Adolescent Anxiety and the American School System

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Abstract

Anxiety has been found to be the top presenting mental concern for children and adolescents in America today (Mister, Reetz, Krylowicz & Barr, 2013). This paper provides an overview of the rise of adolescent anxiety and how the American educational system with its’ emphasis on standardized testing and the current expectations placed on children and adolescents could be contributing to adolescent anxiety. A comparison of Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore’s successful educational systems are reviewed along with current school-based mental health practices in American schools. Possible research-based interventions such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy and the FRIENDS program are discussed as a way to help prevent and treat anxiety within the school system and promote overall mental health for all students.
Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the students I had the pleasure of working with at Osseo Senior High School. They were a constant reminder of how needed and important our work as school counselors and educators are within the school environment.
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Adolescent Anxiety and the American School System

A growing concern in school age adolescents and young adults has been the significant increase in the number of students experiencing heightened levels of anxiety over the last few years. According to a study conducted by Mister, Reetz, Krylowicz and Barr (2013), in which over four hundred college counseling center directors were interviewed, the researchers discovered that “Ninety-five percent of college counseling center directors surveyed said the number of students with significant psychological problems is a growing concern in their center on campus...The survey also found that anxiety is the top presenting concern” (para. 1). The results of this survey demonstrate the staggering increase of mental health disorders in adolescents and young adults with anxiety at the top of the list. Mister et al. (2013) also found that “Seventy percent of the directors believe that the number of students with severe psychological problems on their campus has increased in the past year.” Such psychological problems include depression, ADHD and generalized anxiety. The large increase in mental health problems that are consistently showing up throughout the education environment is not only a huge concern but it also questions the American system of education as a possible contributor to the rise in adolescent and young adult anxiety.

The current mental health state of young children and adolescents today is troubling. Gray (2011) writes, “...scores indicate that five to eight times as many young people today have scores above the cutoff for a likely diagnosis of a clinically significant anxiety or depressive disorder than was the case half a century ago” (p. 448). The research on the increase in anxiety and mental disorders for young people show that there are no signs of this trend slowing down and the statistics may only get worse. Adolescents reporting feeling anxious or depressed has doubled just in the last 30 years (The Nuffield Foundation, 2012). There are several major types
of anxiety including panic disorders, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder each with their own characteristics. The most common form of anxiety seen in adolescents is the generalized anxiety disorder (American Psychological Association, 2010).

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2013), “Anxiety disorders vary from teenager to teenager...Even in the absence of an actual threat, some teenagers describe feelings of continual nervousness, restlessness, or extreme stress” (para. 3). Symptoms such as excessive fears, restlessness and continual nervousness make it extremely difficult for children and adolescents to meet the standards placed on them in and outside of schools.

The educational expectations in America appears to promote the rise of student anxiety and the pressure to be successful in school now begins much earlier than when students enter college (Kaur, 2013). A major contributor to this academic pressure is testing, and test anxiety is grossly on the rise for American students. A common myth about test anxiety is that only students who have not studied and are not prepared experience this test anxiety, but it is quite the opposite. Students with test anxiety will commonly be overly prepared because of the stress of the test and the pressure to do well, but when faced with the test, a paralyzing effect takes over which extremely hinders the ability to perform well (Cherry, 2012). According to the Anxiety Resource Guide (2012), “This form of school-related stress hounds the kindergarten pupil as much as the Ivy League Scholar” (para. 2). With testing playing an important role in the American educational system, test anxiety in students will continue to be on the rise and will affect students in elementary school through graduate school.

Kohn (2000) explains this testing phenomenon by stating, “While previous generations of American students have had to sit through tests, never have the tests been given so frequently and never have they played such a prominent role in schooling” (p. 1). It is important to note that
testing is not new to our current generation of students, but the frequency, amount of time spent on testing and level of importance placed on testing is new. Ravitch (2011) further explains:

What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward. No education experience was needed to administer such a program. Anyone who loved data could do it. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators; it often generated higher test scores. But it had nothing to do with education. (p. 16)

The educational system has increased the focus on testing and data and the quality of education students are receiving could be suffering as a result. Kohn (2000) writes, “Exams used to be administered mostly to decide where to place kids or what kind of help they needed; only recently have scores been published in the newspaper and used as the primary criteria for judging children, teachers, and schools” (p. 1). The results of the standardized test scores for the current generation of students are becoming the top concern for school districts and the focus is being taken away from the individual student’s results.

According to the Hechinger Report (2012) “In the U.S., states give annual high-stakes exams that determine whether schools must undergo reforms, in some cases whether students can pass to the next grade level or graduate from high school, and increasingly whether teachers can receive tenure and keep their jobs” (para 2). The pressure to do well is not just on the student, but on teachers, administrators and leaders in the school district as school ratings and teacher decisions depend on the scores. The standardized test scores also provide a platform for politicians to use during their campaigns and Kohn (2000) explains, “Demanding high scores fits nicely with political slogans like “tougher standards” or “accountability” or “raising the bar” (p. 2). McDonald (2004) expands and states, “Standards-based reform is the product of a remarkable
political alliance that coalesced in the mid-1980s, and has gone on to affect educational policymaking deeply at federal, state, and local levels” (p. 40). It is important for politicians to want to improve schools, but giving hard-and-fast data to use in a campaign is missing the real issue and problems within education.

