

# Challenges Experienced Use of Distance-Learning by High School Teachers Responses to Students with Depression

Deyab A. Almaleki

Department of Evaluation, Measurement and Research, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

## Abstract

Trustless, depression, happiness is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences at times. People face problems and hard circumstances every day due to an environment, social life, or traumatic developments in their lives. This study focused on a particular type of inconsistency patterns of behavior that experiences' students during the school time. Some students find depression interferes with their learning and test taking to such an extent that their grades are seriously affected. This study examined the awareness and readiness of a sample of Saudi Arabian high school teachers to recognize, understand, and respond to the ways in which students may respond to testing situations with depression. Findings suggest teachers learn from experience to use both direct and indirect ways to identify students with depression; employ test preparation and test taking strategies to help students reduce depression; and reach out to parents for additional assistance where teacher strategies are not sufficient.

## Key words:

*Teacher Experiences; Patterns of behavior; Depression; Psychological; High school*

## 1. Introduction

Studying at the high school level comes with many diverse challenges. Students face difficulties, some students' cohorts are impacted harder than others due to greater psychological risks brought on by the differences between their native and host cities. The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia encourages all high school students to continue their education, and the government provides a free education at all education levels in the country. Additionally, they offer a monthly payment for all domestic students.

High school time is usually one of positive growth, but for many students, school-related stress is part of the high school experience and one of the most stressful periods in their life. Students can face problems like staying organized and managing their time properly. They could also be stressed to join activities in their new academic life. When students relocate, the move can be the most stressful factor particularly for students from different cultures and different backgrounds. Many researchers revealed that when students had been diagnosed with or treated for depression, then that negatively affected academic achievement [1–5].

Anxiety and stress are conditions of concern in many aspects of contemporary life. Whether people live in relative safety and comfort, or circumstances that detract from either of those desired states, the pace, complexity, demands, and stressors people encounter at home, at work and in social contexts can produce anxiousness and even full-blown anxiety [5–9]. Unaddressed and uncontrolled, anxiety can become disruptive. Anxiety attacks can be linked to chronic mental health conditions that are often associated with physical health problems as well [10–11]. Adults who experience anxiety to such levels, often seek relief through their health provider if they have the means and/or the knowledge to understand what they are experiencing and take steps to address it. Others might suffer in silence due to insufficient means to acquire preventive care; lack of understanding that their condition is treatable; or even anxiety over either a cultural stigma, peer pressure, or other social/emotional deterrent. In the worst case, people may try to self-medicate or adopt other destructive behaviors as a way of coping with chronic or extreme anxiety [1,12–15].

Parents may be totally unaware of their child's anxiety over taking tests, especially if there are none of the telltale signs like a feigned illness the morning of test day in hope of a reprieve from going to school that day. It is, more often, the teacher who is in a position to recognize and respond to students' test anxiety [11,16–18]. This requires that teachers understand and respond appropriately to cases where students demonstrate test anxiety. The nature of teachers' job is very complex and multi-faceted. The skills, abilities, and strategies teachers use to help students create knowledge are developed through both training and experience; yet, dealing with student anxiety is rarely part of the pre-service preparation teachers receive [1,5,19–23].

This study is about children and a particular type of anxiety that even very young children can experience in school. Before discussing the particular type of anxiety that is the focus for this study, it is useful to consider the larger picture of children experiencing anxiety. Some common sources of childhood anxiety include anxieties associated with normal childhood fears: (a) fear of being separated from parents; (b) fears over both real and imaginary creatures (the

monster under the bed; the mean dog next door, etc.); (c) fear of being bullied; (d) fear of not being accepted or liked (the last one picked for a game; fear of being left out of social plans, etc.); and fear of not living up to the expectations of significant adults, to name some of the most common. The anxieties that accompany such fears are usually fleeting and easily assuaged by parents and others who help the child recognize and work through their fear and the anxiety they feel because of it [2,9,15,20,24–27].

Depression is one of the troublesome components related to low academic performance. It meddles with the recovery of earlier education and decreases the cognitive function that might something else have been utilized for solving tasks in testing conditions. Depression has often been associated with low academic achievement as it inhibits the student's performance in assessment situations [28–31].

