Understanding School-Related Fear and Anxiety Among Elementary School Children: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Schools are expected to support children's academic and psychological development, yet everyday educational experiences may also generate fear and anxiety. This study explored how elementary school children experienced school-related fear and anxiety and the factors they perceived as contributing to those experiences. A qualitative phenomenological design was used. Nine students from Grades II to VI participated in individual semi-structured interviews guided by 20 open-ended questions. The transcripts were examined through thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes were identified: fear of speaking and classroom participation; academic anxiety and parental pressure; fear of teachers and classroom mistakes; peer influence and classroom communication; and physical responses and coping strategies. Participants described worry about being wrong, disappointing parents, receiving harsh or public correction, and being laughed at by classmates. They also reported trembling, rapid heartbeat, sweating, difficulty concentrating, and forgetting answers in stressful classroom situations. Supportive teacher communication, opportunities to practise, small-group interaction, and reassurance that mistakes are part of learning were perceived by students as helping them feel calmer and more willing to participate. The findings indicate that school-related fear and anxiety are shaped by the interaction of personal, academic, relational, and classroom factors. Schools should therefore promote psychologically safe communication, constructive feedback, respectful peer interaction, and developmentally appropriate coping support.

Keywords*: elementary school children; phenomenology; school anxiety; school-related fear; student well-being*

INTRODUCTION

Fear and anxiety are common emotional experiences in childhood, but they become educational concerns when they are persistent, intense, or disruptive to children's daily functioning. Developmental research distinguishes ordinary childhood fears from anxiety that interferes with participation, concentration, relationships, or school adjustment (Beesdo et al., 2009; Muris et al., 2000; Rapee et al., 2009; Spence, 1998). Within school, these emotions may be triggered by evaluation, uncertainty, social exposure, perceived criticism, or the belief that important outcomes are beyond the child's control (Pekrun, 2006). School-related fear

and anxiety should therefore be understood not only as individual reactions but also as experiences shaped by classroom practices and relationships.

Academic evaluation is one prominent source of anxiety. Children may worry about examinations, grades, making mistakes, or failing to meet expectations. A systematic review of primary-school research found that test anxiety was associated with lower achievement, academic self-concept, and self-efficacy, as well as with broader anxiety symptoms (Robson et al., 2023). Earlier studies likewise showed that anxiety can disrupt working memory and concentration, which may make it harder for children to retrieve information or demonstrate what they know (Mazzone et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2008; Putwain, 2007). In competitive classrooms, perceived pressure and comparison with classmates may further intensify stress (Becker & Börnert-Ringleb, 2025).

Teacher–student interactions are also central to children's emotional experiences. Supportive teacher relationships are associated with stronger engagement and more positive school outcomes, whereas controlling, critical, or intimidating communication may increase fear of negative evaluation and reduce willingness to participate (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda et al., 2011; Salazar-Ayala et al., 2021). A child who anticipates anger, ridicule, or immediate public correction may remain silent, avoid asking for clarification, or pretend to understand. Such behaviour can be misinterpreted as lack of interest or ability even when it reflects an attempt to avoid embarrassment.

Peer relationships can provide belonging and encouragement, but they can also contribute to anxiety through teasing, rejection, bullying, or social comparison. Peer victimization has been consistently associated with psychological distress and difficulties in school functioning (Arseneault, 2018; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2000). In Indonesia, Kaloeti et al. (2021) found that bullying victimization was linked to the onset of anxiety symptoms among elementary school children. Conversely, perceived support from teachers and peers can strengthen motivation, school identification, and engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wentzel, 1998).

Indonesian studies have also documented learning anxiety among primary-school students and anxiety in English-learning situations (Anggraeni et al., 2021; Purandina, 2022). However, much of the available literature uses surveys or focuses on a single form of anxiety, such as test anxiety, bullying-related anxiety, or language anxiety. These approaches are valuable but may not fully capture how children themselves connect academic expectations, teacher behaviour, peer responses, bodily sensations, and coping efforts in their daily school lives.

Listening directly to children is important because their interpretations may differ from adult assumptions about what is stressful or supportive. Qualitative inquiry can illuminate how fear develops in particular situations, how children respond, and which forms of classroom support they perceive as meaningful. Accordingly, this study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary school students and to develop a context-sensitive understanding of school-related fear and anxiety.

This study addressed the following question: How do elementary school children experience school-related fear and anxiety, and what personal, academic, teacher-related, peer-related, and coping factors do they identify as shaping those experiences?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore elementary school students' lived experiences of fear and anxiety in the school environment. Phenomenology was selected because it seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to experiences rather than measuring those experiences only through predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis focused on the situations that generated fear or anxiety, the meanings students attached to those situations, their emotional and physical responses, and the forms of support they perceived as helpful.