Another important issue is the type of standardized test American schools use. Kohn (2000) elaborates:

The worst tests are often the most appealing to school systems: It is fast, easy, and therefore relatively inexpensive. There is little incentive to replace these tests with more meaningful forms of assessment that require human beings to evaluate the quality of students’ accomplishments. Efficient tests tend to drive out less efficient tests, leaving many important abilities untested and untaught. (p. 2)

Due to the lure of efficiency and the quantitative data that American’s crave, the school system has created a problematic cycle of how schools measure academic achievement. Ravitch (2011) writes, “What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement” (p. 16). Kohn (2000) further explains and states, “Any aspect of learning (or life) that appears in numerical form seems reassuringly scientific…it is easier to measure efficiency than effectiveness, easier to rate how well we’re doing something than to ask whether what we’re doing makes sense” (p. 2). The issue is the answer to the question of who is benefitting from these standardized exams. Even the companies that create the standardized tests reap insane profit. For example, in 1999, it was estimated that the manufactures of the tests banked a quarter of a billion dollars and that number will only increase (Kohn, 2000).

One effect from the testing phenomenon according to McNeil (2002) is, “standardized controls reduced the scope and quality of course content, diminished the role of teachers, and
distanced students from active learning” (p. 3). The standardized exams are so narrow and some teachers feel pressure to teach to test and ignore other beneficial content areas. The long term effects are more troubling. McNeil (2002) explains:

Standardization creates inequities, widening the gap between the quality of education for poor and minority youth and that of more privileged students....Over time, the longer standardized controls are in place, the wider the gap becomes as the system of testing and test preparation comes to substitute in minority schools for the curriculum available to more privileged students. (p. 3)

The intention of standardized tests was to create an equal playing field for all students, but the results demonstrate that standardized tests only widen the opportunity gap because schools in America are not equal. Kohn (2000) writes, “Research has repeatedly found that the amount of poverty in the communities where schools are located...accounts for the great majority of the difference in test scores from one area to the next” (p. 4). The more wealthy the area, better academic opportunities are provided which creates an unequal playing field from the start purely based on location. According to Kohn (2000), “The results of these tests must tell us something. The main thing they tell us is how big the students’ houses are” (p. 4). Giving every student in America, or an entire State, the same standardized test would make sense if every school was funded equally, but that is not the case.

Research has shown that standardized tests are also not applicable to real world situations. Kohn (2000) expands:

How many jobs demand that employees come up with the right answer on the spot, from memory, while the clock is ticking? And when someone is going to judge the quality of
your work...isn't it far more likely that the evaluator will look at examples of what you’ve already done, or perhaps watch you perform your normal tasks? (p. 4)

The main idea is that educators are constantly expressing to students that school and education is preparing them for the real world, but standardized exams is not a proper tool to prepare students for the real world. Bhattacharyya, Junot and Clark (2013) write, “The main problem with standardized tests is that they inhibit the kind of education that matters the most, preparing young people with “higher order thinking skills” to compete in a global economy” (para. 1). With schools focusing so much time, energy and money on tests it seems the education priorities are focused on high scores instead of preparing students to be successful in the modern world.

The research on standardized tests also extends to the SATs and ACTs. Kohn (2000) explains, “These tests are not very effective as predictors of future academic performance...they’re not good indicators of thinking or aptitude; the verbal section is basically just a vocabulary test” (p. 4). Currently, there are many U.S. colleges and universities that no longer require the test scores as part of the application process. Even some graduate schools in the U.S. do not require GRE scores (Ruuska, 2014). According to Redford (2014), a longitudinal study which tracked 123,000 students at 33 test-optional public and private colleges and universities over 8 years found that, “high school GPA is actually a better predictor of college success than SAT or ACT scores” (para. 1). Ruuska (2014) expands and states, “students with higher GPAs in high school performed better in college than their peers with low high school GPAs, regardless of their standardized test scores” (para. 3). This research demonstrates that one test taken on one Saturday is not going predict how students will fair in college. It make sense that GPA serves as a more accurate picture of how students will do in college as it is typically measured over a four-year time in their high school career.
What is most troubling is that adolescent and young adult anxiety could be a result of the testing overload and the education environment. For example, according to Mc Donald (2001), “Tests are identified as a major source of concern to many children, and the overall prevalence of test anxiety appears to be increasing, possibly due to increased testing in schools and pressures associate with this “ (p. 1). Having an educational system which emphasizes testing is a major concern and is causing an anxiety inviting environment for students. Henry (2007) explains:

High-stakes standardized tests increase the levels of fear and anxiety of young students, and it is a well-documented fact in education that the higher the levels of affective interference, the less able students are to complete even low-order thinking tasks-not to mention the more reflective, higher-order skills. (p. 51)

The validity of the scores from these tests are now in question, and not just from the anxious students but also from the apathetic learners as well. Mortimer and Larson (2012) write, “What is critical is that young people enjoy learning, know how to find information, and are able to think creatively in new situations” (p. 16) and the American Education system needs to ask if the testing phenomenon is truly benefiting the students.