When children do not experience help recognizing and dealing with their fears, anxiety can build up [26,32–33]. Additionally, when children repeatedly feel threatened in some way (the mean dog, the monster that defies logical reasons to dispel, the persistent bully, and other conditions that make them feel threatened, inadequate, and otherwise vulnerable), their occasional anxiety can become a pattern of anxiety and escalate to more pervasive and serious levels [14,34–35]. In schools, children are subjected to almost daily stressors, not the least of which is the stress that can come from situations that make them feel like failures or feel at risk for failure [9,36]. One such situation can be the academic test. While some children thrive in testing environments, others do not. Whether a short quiz over small segments of learning content or a comprehensive exam covering whole unit, term, or even years of academic learning outcomes, these assessments can feel like walking out on a tightrope, especially when the child senses or is told that the assessment is, to some degree, high stakes. This can be the result of believing that the test will affect a class grade, determine passing to the next grade, influence decisions about future opportunities, or simply make parents either proud or disappointed. In extreme cases, children might have real reason to fear the repercussions of poor performance on an assessment; in other cases, that fear may have no rational basis. Regardless of the source, the anxiety is real and it, too, has repercussions [16,37–38].

## 2. Theoretical Consideration

Depression is a disquiet or dread felt some time recently, amid, or after an examination since of concern, stress, or despair [1,20,39]. A few of students discover anxiety meddling with their knowledge and exam to such a degree that their grades are truly influenced. In many situations, testing has high stakes implications. This can add to test

depression for students, especially if a test carries significant weight for grades or other educational outcomes. This can also raise concerns for parents and for teachers who may be judged on the performance of their students [5,20,29–30]. When parents and teachers have anxiety about tests and testing situations for their children and the children they teach, children can pick up on that anxiety, and it can become a multiplier for anxiety students may already feel about a given assessment situation. In such cases, the adults become contributors rather than mediators of the child's anxiety in anticipation of taking a test, or during the actual process of taking the test [33,40–41].

Reactions to anxiety can comprise of expanded heart rate, push hormone discharge, fretfulness, watchfulness, and fear of a possibly unsafe circumstances [1,19–20]. All are responses that might affect students' concentration and performance, especially when students are adolescents in high schools where curriculum rigor increases and tests, grades, and grade point averages become more significant to a student's future. High schools are an intermediate step between elementary school and college, offering general, technical, vocational, or college-preparatory courses. This is also where students often get into academic tracks that determine their post-secondary study and career opportunities, typically, based on grades and academic assessment results. It is natural, therefore, that students become more aware of the significance of tests as they matriculate into secondary programs and, thus, become more susceptible to test anxiety [6].

Studies found that teachers can learn to better identify and use strategies to reduce student anxiety, and students can learn strategies to manage their own anxiety if they are provided direct instruction on those strategies along with in-class time and support to practice and apply the strategies [6,10–11,17,42].

To date, there is limited research examining how prepared teachers are to deal with student depression. Previous studies in Saudi Arabia surveyed teachers on specific assessments relative to identifying students with depression but did not conduct an in-depth exploration of all the ways teachers use to identify students who are experiencing test anxiety or depression and all the ways they are responding to situations where students' levels of depression might interfere with their academic success. Additionally, prior to this study, there was no research to explore how teachers in Saudi Arabia learn how to recognize and respond to students with depression. Because of national policies that emphasize academic preparation, testing is often very high stakes in Saudi schools; thus, there is a need to understand how prepared Saudi teachers are to deal with depression within their learners [43], [44].

The explicit aims of this study were to describe how Saudi teachers identify and respond to students with

depression, including if and how they involve parents. The study was conducted as a multiple case study of Saudi high school teachers who self-identified themselves as teachers who have had experience identifying and working with students who have depression. This study produced a better understanding of the way Saudi teachers were identifying and supporting students with test anxiety. Finally, this study added to the limited information about how Saudi teachers learn to address this issue.

The main study question that guided this research was: how do a sample of Saudi high school teachers who self-identify as having experience and some developed practices pertaining to depression describe the ways in which they identify and respond to high school students with depression in Saudi Arabia and how did they develop this capacity? Additionally, the following three sub-questions further focused this study within the overarching question—how do Saudi teachers self-identified as instrumental (i.e. illustrative) cases (Stake, 1995) of teachers who have knowledge, experience, and established practice related to identifying and responding to high school students with depression:

1. Identify students with Depression?
2. Respond to students who have high- Depression?
3. Involve parents in helping students who have high-Depression?

### 3. Methods

This study was designed to begin investigating how Saudi teachers recognize and respond to high school students with depression in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, this study focused on how teachers identify and work with students who have high-depression and how they involve parents in helping their children overcome high-depression. This study sought to address the gap in Saudi research on depression, by directly interviewing an instrumental sample (that is, a sample of teacher cases who self-identify as knowledgeable and experienced on the issue of recognizing and dealing with depression) of teachers and, through these interviews, gain a fuller picture of teachers' current state of understanding and strategies for responding to student depression.