Participants or Data Sources

Nine elementary school students from Grades II to VI participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit children who reported having experienced fear or anxiety during school activities, including answering questions, presenting work, taking examinations, interacting with teachers, or dealing with peer conflict. These grade levels were selected because the students were able to describe their experiences verbally while still being strongly influenced by classroom and school relationships. The primary data consisted of semi-structured interview transcripts, supported by field notes documenting non-verbal expressions, emotional responses, and the interview context.

Participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and pseudonyms in the form of participant codes (P1–P9) were used in transcripts and reporting. Personally identifying information was removed from the dataset. In addition to parental or guardian consent, verbal assent was obtained from every child immediately before the interview.

Interview Guide

The principal instrument was a semi-structured interview guide containing 20 open-ended questions. The questions were organised around six areas: (1) situations at school that made the child feel afraid or anxious; (2) experiences of answering questions, presenting work, and participating in class; (3) worries about examinations, grades, and parental expectations; (4) interactions with teachers and reactions to mistakes; (5) peer responses, teasing, bullying, and group communication; and (6) physical reactions, avoidance, and coping strategies. Example interview areas included what the child felt when asked to speak in front of the class, what happened when an answer was incorrect, how the child felt before a test, and what helped the child feel calmer.

Before use, the interview guide was reviewed by two lecturers with expertise in elementary education and qualitative research to assess content relevance, clarity, and age appropriateness; minor wording revisions were made based on their feedback.

The semi-structured format provided consistency across interviews while allowing the interviewer to use neutral follow-up prompts when a response required clarification. Questions were phrased in age-appropriate language and did not require children to disclose more detail than they wished to share.

Data Collection and Ethical Safeguards

Data were collected over four weeks through individual face-to-face interviews. Permission was obtained from the school before recruitment. Each interview was conducted in a quiet room at school and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher explained the study in child-friendly language, emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers, and reminded the child that participation was voluntary.

Children were told that they could skip any question, request a break, or stop the interview at any time without penalty. If a child appeared uncomfortable, the interviewer paused the conversation, checked whether the child wished to continue, and ended or redirected the interview when necessary. Children were not pressured to describe upsetting events in detail, and the interviewer used calm, non-judgmental communication throughout the session.

With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written immediately after each session. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. These procedures were designed to respect children's agency and minimise power-related pressure in school-based research (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; Jackson-Hollis, 2019; Rees et al., 2007; Sun et al., 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures. First, the researchers repeatedly read the transcripts and checked them against the audio recordings to become familiar with the data. Second, meaningful statements related to fear, anxiety, classroom participation, academic pressure, teacher interaction, peer responses, bodily reactions, and coping were coded. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset. Fifth, each theme was defined and named to clarify its central organising idea. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research question and relevant literature. The analysis was primarily semantic and experience-focused, while remaining attentive to how school relationships and expectations shaped participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Trustworthiness was supported through several procedures. The researchers compared transcripts with audio recordings, maintained field notes and coding records, and documented decisions in an audit trail. Age-appropriate member checking was conducted by summarising the main meaning of participants' responses and asking whether the summary accurately represented what they intended to say. Rich descriptions of the participants, interview process, and themes were provided to support transferability, while the use of direct quotations allowed readers to examine the connection between the interpretations and the data.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the nine interviews generated five interconnected themes: fear of speaking and classroom participation; academic anxiety and parental pressure; fear of teachers and classroom mistakes; peer influence and classroom communication; and physical responses and coping strategies. Table 1 summarises the number and proportion of participants whose accounts contributed to each theme. Because a participant could contribute to more than one theme, the percentages are not intended to total 100%.

Table 1
Summary of Themes Identified in the Interview Data

Theme	Participants reporting theme	Percentage	Participant codes
Fear of speaking and classroom participation	4 of 9	44.4%	P1, P3, P5, P8
Academic anxiety and parental pressure	6 of 9	66.7%	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9
Fear of teachers and classroom mistakes	5 of 9	55.6%	P1, P4, P5, P7, P9
Peer influence and classroom communication	4 of 9	44.4%	P2, P5, P6, P8
Physical responses and coping strategies	5 of 9	55.6%	P1, P3, P6, P8, P9

Note. Percentages indicate the proportion of the nine participants whose accounts contributed to each theme.

Fear of Speaking and Classroom Participation

Four participants (44.4%) described fear when answering questions, presenting assignments, or expressing opinions in front of the class. Their concerns centred on making mistakes, being heard by everyone, and receiving immediate correction in front of classmates. P1 stated, “I know the answer, but I am afraid to say it because I might make a mistake and everyone will hear it.” P8 similarly explained, “I become nervous if the teacher immediately says my answer is wrong in front of my friends.” These accounts show that the social visibility of classroom participation was an important part of the fear experience.