For the American educational system to focus on standardized tests for so long makes some degree of sense. According to Phelps (2005), “Standardized tests can produce at least three benefits: improved diagnosis (of student’s strengths and weaknesses); improved prediction and selection (for college, scholarships, or employment) and; most controversial, improved achievement” (p. xv). The intentions of standardized tests sound appealing and extremely beneficial to schools, but as the research demonstrated, students are not benefiting and the tests are not an accurate measure of future performance. It is important to note that standardized testing may have started out providing the above benefits, but it has since turned into benefitting
a lot of people except for the students and teachers which is a major problem. The testing pendulum has seemed to swing too far to one side, and the benefits that schools, teachers and most importantly students could gain from standardized tests are lost because there is either too much testing, schools are not using the right tests or the current approach schools have on testing is misguided.

The standardized testing in America is also quite unique from the rest of the world. Very few countries will administer standardized tests to students before the age of sixteen, and it is even difficult to find other countries that will give multiple-choice exams to students of any age (Kohn, 2000). According to Kohn (2000), “In the U.S., we subject children as young as six to standardized exams, despite the fact that almost all experts in early childhood education condemn this practice” (p. 1). The United States is continually trying to compete with other countries and provide the best possible education, but standardized testing is not the practice of the top ranked educational systems. According to a report in 2012 that showed where countries are ranked in terms of reading and math and science, the United States consistently lagged behind international educational systems in Hong Kong, Singapore and Finland. The common thread between the top ranked countries is little to no standardized testing (Khazan, 2012).

What is also interesting is how high the prevalence of anxiety is in America compared to Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore. For example, over six million or 29% of Americans will suffer from anxiety, compared to only 7% of the Finnish population (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2010). That 7% also includes Finnish adults suffering from depression and alcohol-related disorders so the actual number of people with anxiety is much less than 7% (European Commerce, 2008). In Hong Kong, it is estimated that only 4% or roughly 200,000 people are affected with anxiety. In Singapore, only 3% or 64,000 people are estimated to have
anxiety, and 40% of those with anxiety also reported having a chronic physical illness (Institute of Mental Health, 2013).

**International Education Systems**

**Finland’s Educational System**

If the education system in America intends to compete with the best in the world, then a close examination of what the top educational systems are doing needs to be conducted starting with Finland. Finland has a drastically different approach to education, and their approach is extremely successful since they are one of the top countries in the world for education. Darling-Hammond (2010) writes, “Finland has been a poster child for school improvement since it rapidly climbed to the top of the international rankings...it now ranks first among all the OECD nations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)” (p. 2). Finland’s approach to their educational system is extremely successful and very different from the United State’s approach.

In regards to testing, Khazan (2012) writes that in Finland, “There are no standardized tests, and the focus appears to be on equity, not competition between schools or students” (para. 17). Finland has completely rid their educational system of standardize tests, and the approach is proven to work. Also, according to Vasagar (2010), “There is only one set of national exams, when children are about to leave school, aged 18. The government conducts national assessments; sampling the population to keep track of school performance but these results are not made public” (para. 4). This is unique because in America schools are constantly compared to one another and given a public school rating and competition is high between school districts.

In Finland, there are virtually no private schools and even the very few religious schools are state-funded (Vasagar, 2010). Timo Lankinen, the director general of the Finnish national
board of education explains by stating, “Somehow we have had that kind of social agreement that basic education in Finland should be provided for all, and take all levels into account...if it remains so, there isn’t any need for private schools” (Vasagar, 2010, para. 14). Finland’s schools place so much value on having equal education that a student living anywhere in Finland can expect the same standard of academia as any other student. Also, according to Darling-Hammond (2010) “All students receive a free meal daily, as well as free health care, transportation, learning materials, and counseling in their schools, so that the foundations for learning are in place” (p. 4). Providing free meals and education for every student allows schools to not discriminate based on the socio-economic status of families and truly provide an equal education. In America, not every student is provided with free education and meals and a large contributor to school funding is property taxes which typically means that suburban schools are more highly rated and have more funds than urban schools which creates a systemic barrier and inequality in education purely based on location.

What also sets Finland apart is that in order to be a teacher, a master’s degree is required to teach any grade above kindergarten and teaching is perceived as a high-status profession compared to America where teachers only need a bachelor’s degree (Davidson, 2012). Vasagar (2010) explains “Finland’s success is due, in part, to the high status of teaching” (para. 12). The quality in the equal education in Finland is higher because of the higher standards for teachers. Darling-Hammond (2010) expands:

The Finns have worked systematically over 35 years to make sure that competent professionals who can craft the best learning conditions for all students are in all schools, rather than thinking that standardized instruction and related testing can be brought in at the last minute to improve student learning. (p. 3).
In Finland, having a society that holds the view of teaching being a pivotal profession and holding higher standards for teachers is a proven recipe for success in the educational system (Davidson, 2012).