The investigation utilized qualitative case study methods with an inductive, interpretive approach to produce a fairly detailed and comprehensive profile of how an instrumental case study sample of Saudi high school teachers describe the phenomenon of depression among their students and portray the manner in which they respond to that phenomenon when they observe it in their students. This study also describes how the sample of Saudi teachers engage with students who have high depression in order to reduce its effect and

explores if and how the Saudi teachers involve parents in addressing depression in their children.

#### 3.1 Research Participants

The study was designed as a multiple case study of Saudi high school teachers who self-identify as teachers who have had experience identifying and working with students who have depression. During the recruitment phase of this study, potential participants from high school teachers in a metropolitan area of Saudi Arabia an estimated of 10,000 teachers from all groups and ethnicities that make up the Saudi demographic were contacted from e-mail list and directed to a survey-hosting site (Survey Monkey). The site was open for 10 weeks. The survey sought to identify teachers who self-identify as being experienced with recognizing and responding to depression among their students. 150 teachers, from 30 high schools in the metropolitan area responded to the survey, self-identified as meeting the study criteria for an instrumental or illustrative case. From among those 150 qualifying respondents, the researcher randomly selected 100 participants for four core curriculum teachers (Mathematics education, English language, Science education, and Arabic language) from different high schools to participate an in-depth exploration of how these teachers feel confident in their ability to identify and address the needs of students who experience depression. Each teacher was considered a separate case.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

The researcher arrangements with study participants to schedule on-line interviews asking each to prepare for the interview by reflecting on the study questions and preparing to share artifacts of their work related to those questions via a Skype video-conferencing session. This media was selected because it was familiar and comfortable for the participants and conducive to the sharing of visual examples as the teachers described the means by which they recognize and respond to test anxiety. The visual sharing was important to enable the teachers to describe any strategies, resources, or tools the use for this purpose. The Skype media also allowed the researcher to engage in a rich exchange of information and ideas with each teacher even though separated by two continents.

The interview was conducted in an inductive manner utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol. The investigator is fluent in both the informal and formal variations of the Arabic language. The researcher developed the interview protocol comprised of ten main questions supported by a probing guide in English; then, translated it to conversational Arabic. To validate the interview protocol, the researcher engaged his English speaking in an expert

review of the alignment of the question guide to the stated purpose of the study and research questions. After translating that guide to Arabic, researcher engaged a pair of Arabic speaking to review the interview protocol for clarity and alignment as well. This type of dual-language review is important in studies that engage participants in one language with the intent to create a study report in a different language to establish authenticity and credibility.

Before starting each interview, the researcher conducted a warm-up session with each participant to establish rapport and complete the consent process in a face-to-face format. Each participant was provided enough time to become comfortable talking with the researcher and for the researcher to convey authentic interest in that participant's contribution to the study. During the interviews, researcher recorded the Skype session for 45 minutes and took extensive field notes. After each interview, the researcher created a reflective memo to summarize observations he made during the interview. Researcher also used memos to capture insights and explore the meaning of what participants said and shared during the interview.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Arabic with observations inserted as they occurred during the interview as teachers shared artifacts related to the study questions. The Arabic transcriptions were translated to English for data analysis. Additionally, translation to English prior to data analysis enabled the results to be articulated in English for reporting purposes.

#### 4. Result

Each participant in this study was able to engage in an explicit and detailed description of the ways in which they identify students who exhibit depression. They all noted that they had found and were using some form of assessment to confirm specific cases of depression among their students. They were also very consistent in stating the observable "symptoms" they watch for to identify a student who might be experiencing depression, e.g., facial expressions and body language like fidgeting; certain behaviors like expressing self-doubt or fear; and various physiological responses such as uneven breathing, sweating, and headache. Some of participants also noted that they actually make observations while students are taking tests, noting such indicators as stuttering while responding to oral questioning, displaying uncertainty while responding to a test question, and producing a weaker than expected academic performance on a particular assessment.

The teachers were also able to provide detailed descriptions regarding how they respond to students who exhibit depression. The teachers' responses on this issue fell into two categories: teaching students' strategies to use

while taking tests and teaching students strategies to prepare for tests. The test-taking strategies noted by participants included time management during the test, reading directions carefully, and not worrying about the test results while taking the test. Test preparation strategies include avoiding procrastination in test prep, showing up early for class the day of a test, getting a good night's sleep, and organizing materials to be studied prior to a test. In both cases, teachers put much emphasis on students trusting themselves and avoiding self-doubt.

