "were peaceful and calming colors which have a positive impact on us," and using representational artwork over abstract artwork. "Abstract does not support our health." Rather, abstract art was interpreted as a representation of someone's disease or mental impairment, and thus, may be a trigger. "I do not want to see someone else's stuff. I have enough of my own to deal with."

The group believed that natural light was a positive element, that it "made you feel better," enhances wellness, and is the best type of light. Three of the interviewees commented on the need for an abundance of natural light and to think about the incorporation of light flow inside. "Lighting is an important aspect [how the environment affects humans], we want to bring natural lighting into a space and make it comfortable and make it usable. That's the first thing you've got to have. Spaces that are appropriate to the scale and how much light you can bring into them has a big impact. Access to multiple windows with a nice view could have a positive influence and uplift your spirit." The interviewees supported having sufficient artificial lighting for task purposes was also seen as reassuring but exposure to soft lamp-like lighting can be calming, and having access to the outdoors and using natural looking elements in the design were referenced by several youth. Some suggestions in interacting with nature included having a garden with benches, aquariums, animals, water features, and foliage/plants and flowers. "There's a certain amount of psychological release that you get looking out a window. Whether it is a fake window plastered on the wall or a painting, there's just an affect. Nature does calm the soul. Being able to see nature and living things makes you think you are in a calming place. Fish tanks are a big plus. Why? Because the way the fish swims, their movement, their tempo has an effect on the human heart. How they flutter about how they move their fins. We will start to mimic the patterns of the fish."

School Design

Commentary by Anxious Youth

The interviewees also offered suggestions for the exterior of the school building and layout. Have an aesthetically pleasing and maintained exterior curb appeal because "how the school looks has an effect on how we feel." For example, having a purposefully designed entrance, landscaping, and a welcoming sign makes all students and school personnel feel accepted and part of a positive environment. As revealed, "I think that people's perception of their environment makes a huge difference. If you think you're going to an area that looks kind of run down or older, you're going to assume no one cares about you even though that might not be true. And so going into school with your own expectations can really affect your mood and experience."

In addition, the school environment should promote safety and protection for students and school personnel. Weapons should be not allowed [to rebuke that several state legislatures are conducting proceedings on allowing teachers to carry concealed guns in the classroom], and appropriate security measures should always be in place

with nearby staff available for assistance in each corridor."

To prevent injuries and promote safety and protection, the school environment should incorporate these elements: eliminate trip/fall hazards, secured windows and doors, install heated floors, rounded wall corners, and practice the safe transference of students including wayfinding [ease of access throughout the school grounds]. A school environment should also provide physical accessibility, clear signage for an ease of navigation both in the interior and exterior of the site to eliminate confusion. Suggestions included placing spaces in a logical way for ease of travel and don't have anything too far spread out for shorter routes. Some examples of physical accessibility include paying attention to ergonomic design, close parking, having multiple entrances, and easy access to a nurse's station. Some examples of navigation include interior and exterior signage, using universal healthcare symbols, having colored lines along the wall/floor, and incorporating fun identifiers throughout like animal footprints for the children. To expand on the use of universal healthcare symbols, an interviewee explained, "I do like it when it [signage] feels more universal; like it might be a plate with a fork or something for the cafeteria, and things like that to point to the areas they are trying to get you to rather than just wording. I think that's helpful for a lot of people." Students need to practice and rehearse where to find everything. If legends and markers are not easily identifiable on the walls or floors, then "wayfinding can really cause some panic so you really need to make sure the school design can all work and flow together."

Conclusion

This article provided information regarding the behaviors of anxious students presented in the classroom and interventions as provided by the literature, educational programs, and most importantly, anxious youth themselves who were interviewed for suggestions for educations and school personnel. As a norm, educators have benefitted from including socially engaging activities to build a community of learners in the classrooms. However, anxious students may suffer from the debilitating effects of this mental disorder which poses obstacles for the youth as well as the teacher and peers. Facilitating understanding about living with anxiety by teaching all students (while maintain privacy for anxious youth) in collaboration with the school counselor or a guest speaker (in person or virtually) who battles anxiety would stimulate new knowledge and experiential discussions for the classroom community.

Anxious youth have stated that surprisingly often, they do not even really understand what anxiety is, or why they are anxious, therefore, lessons on anxiety are often helpful to them as well as suggesting that the teacher "understands me." What is apparent is that the suggestions from the anxious youth are crucial advice to educators and school personnel; some of these suggestions contradict accepted approaches in safe room designs such as the use of fuzzy material and lots of color to assimilate cozy positivity. These designs are actually considered an invasion to most anxious youth's thought processes and is interpreted as bacteria-infected and too busy/stimulating. Therefore, giving preference to suggestions of youth who suffer from debilitating anxiety would provide insight into their reality and the struggles they have endured in the classroom unbeknown to non-anxious educators and school personnel.

Recommendations

As a last commentary, the interviewees stressed the importance of being involved with parent, teacher, school counselor/psychologist communication which not only would educate the youth about upcoming situations and transitions but would also empower them with choices, knowledge to know what is forthcoming and expected, and the opportunity to rehearse. As posed by the literature and anxious youth, reacting effectively to anxiety involves a crucial break or distraction from the anxious thought. "Sometimes, and generally with minor anxieties, there is a practical solution that we can immediately enact (Atkinson, 2019). But for those with problematic, unresolved, or serious causes for anxiety, no "fix" may be either apparent or possible. The effective practical support is to encourage the student to ask for help from the teacher, and to practice and rehearse doing so. Therefore, a class lesson in asking for help and investigating the potential obstacles may be an initial step in developing classroom resilience. Discussing and implementing such strategies may benefit the whole class, rather than those the anxious in pursuit of mentally healthy wellness of the classroom community.

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