What is also unique about Finland’s educational system is that children do not begin school until they are seven-years-old and according to Vasagar (2010) “there is no pressure on them to do anything academic before then” (para. 2). In America, there is a great deal of pressure to begin academic work as soon as possible and with how American society is set up, children almost have to begin academic work early just to keep up with their peers and the educational system. Khazan (2012) explains that in Finland, “schools assign less homework and engage children in more creative play” (para. 16). The educational system in Finland understands the value of play and its importance in child development. Ginsburg (2007) writes, “Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth” (para. 1). The school is an ideal environment for constructive play to take place and Bodrova and Leong (2005) explain this by stating:

Early childhood classrooms provide a unique setting to foster the kind of dramatic play that will lead to cognitive and social maturity. There are other children to play with, a setting that can be organized to encourage imaginative play, and adults who can encourage the play, guiding children to play effectively with each other. Indeed, this is the cornerstone for all learning. (para. 1)

Finland is using the school environment and its unique potential to foster children’s development by creating many opportunities for play by allowing frequent recess breaks throughout the school day (Vasagar, 2010).
Hong Kong’s Educational System

Hong Kong is another place that is ranked in the top five in the world for high school student and college completion rates with a respected education system (Davidson, 2012). Khazan (2012) explains, “Hong Kong has been consistently ranked among the top Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries in education, but there’s actually a significant amount of dissatisfaction with the level of testing and rote memorization in the schooling system there” (para. 12). This is important that Hong Kong is moving away from standardized tests because as Strauss (2012) writes, “Asian nations tend to do brilliantly on the standardized testing....Hong Kong seems a success story when viewed enviously by American educators noting those high test scores” (para. 7-10). Although Hong Kong excels in their test scores, there is great disapproval with standardized tests. Khazan (2012) further explains Hong Kong’s dissatisfaction with testing by stating “the general public feels that the extreme standardization and the harsh drilling to do well on those tests makes education uninspiring and even painful” (para. 14). This type of pain is also present in many U.S. schools, and emphasizing standardized tests in the United States appears to contribute to anxiety for a number of students. Having a place like Hong Kong which typically thrives in test scores state dissatisfaction with testing speaks to the idea that there has to be a better way to measure education (Henry, 2007).

Hong Kong used to administer plenty of standardized tests, but according to Davidson (2012) “educators in Hong Kong want to learn more about more flexible, motivating, inspiring ways to improve their system” (para. 11). Hong Kong is looking at the Finnish educational system to help their educational system be as successful as the Finnish education system. A strategy Hong Kong plans to employ according to Khazan (2012) is, “to create “Liberal Studies” as a compulsory subject at the secondary level in order to help students master critical thinking.
and creative skills” (para. 14). The question Hong Kong is facing amidst their education reform, and the question the United States board of education needs to ask according to Davidson (2012) is, “Do we want our kids to thrive in the 21st century or do we want them to raise their test scores?” (para. 18). Although Hong Kong has consistent top results in test scores, their Ministry of Education understands that teaching students to test well does not amount to much in the modern society and the focus should be on practical knowledge and skills such as critical thinking and creativity (Strauss, 2012). As Hong Kong learns and adapts their education from the Finnish educational system, the United States would benefit from learning how to undergo a successful educational reform from Hong Kong.

**Singapore’s Educational System**

Singapore, a country that out-shines other countries in their math performance and “have the enviable record of scoring first in the world in mathematics proficiency on the past three Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS)” takes a different, slower approach to math than American schools (Leinwand and Ginsburg, 2007, p. 1). According to Hu (2010), “For decades, efforts to improve math skills have driven schools to embrace one math program after another, abandoning a program when it does not work and moving on to something purportedly better” (para. 5). In America, we develop programs for math, implement them in the classrooms and adjust accordingly and the cycle continues. According to Ginsburg and Leinwand (2005), “Singapore recognizes that some students may have more difficulty in mathematics and provides them with an alternative framework; the U.S. frameworks make no such provisions” (p. 3). Singapore focuses on each individual student instead of the whole and ensures that each child understands the material before going on to the next unit. Hoven and Garelick (2007) explain by stating, “Singapore math is able to teach at a slower pace and in more
depth...in the Singapore system, students achieve mastery, so schools do not need to reteach skills” (p. 5). This is a pivotal method especially for subjects such as math where future units build on from previous units. In American math classes, a unit is taught, a test is given and then the class moves on to the next unit. If a student does not comprehend the material, then the student either has to catch up on their own time outside of class or continue to lag behind (Ginsburg & Leinwand, 2005).

Singapore is taking the anxiety of math out of the classrooms by ensuring that all students understand the material before moving on, and what is most impressive according to Prystay (2004) is that, “Students in Singapore routinely score among the highest in international math tests” (para. 2). Although it may seem that students will not be able to receive all that a general math curriculum offers due to the slow pace of the math model, but the research tells a different story. Hu (2010) explains the success of Singapore’s math program by stating:

Slowing down the learning process gives students a solid math foundation...and makes it less likely that they will forget and have to be retaught the same thing in later years. And with Singapore math, the pace can accelerate by fourth and fifth grade, putting children as much as a year ahead of students in other math programs as they grasp complex problems more quickly” (para. 7-8)

The results show success, and the slow pace of Singapore’s math program reduces anxiety and student stress because the aim is to have every student master each step before continuing on. Leinwand and Ginsburg (2007) writes, “Regarding mathematics standards in grades 1-6, Singapore covers an average of 15 topics per grade level, compared with Florida’s 54 and New Jersey’s 50” (p. 2). Somehow math education in America has pushed for more topics instead of
more understanding, and the results and research of success strongly favor Singapore math.