Participants contrasted these situations with moments when teachers used calm communication and allowed them to finish before giving feedback. P5 explained, “When the teacher speaks calmly and tells us that making mistakes are normal, I feel more confident to answer.” The students therefore linked participation not only to their own confidence but also to the way teachers responded to incomplete or incorrect answers.

Academic Anxiety and Parental Pressure

Six participants (66.7%) reported anxiety related to examinations, grades, and academic expectations, making this the most frequently represented theme. Students described worry before tests, concern after receiving results, and fear of disappointing their parents. P2 stated, “Before the test, I keep thinking about my grades because I do not want to disappoint my parents.” P9 added, “When the teacher only talks about getting high scores, I become more nervous before the exam.”

The participants also described classroom practices that they perceived as reducing pressure. P4 explained, “I feel less afraid when the teacher tells us to do our best and says that mistakes are part of learning.” Students reported feeling more prepared when teachers explained assessment procedures, provided practice opportunities, and communicated that effort and improvement were important alongside scores.

Fear of Teachers and Classroom Mistakes

Five participants (55.6%) described fear associated with teachers’ reactions and the possibility of making mistakes. Loud voices, public criticism, and immediate correction were associated with hesitation to ask questions or admit confusion. P4 stated, “Sometimes I do not ask questions because I am afraid the teacher will be angry.” P7 explained, “I pretend to understand because I do not want to make mistakes in front of everyone.” These responses

indicate that silence sometimes functioned as a protective strategy rather than evidence that the lesson was understood.

In contrast, supportive explanation encouraged help-seeking. P1 shared, "If the teacher explains kindly, I am not afraid to ask again." Participants consistently differentiated between teachers who communicated in ways that felt safe and those whose responses were experienced as intimidating.

Peer Influence and Classroom Communication

Four participants (44.4%) reported that classmates' reactions influenced their confidence. Being laughed at or anticipating ridicule reduced willingness to answer again. P6 stated, "If my friends laugh, I do not want to answer again." Participants also explained that teachers shaped peer interaction by establishing expectations for respectful responses. P5 said, "The teacher tells everyone to respect each other's answers, so I feel more confident."

Small-group discussion was repeatedly described as more comfortable than speaking before the whole class. In smaller groups, students felt less exposed and more able to test an answer before sharing it publicly. Peer influence was therefore experienced as both a source of anxiety and a possible source of support, depending on the classroom communication norms.

Physical Responses and Coping Strategies

Five participants (55.6%) described physical and cognitive responses during anxiety-provoking classroom situations. Reported experiences included trembling hands, sweating, rapid heartbeat, difficulty concentrating, and forgetting answers during presentations or examinations. P3 stated, "Before I answer, my heart beats very fast." P9 explained, "Sometimes my hands shake when the teacher asks me to come to the front."

Participants identified several strategies that they perceived as helping them manage these reactions: practising before presentations, receiving encouragement from teachers, participating first in small groups, pausing to calm themselves, and being reminded that mistakes are normal. These accounts do not demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention, but they indicate which forms of support children themselves associated with greater comfort and confidence.

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study identified five themes that together describe how elementary school children experienced school-related fear and anxiety. The findings show that anxiety was not confined to a single event. Instead, it emerged through the interaction of public classroom participation, academic expectations, teacher responses, peer behaviour, and bodily reactions. The children's accounts also indicated that supportive communication and lower-risk opportunities to participate were perceived as helpful.

Fear of Speaking and Classroom Participation

The first theme concerned fear of answering questions, presenting work, or expressing an opinion in front of classmates. Participants' concerns were closely connected to the possibility of being wrong and being negatively evaluated. This pattern is consistent with research

showing that fear of negative evaluation can discourage participation and that controlling or highly corrective teaching styles can amplify this fear (Li et al., 2023; Salazar-Ayala et al., 2021). Adamson (2024) similarly documented how fear and shame can shape students' communication in classroom settings, while Purandina (2022) reported anxiety among Indonesian elementary pupils in English-learning situations.

The present findings extend this literature by showing how children connected participation anxiety to the timing and manner of feedback. Immediate public correction was experienced differently from calm feedback delivered after a child had completed an answer. This suggests that participation should not be treated simply as a measure of knowledge or motivation. A student's silence may reflect an effort to avoid embarrassment. Pair work, small-group discussion, rehearsal, and feedback that normalises mistakes may provide lower-risk entry points before whole-class participation.

Academic Anxiety and Parental Pressure

The second theme involved examinations, grades, and fear of disappointing parents. This finding is consistent with research showing that test anxiety is present in primary-school populations and is associated with poorer academic self-beliefs and achievement outcomes (Putwain, 2007; Robson et al., 2023). Mazzone et al. (2007) found that anxiety symptoms were related to school performance, and Owens et al. (2008) demonstrated that anxiety can affect working-memory processes involved in academic performance. From a control-value perspective, anxiety is likely to intensify when an outcome is highly valued but the student feels limited control over success (Pekrun, 2006).

