

**Description and Explanation of the Research Process:**

**Shy or Anxious? Examining the Efficacy of School-Based Interventions for Childhood**

**Social Anxiety**

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## Description and Explanation of the Research Process

I completed and presented my honors thesis, “Shy or Anxious? Examining the Efficacy of School-Based Interventions for Childhood Social Anxiety” in the fall semester of 2021 with the help of my thesis mentor, Dr. Dan Florell. This topic is one that interested me since the beginning of my collegiate career. After having been dismissed as shy throughout childhood and adolescence, I was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder my freshman year. I knew that I had experienced detrimental effects due to this dismissal, and I wanted to use my honors thesis to help those with experiences similar to mine.

Initially when I came to Dr. Florell with my thesis proposal, my only research aim was to compare shyness and social anxiety disorder by examining the long-term affects of misidentifying one for the other. However, this focus was too broad, and Dr. Florell gave me the task of finding an additional focus that could narrow down my original idea. To do this, I utilized the databases offered through the ECU Library, particularly PsycINFO. I began with basic search terms like “‘shyness’ AND ‘social anxiety disorder,’” and found a theorized continuum that shyness and social anxiety both exist on different ends of severity. I learned that the goal of interventions should find a way to avoid pathologizing shyness, but still intervene for symptoms that imply risk for development of social anxiety disorder. These sources also mentioned school-based interventions, and how they can be ideal treatment methods to address the needs of individuals across the continuum.

Discovering the recommendation for school-based interventions set the course for my next research aim. I sought to create a literature review comparing existing school-based interventions for social anxiety in childhood while breaking down their overarching components. Once I had a list of components to search for within the existing research, I could find the

frequency in which each method was used and build a framework for the development of future school-based interventions. Although it seemed relatively straightforward, typing in “‘social anxiety disorder’ AND ‘school-based interventions’” brought up very few results. I quickly realized a massive hurdle in my research would be the lack of existing school-based interventions specifically for social anxiety disorder.

At first, I felt discouraged by this; however, I mentioned interventions focusing on other mental health concerns like generalized anxiety disorder to Dr. Florell that I had initially regarded as being irrelevant. With his advice, I expanded my research on school-based interventions to find existing ones focusing on disorders often seen comorbidly with social anxiety disorder. Specifically, I focused on generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder since their targeted symptoms and overall methodologies would share similarities. From there I began to search the databases for terms like “‘depression’ OR ‘anxiety’ AND ‘school-based interventions’” to find the variety of existing research I needed.

After searching school-based interventions for these comorbid terms, I had a breakthrough in finding a meta-analysis of existing interventions for depression and anxiety. At this point I had built a collection of popular interventions, but this finding allowed me to examine the author’s sources to find additional interventions I might not have otherwise found. This breakthrough also allowed me to begin utilizing Tipasa, a service through the ECU library which allows users to request and download articles from other libraries not readily available at our own. In the case of this meta-analysis, some of the interventions analyzed were not able to be downloaded straight from PsycINFO. Tipasa was vital to my thesis, as many of the existing interventions did not have the full text linked through the databases, and it opened a whole world of research ready for me to download often in just the span of a day.

In addition to a lack of prior research, I had a difficult time trying to address my own biases in the research. When I was first looking at sources detailing shyness and its relation to social anxiety disorder, I read a source that suggested universal school-based interventions—interventions that are given to an entire school population rather than those singled-out as at risk—as a best course of action for addressing individuals across the continuum of shyness and social anxiety. As I first sorted through interventions, I kept the belief that universal interventions were more advantageous, even when I was finding sources that described using different types of interventions. I realized that the bias I held was encouraging me to keep previous interventions in my analysis that may not have been applicable simply because they were universal.

Once I recognized my bias, I made the decision to go back through the list of previous interventions I had and look closely through their method and procedure sections to determine their relevancy to my research. Some were given to parents to implement at home rather than implemented at school, and so I had to remove them from my analysis. I knew that this topic was one that was important to me, and I wanted my findings to be legitimate and capable of helping others. I knew that trying to justify sources that did not fit cohesively with the rest of my research to support a hypothesis would have compromised my findings and reflected poorly on me as a researcher. Even though I ultimately found that universal interventions were seen most frequently, I know that this finding was not purely due to bias.

Creating my honors thesis was the most academically challenging experience I have yet to face, but through the help of various resources offered by the ECU library and the guidance of my thesis mentor, I had all the tools I needed at my disposal to successfully complete the project. Even now, a semester later, I can identify ways in which I would build upon my research, and I

feel more confident in my ability to find and analyze sources. I plan on going to graduate school, and I am genuinely excited to use the research skills I have gained in future research projects.