Ginsburg and Leinwand (2005) further explain:

> With so much more mathematics content to cover in each grade, many U.S. state frameworks are not able to treat topics with depth. Therefore, they repeat the same topics over many more grades than does Singapore, and the mathematics curriculum does not progress at as fast a pace. (p. 3)

Having Singapore students cover only 15 math topics per grade compared to 50 topics per grade in some U.S. states demonstrates the importance of learning comprehension and depth of math information if students want to be successful in math. Hoven and Garelick (2007) write, “The surprising result—slower pace resulting in more rapid progress—works for students who perform on, above, or below grade level” (p. 5).

There are some schools in the U.S. that adopted the Singapore Math method as a pilot program, and according to Garelick (2006), “In schools where Singapore Math (SM) was being used as a pilot program, students typically outperformed their peers in other district schools” (para. 1). An example of the program’s success according to Landsberg (2008) is, “In 2005, just 45% of the fifth-graders at Ramona Elementary School in Hollywood scored at grade level on a standardized state test. In 2006, that figure rose to 76%” and the difference can be attributed to Singapore math (p. 1). However, many elementary schools that have adapted the Singapore Math as a pilot program have dropped out despite the positive results. Hu (2010) writes, “All along, people have said it’s too hard, too demanding for teachers...about a dozen schools had started and dropped Singapore math, in some cases because teacher’s themselves lacked a strong math background and adequate training” (para 20). Another reason for dropping the program is because Singapore math is typically more expensive, and adopting a new program requires hiring
coaches and trainers to ensure that teachers understand the material. Even though the results demonstrate that students who have been taught Singapore math will typically outperform peers who have not been taught Singapore math, schools still have decided to drop the program due to lack of teacher knowledge.

However, there are schools that do practice Singapore math and there are no plans for dropping the program. Two current examples are P.S. 132 in Manhattan which serves mostly poor students as well as a private school in Washington where the President’s daughters attend. This demonstrates that Singapore math works for poor students as well as students who attend even the most highly rated private schools. One principal from a California school raves about the program and states, “It’s wonderful...Seven out of 10 of the students in our school are proficient or better in math, and that’s pretty startling when you consider that this is an inner city, Title 1 school” (Landsberg, 2008, p. 1). If the program works, it is difficult to justify quitting it. American society is not typically a preventive society, so it is understandable why American elementary schools would drop the successful program based on money or adequate training for educators. Ginsburg and Leinwand (2005) explain, “U.S. teachers are among the poorest performers of all college students in mathematics” (p. 9). Dropping a successful program like the Singapore math due to lack of teacher training is not providing the best possible education to students, and prevention reforms may need to start with teacher education.

**Summary**

If America truly wants to provide the best possible education and prepare students for real world scenarios, then there is much to be learned from Finland’s, Hong Kong’s and Singapore’s educational systems. Downplaying the standardized testing seems like the appropriate first step. The American educational system could benefit from increasing its’ focus
on teacher education and critical thinking processes and creativity. The question that needs to be asked is do we want our students to be creative, critical thinkers and problem solvers ready to embrace our complex, ever changing society.

United States Education and Family Norms

Rise of Adolescent Anxiety

As research has stated, the rise in adolescent anxiety has doubled in the past 30 years and approximately one in every four to five youth ages 13-18 in the United States meets the DSM-IV criteria for a mental disorder with anxiety being the most common (Merikangas, K.R, He, J., Burstein, M., Swanson, S.A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benjet, C., Georgiades, K., and Swendesen, J., 2010). Woodward and Fergusson (2001) state, “adolescents with anxiety disorders are at an increased risk of subsequent anxiety, depression, illicit drug dependence, and educational underachievement as young adults” (para. 4). Since adolescent anxiety is so prevalent, an overview of possible causes of anxiety as well as treatment needs to be addressed.

There are a number of different ways to assess child and adolescent anxiety and a place to start could be with screening tools that can be taken by the child, parent and/or teacher, and some screening tools are even offered for free online. It is important to note that the screening tools do not provide a diagnosis, it is just a good starting point if presenting anxiety is in question (School Psychiatry Program and Madi Resource Center, 2010). The next step in the process of assessing adolescent anxiety would to be get a clinical interview. According to Hsiao, R.C., Boydston, L., and Varley, C. K. (2012), “The clinical interview is the most important diagnostic tool in the assessment of anxiety” (para. 3). After a clinical interview is performed from a licensed professional, then a diagnosis can be made and treatment options can be discussed.
There are many different options for treatment of adolescent anxiety, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, medication, stress management, and therapeutic programs for teens (Hurst, 2011). According to the Anxiety and Depression Associate of America (2010), “No one treatment method works best for every child; one child may respond better or sooner, to a particular method than another child with the same diagnosis” (para. 4). A combination of treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy and medication has been proven to provide the most help in treating anxiety (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2010). If properly assessed and diagnosed early, then the more likely it will be for the child or adolescent to be properly treated for anxiety and it will be less likely that anxiety will occur in adulthood (Merkangas, et al., 2010).