The teachers in this study confirmed that nothing in their teacher preparation or professional development, since, prepared them to address depression with their students. Rather, they talked about learning from experience and trial and error. They reported testing out such strategies as stopping the test session, providing a re-test opportunity, changing the test environment and circumstances, previewing the format of the test the day before, providing practice tests, creating a comfortable testing environment, conducting reviews of the material to be tested, and developing test questions that focus on the most important elements. Some teachers expressed that they try to, "protect students from things that might happen". The richness of the teachers' responses indicate that they are very intentional about creating fair and reasonable opportunities for students to succeed in demonstrating learning in test situations. Teachers noted differences in student intelligence, but that perceived difference did not appear to influence the effort the teachers made to help students be successful in testing situations.

In addition to their in-class efforts to help students with depression, the teachers all described ways in which they enlist parents to help their students who demonstrate a pattern of test anxiety. Some of the teachers described and shared examples how they get parents to follow up at home with strategies to help their child reduce depression. Some teachers talked about working with parents to build trust and confidence in their child's ability to solve their own problems, and some other teachers talked about working with parents on developing students thinking skills, and one teacher, creatively, noted asking parents to create simple "tests" for their children at home. All the teachers noted involving principals in their interactions with parents and providing parents with their phone number. Teachers also noted calling parents either before or after a test.

While teachers did not share many artifacts to support their examples, they were very animated and detailed in their descriptions. This allowed the researcher to elicit much rich information while also getting a feel for how these teachers think about and respond to the problem of students experiencing depression. Participants' facial expressions, animated descriptions, and verbal tone all confirmed that this is an issue they take seriously. These teachers conveyed a strong level of authenticity about their concern for students'

well-being overall and, the issue of helping students who experience depression appeared to be just one manifestation of that care and concern. These teachers' responses demonstrated resourcefulness and initiative on this issue.

After analyzing and reducing the rich categories of information gleaned from these ten cases, the within case and cross-case analysis yielded four distinct themes:

1. Teachers use a combination of both direct and indirect means to identify depression.
2. Through experience, teachers develop skill at recognizing student anxiety and develop strategies to prevent and/or reduce depression.
3. Through experience, teachers also develop strategies to teach students how to prevent and/or reduce their own depression.
4. Teachers initiate contact with parents to enlist their help in assisting students with depression.

The results of this study suggest that Saudi teachers gain both awareness and the ability to respond proactively to students' depression through experience combined with caring and compassion. This experiential learning by the teachers is indicative of a broader care and concern for student well-being and success. The results also suggest there are no formal means by which teachers are prepared to deal with depression; thus, each teacher discovers and adapts ways to deal with this important issue on their own by taking initiative, exploring and testing out strategies, and enlisting both their principal and the parents.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings from this study do support the findings from other studies that teachers are not explicitly trained to identify and deal with student depression [11,13,15–17,28–31,43–46]. The findings from this study also suggest that teachers pay attention to students and use what they observe to help them understand and respond to factors that may influence student academic achievement and success. Finally, the findings from this study reinforce findings from previous studies that illustrate how much teachers learn about teaching from actually doing the teaching, especially when the teachers develop habits of observation and reflection to guide them in planning instruction and refining their classroom practices and student interventions [1,3,20,39,45–48].

The cases examined in this study (along with the 150 survey responses that identified the qualifying pool for this study) also indicate that Saudi schools have teachers who have developed a certain level of understanding, attentiveness, and strategy regarding student depression independent of their formal preparation for teaching. This

suggests that Saudi schools could immediately tap into the knowledge and strategies developed by such teachers in order to address student depression in a more proactive and comprehensive way. Saudi schools could actively engage such teachers in dialogue to inform the practices of the entire school and, thus, create the context for testing out and confirming those practices that are most effective in helping students who experience depression.

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**Deyab A. Almaleki** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Evaluation, Measurement and Research. Dr. Almaleki received his Ph.D. from Western Michigan University (USA) in 2016 in Evaluation, Measurement and Research. Since 2011, Dr. Almaleki has authored and co-authored in more than 20 peer-reviewed journal articles, and over 30 peer-reviewed presentations at professional conferences. Dr. Almaleki has extensive experience in educational and psychological research, research design, applied statistics, structural equation modeling, design and analysis of psychological measurement.