The interviews also showed that pressure was produced through both family expectations and classroom messages about scores. The study cannot determine whether parental expectations caused the children's anxiety; however, participants perceived the possibility of disappointing parents as emotionally important. Teachers and parents may therefore reduce unnecessary pressure by emphasising preparation, effort, progress, and specific feedback rather than presenting grades as measures of personal worth.

Fear of Teachers and Classroom Mistakes

The third theme highlighted the emotional significance of teacher communication. Some children avoided asking questions because they anticipated anger or criticism. This finding aligns with evidence that teacher–student relationships shape engagement, adjustment, and longer-term school outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda et al., 2011). Wentzel (1998) also showed that perceived teacher support is related to school motivation, while Salazar-Ayala et al. (2021) linked controlling teaching styles with fear of negative evaluation among pre-adolescents.

Importantly, the participants did not reject correction itself. They distinguished between correction that preserved dignity and correction that felt harsh or publicly embarrassing. Constructive feedback can maintain academic expectations while reducing threat: teachers can allow wait time, respond to the reasoning behind an answer, correct privately when appropriate, and explicitly communicate that mistakes provide information for learning. Such practices may make it easier for students to acknowledge confusion and seek help before misunderstandings accumulate.

Peer Influence and Classroom Communication

The fourth theme showed that peers could either intensify or reduce anxiety. Laughter, teasing, and perceived judgment discouraged further participation, whereas respectful responses and small-group interaction increased comfort. This pattern is consistent with research linking peer harassment and victimization to psychological maladjustment and weaker school functioning (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2000). The longer-term effects of bullying on mental health and school adjustment are also well established (Arseneault, 2018). In the Indonesian context, Kaloeti et al. (2021) found a relationship between bullying victimization and anxiety symptoms among elementary school children.

The findings also underscore the teacher's role in establishing peer norms. When teachers explicitly required students to respect one another's answers, participants perceived greater safety. Supportive relationships with peers and teachers contribute to school engagement and identification (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Cooperative learning is therefore most likely to be helpful when group norms prevent ridicule and ensure that quieter students are not pressured or excluded.

Physical Responses and Coping Strategies

The fifth theme addressed trembling, sweating, rapid heartbeat, concentration problems, and forgetting answers. These reactions are consistent with established descriptions of childhood anxiety, which include emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physiological components (Beesdo et al., 2009; Rapee et al., 2009; Spence, 1998). The children's reports also correspond with evidence that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing during school tasks (Mazzone et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2008). Their physical reactions should therefore not be dismissed as unwillingness or lack of preparation.

Participants perceived practice, encouragement, small-group participation, and reassurance about mistakes as helpful. Because the study was qualitative and did not test an intervention, these strategies cannot be described as having effectively reduced anxiety. They are better understood as child-identified supports that may inform future classroom practice and intervention research. Schools could combine predictable routines, gradual participation opportunities, simple age-appropriate calming strategies, and access to appropriate support when anxiety is persistent or significantly disrupts functioning.

Implications and Limitations

Taken together, the findings suggest that psychologically safe classrooms require coordinated attention to academic demands, teacher feedback, peer norms, and children's coping resources. Teachers can reduce avoidable threat without lowering expectations by clarifying tasks, allowing preparation time, responding respectfully to errors, and using gradual participation structures. Schools should also address teasing and bullying consistently and communicate with parents about the emotional effects of excessive performance pressure.
Several limitations should be considered. The study involved a small purposive sample of nine students, and the findings are context-specific rather than statistically generalisable. The data relied on children's retrospective accounts and did not include observations, parent interviews, or teacher interviews as independent sources of triangulation. Participants also differed in grade level, which may have influenced how they understood and described anxiety. Future studies could examine developmental differences, include multiple schools

and stakeholder perspectives, and evaluate whether child-identified supports reduce anxiety over time.

CONCLUSION

This study found that elementary school children experienced school-related fear and anxiety through five interconnected domains: classroom speaking and participation, academic expectations and parental pressure, teacher reactions to mistakes, peer communication, and physical responses with coping efforts. Children described silence, avoidance, bodily arousal, and difficulty concentrating when they anticipated criticism, poor grades, anger, or ridicule. They also perceived calm teacher communication, preparation opportunities, respectful peer norms, small-group participation, and the normalisation of mistakes as helping them feel safer. The findings support a relational and context-sensitive understanding of school anxiety: children's emotional responses are shaped not only by personal confidence but also by how adults and peers organise everyday learning experiences. Because this qualitative study did not test an intervention, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of these child-identified supports in larger and more diverse school settings.

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