**Education and Parenting Expectation Shift**

Another factor contributing to adolescent anxiety is the change of expectations placed on today’s generation of children and adolescents. Elkind (2010) explains this change by stating:

The concept of childhood...is threatened with extinction in the society we have created. Today’s child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress-the stress borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations. The contemporary parent dwells in a pressure-cooker of competing demands, transitions, role changes, personal and professional uncertainties, over which he or she exerts slight direction. (p. 3)

The current way of rearing children is to enroll in early childhood education and to hurry the process of growing up and become little adults as fast as possible. Elkind (2010) writes, “If you did not start teaching children when they were young, parents were told, a golden opportunity for learning would be lost” (p. 8). Parents today are facing many pressures from society to over
schedule children and adolescents. Wallace (2014) states, “There’s a little fallacy that we have to enrich our children’s experience with every kind of lesson and every kind of sport and every kind of club, and that backfires at a certain point” (para. 15). With the current American educational system and expectations, it is no surprise that speeding the process of growing up has become common practice for raising children and it has unfortunately become almost a necessity to survive the education system.

Now there is a “readiness” fad that children and parents face. Strauss (2014) explains, “every public school kindergartener in Oregon was given a kindergarten readiness test last September...kindergarten is the new first grade when it comes to academics” (para. 4). Kindergarten used to be the place to where children would learn letters, numbers and sounds, but now the expectation has changed in that early childhood education is now the norm where infants who cannot even talk yet are being taught letters and numbers. Now Kindergartens are subject to tests and one of the many issues with early childhood testing according to Strauss (2014) is, “Teachers who want children to do well on tests may eliminate worthwhile learning experiences, introduce skills too early, or narrow the curriculum in order to “teach to the test” (para. 20). Research has proven time and again that young children learn best in environments where they can play and explore and the changing expectations for young children seems to be heading in the opposite direction (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

Along with the changing expectations, children and adolescents today are exposed to bullying, parental divorce, violence, peer pressure, and the list could go on. Although these things are not necessarily new, the prevalence of what kids are facing today is significantly more than the past. The Nuffield Foundation (2012) explains:
Today’s teenagers are more likely to be in education and less likely to be in paid employment than their counterparts in the 70s and 80s, leading to a longer and less structured period of adolescence. Family life for teenagers has also changed. Young people in the 2000s are twice as likely to have experienced the divorce of their parents that young people 30 years ago. (para. 2-3)

The age of technology is only adding to the stress. Wallace (2014) writes, “Today’s teens...can now compare their academic performance and everything else about their existence to other teens 24 hours a day through updates on Facebook, Twitter....and that only increases the stress” (para. 10). With social media, there is no break for today’s adolescents. Elkind (2010) explains, “the omnipresence of computers, the evidence from new brain research, and the explosive use of the Internet have added to the demands that children feel, think, and behave as more competently and mature than their age would warrant” (p. xxi). With the prevalence of social media, teens today do not have an escape from the stress and pressures they are exposed too.

Another issue is that it is not just the children and adolescents who are negatively affected, but the parents are being affected as well. Wallace (2014) states, “Parents also contribute to their teens’ stress by not figuring out how to cope with their own stress...many parents demonstrate unhealthy coping mechanisms and live a full-blown stressed out lifestyle” (para. 22). Elkind (2010) writes, “Parents are under more pressure than ever to over-schedule their children and have them engage in organized sports and other activities that may not be age-appropriate” (p. xvii). American society today values and almost demands that children and adolescents should be involved and the motto seems to be “the busier, the better”. Parents today are simply just trying to keep up with the fast-paced, demanding environment and they along with their children are being stretched thin.
Present School Services

With children and adolescent anxiety and other mental health issues on the rise, it is imperative to investigate the services provided within the school systems. Rose, Miller and Martinez (2010) further explain, “anxiety disorders are the most frequently occurring mental health concern in children and adolescents but are the least treated” (para. 1). According to Merikangas, et al., (2010), “The likelihood that common mental disorders in adults first emerge in childhood and adolescence highlights the need for a transition from the common focus on treatment of U.S. youth to that of prevention and early intervention” (para. 3). The lack of preventative mental health services in America is contributing to the rise of mental health disorders such as anxiety in children and adolescents. It is estimated that 20% of youth need mental health services, not including the high number of at-risk youth that could benefit from services (Merikangas, et al., 2010).

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2010) also states that, “Research shows that untreated children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss out on important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse” (para. 14). Children and adolescents with anxiety will have a more difficult time with their academics and the research shows that unless they receive treatment for their anxiety, these adolescents will often choose to self-medicate with harmful substances such as drugs which allows for a whole host of other issues for the students. Radliff and Cooper (2013) write:

Untreated mental health issues affect children’s success in schools and represent a serious concern that is not going away. Mental health is a key aspect of every child’s healthy development, and research has demonstrated that the public mental health service system remains largely ineffective in meeting the needs of children and adolescents. (p. 244-245)
Having anxiety as an adolescent also poses risks for having anxiety later into adulthood if left untreated (Edwall, 2012). For example, according to Pine, Cohen, Gurley, Brook and Ma (1998) who conducted a longitudinal study which sampled 776 adolescents they found that, “adolescent anxiety or depressive disorders predicted an approximate 2- to 3-fold increased risk for adulthood anxiety or depressive disorders” (para. 3). The need for children and adolescent to utilize treatment options are critical and American society needs to take a more preventative stance on mental health instead of a reactive stance.

According to Paternite (2005) “From the small percentage of youth who do receive service, most actually receive it within a school setting” (p. 1). The school provides a unique environment to provide the much needed mental health services, but currently the school-based mental health programs are not widely accepted into the American schools. Radcliff and Cooper (2013) write, “The challenge is deciding who should provide such services and how districts should fund these programs” (p. 244). Not having the answers to the legitimate issues is causing limited services to be provided in schools. Paternite (2005) explains, “Mental health services in schools historically have been quite restricted, limited primarily to assessment, clinical consultation, and treatment services for students” (p. 2). The issue is that research is stating that the youth who do receive treatment are getting it from the schools, with mental health services not widely accepted in schools. Radcliff and Cooper (2013) write:

While we understand that countless youth experience mental health issues...we often hit a roadblock as to how to best address their needs. Unfortunately, this frequently leads to lack of services, particularly for those who are unlikely to receive mental health care outside of school due to various barriers (e.g., lack of insurance, cost, and transportation). (p. 245)
With little to no services in schools, the research shows that youth will not receive the treatment they need since it is not as easily accessed. Schools are aware of the mental health issues, but are unsure as whether to take a preventative stance or a reactive stance (Radcliff and Cooper, 2013).

Barta (2011) writes, “Schools have a significant and sustained access to adolescents. Therefore, schools are ideally positioned to initiate and maintain activities and services to enhance the psychological development and well-being of adolescents” (p. 20). Having School-Based Mental Health program’s would benefit not just individual students, but the school as a whole. Radliff and Cooper (2013) state, “Research has demonstrated that mental health, learning, and academic achievement are irrevocably intertwined and that mental health has an impact on academic achievement and success in school” (p. 245). Results show that there was a significant increase in overall grade point averages for students who receive mental health services compared to students who were not using mental health services (Walker, Kerns, Lyon, Burns & Cosgrove, 2010).

The important piece about school based mental health services is that it is researched based and proven to be effective in both rural and urban school settings. For example, a study by Armbruster and Lichtman (1999) that compared a clinical sample of 220 children to a sample of 256 children from 36 different inner-city schools found that both groups showed improvements even though the school children were treated for a slightly less amount of time. Armbruster and Lichtman (1999) explain:

These results indicate that school based mental health services show improvement comparable to the clinic-based services, and have the potential for bridging the gap between need and utilization by reaching disadvantaged children who would otherwise not have access to these services. (para 1)
This is crucial evidence and provides hope for children in schools that may not have the option to afford clinical treatment care. Kline (2012) writes, “School-based clinics are also a means to access some populations that under-utilize service in the community” (p. 15). Having evidence-based, mental health services in schools would create a culture of prevention and also promote to the children and adolescents that taking care of your mental health is important not only to self but to academic success (Walker, Kerns, Lyon, Burns & Cosgrove, 2010).

**Summary**

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2010) states, “Early identification and treatment prevents the loss of critical developmental years that cannot be recovered and helps youth avoid years of unnecessary suffering” (para. 13). The more schools focus on prevention, the better for the education system and society as whole. Having more licensed mental health professionals within the school building to perform assessments at school for students who are in need of services would benefit individual students and also the educational system.

**Conclusion**

The incredibly high dropout rates in America demonstrate that the current educational system is not working for millions of students. Goyal (2012) writes, “Every nine seconds, a student drops out of school...and 81 percent said they would not have dropped out if the subjects were more relevant to real life” (p. 4). Swallow (2012) further explains, “Millions of students are being let down all over America...our ability to think critically or creatively has been squandered” (para. 9). The current educational system is not working for many students, and it does not appear to be preparing them to be successful in the modern world. Goyal (2012) explains the education dilemma by stating:
If you worked hard in school, didn’t make too much trouble, and sucked it up, you would be rewarded with modest prosperity. For a long time it worked. Not anymore. The New American Dream involves a new bargain—one that leverages creativity, imagination, and passion, rather than passivity, conformity, and submission. School has failed to harmonize with the New American Dream. (p. 2)

What used to work for people in the past is not working for the current generation of students in the modern day society. The educational system needs to adapt and modify to what is relevant and important for thriving in modern society to decrease the dropout rate and increase the love of learning. Swallow (2012) concludes by quoting Goyal stating, “Can you imagine a child wanting to learn more when the end of the school day is over? That’s when we will know the system is finally working (para. 14).”

The solutions to the educational issues in America are not simple, as standardized testing and children and adolescent mental health problems is a system-wide problem. America can learn from educational systems such as Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore which questions standardized testing as a way for preparing students to be successful in the 21st century. A purposed place to start would be to cut down on the amount of standardized test, especially in the elementary schools, and to take a serious look into not making test scores available to the general public as to ensure that the test scores are a testament to the individual students, not a teacher or school that the student attends.

Furthermore, research of negative affects of standardized tests are slowly catching up to the schools and teachers throughout the country. Banchero (2014) explains, “The anti-testing movement is gathering steam... two Chicago public schools took the rare step of refusing to give the state-mandated exam” (para. 6-7). More and more parents, teachers and schools are
reacting to the standardization problem. Parents are seeing the problem earlier and questioning why their elementary kids are subject to so much testing. According to Banchero (2014), one parent moved her daughter to a private school “because she felt the second-grader was spending too much time being assessed” (para. 17). Recognizing that schools are focusing too much on an efficient but ineffective way to measure academic success is where schools need to begin before improvements can be made.

**Implications for Schools**

A proposition to improve the American educational system is to incorporate more school based mental health services. What appears to be lacking in the schools in regards to mental health is that there are not enough assessments and referrals, especially in the elementary schools. Schools do hire the staff to perform the mental health assessments like School Psychologists but there seems to be not enough of staff for the mental health needs of the students, especially in the elementary schools. According to Kutash, Duchnowski and Lynn (2006) “There appears to be a need for an integrative framework to help communities and schools work together to successfully implement universal, selective, and indicated prevention and treatment strategies” (p. 59). The need for obtainable mental health services for youth is prevalent, and the focus should be on prevention.

According to Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash and Seidman (2010), “Educators have long noted that the unmet psychosocial needs of children and families overwhelm the resources of schools and undermine their capacity to educate children” (p. 2). The research showed that children and adolescents who do seek help for their mental health problems will most likely receive treatment from the school. If young children can receive the assessment and treatment services they need early on, then there should be a significant decrease in the amount of mental
health issues later on and it will not follow into adulthood. If schools can provide these mental health services, or at least provide mandatory mental health assessments by school trained employees, future mental health problems could be eliminated if treated early and schools can expect better academic performance if there are less untreated mental health issues. A future research consideration would be to have a longitudinal school-based mental health service program be implemented in schools to measure the effectiveness of a preventative program and academic success.

For schools, there needs to be more education for the staff and students on anxiety as to recognize the signs and symptoms and provide tools to overcome anxiety and decrease stress. The more staff and students are aware of the issue, the more likely the student can get the help they need to treat anxiety. Another suggestion for schools is to ask the question of how can schools decrease the amount of anxiety in the building, and how can educators best prepare our students to be successful in the modern world. This is important because this question does not mean to imply that there needs to be a curriculum change and no more tests. This question is meant to challenge the way schools present information and what schools choose to focus on and how educators use language around important projects and tests. It is expected and normal for adolescents to experience stress and some anxiety, but hyping up the anxiety in school and pressuring students to be perfect is not necessary and not beneficial to the individual students and to the school system.

Two researched based interventions which both have been found to be extremely effective in the treatment of adolescent anxiety are Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and the FRIENDS program (Corrieri, Heider, Conrad, Blume, König & Riedel-Heller, 2013). CBT has been repeatedly found to be successful and effective in treating children and adolescent anxiety.
The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (2012) explains the logic behind using CBT for treating anxiety by stating:

Cognitive distortions are considered to play a key role in the maintenance of youth anxiety as they lead to misinterpretations of environmental threats and undermine the child’s coping abilities. Behavioral avoidance is also a primary maintaining factor in anxiety. (para. 2)

CBT can use a wide variety of techniques based on the individual’s needs such as emotion education and relaxation, cognitive restructuring and parent interventions.

The FRIENDS program, according to Rose, Miller and Martinez (2010) is a “curriculum that targets childhood anxiety and depression through the application of cognitive behavioral principles and the building of emotional resilience” (p. 400). This program has been found to be effective with both younger children and adolescents which means that elementary schools could adapt this program into their mental health curriculum. According to the Austin Resilience Development (2007), “FRIENDS...helps children and teenagers cope with feelings of fear, worry...and is the only childhood anxiety prevention program acknowledged by the World Health Organization” (para. 1-2). All students should be educated on how to cope with their anxiety because stress is a part of growing up and every student will experience some degree of anxiety. The FRIENDS program teaches the necessary skills so students know how to handle the stress of the childhood and adolescent years.

These interventions could be easily implemented into the schools because School Counselors and/or other specialists within the school could get CBT and FRIENDS training and then train and educate other staff at the school. For example, having Health teachers be educated in the training would ensure more students are getting the education on how to effectively handle
stress from a researched-based program. The trained staff could then set up small CBT or FRIENDS groups as needed for students who have anxiety and who are predisposed to anxiety. Another proposition would be to set up these small groups for all incoming freshmen so each student will know how to recognize the signs and symptoms of anxiety and then know what strategies to use to help treat the anxiety as they enter high school. Education on how to cope with anxiety is important for all students because encountering stress is inevitable and schools need to take a preventative stance and promote mental wellbeing so students can not only be successful in schools but also be prepared to handle stress when they enter the real world.
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