



REPORT

THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD ANXIETY ON PRIMARY SCHOOLING

FEBRUARY 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2019, the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) sent to all Australian Government, Independent, and Catholic Primary School Leaders a survey to begin a discussion on anxiety in Australian Primary School children. Almost 700 replies were received.

The survey comprised two parts:

Part 1

Principals were asked to respond to 10 statements. For each statement, six Likert-type categories of responses were provided.

In broad terms, Principals responded that:

1. They have many discussions with teachers about students' anxieties.
2. They and teachers have many discussions with parents about students' anxieties.
3. They have many discussions with colleagues about levels of students' anxieties.
4. Students' anxieties place high demands on time and resources.
5. Schools are inadequately resourced to manage for anxious students.
6. Most parents do not have the skills to manage their children's anxieties.
7. Students' anxieties negatively influence academic results.
8. Anxious students socialise with difficulty.
9. Student absence from school increases with students' levels of anxiety.

Part 2

In addition to obtaining Principals' Likert-scale responses (Part 1), leaders responded freely to two open requests:

Request 1: "Without identifying your school or any individual, please provide any general comments you wish to make related to childhood anxiety in your school or in primary schools generally"

494 individual comments were given and were coded thus:

1. Comments relating to prevalence of anxiety: 211/494 ~43%
2. Comments relating to parents: 201/494 ~41%
3. Comments relating to staff: 92/494 ~ 19%
4. Comments relating to hypothesised causes of anxiety: 79/494 ~ 16%
5. Other: 47/494 ~ 10%

Request 2: "Please provide any comments you wish to make in relation to the prevalence of childhood anxiety over the last 3 - 5 years"

Approximately 600 comments were provided to the Survey's **Request 2**:

NOTE: As the comments were very similar to those for the first request, **an analysis at the level for Request 1 was not applied.**

The report to follow analyses responses to Parts 1 and 2 of the survey.

The broad findings and implications arising from Part 2 are:

- 1. Principals are very concerned about the incidence of anxiety and its increase.**
- 2. Providing for parents and caregivers with mental health concerns is beyond schools' responsibility and expertise. Rather, their responsibility is to parents' and caregivers' children. Nevertheless, teachers' work necessarily involves them with children's parents.**
- 3. Respondents' comments clearly support a view that children's anxieties are highly connected to many parents' parenting practices.**
- 4. Parents feel "at a loss" and do not know how to cope for their anxious children.**
- 5. A small number of parents hold that the school (alone) is responsible to improve their children's anxiety concerns.**
- 6. Leaders report high levels of concern about their own and the teachers' abilities to cater for significant numbers of anxious students.**
- 7. Leaders hypothesise causes for students' anxiety at school. The dominant causes that they suggest are:**
 - a. Parenting practices (discussed adequately and elsewhere in the report)**
 - b. Children's performativity anxiety**
 - c. Societal influences.**
- 8. 36 uncategorised comments are recorded.**

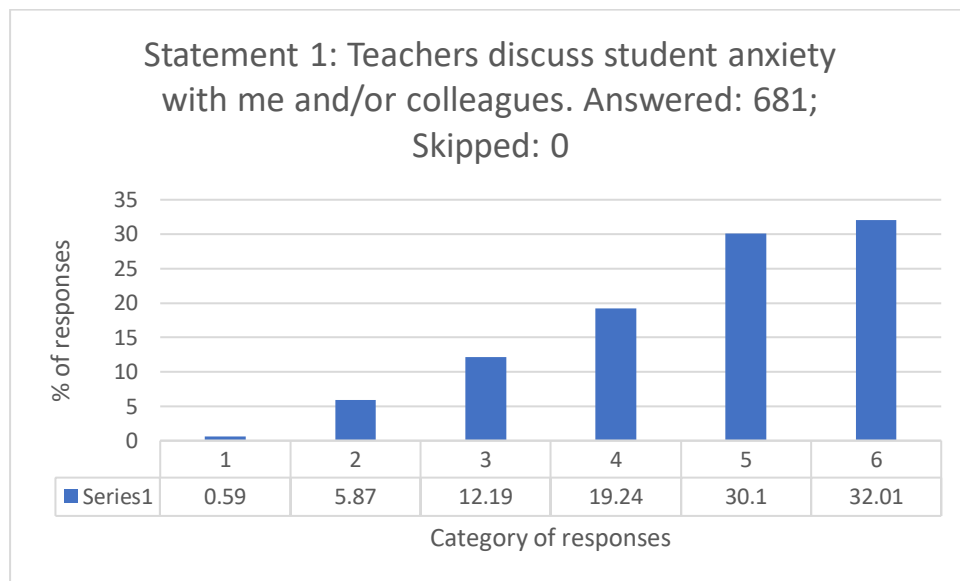
SURVEY RESULTS – PART 1

Principals were asked to respond to 10 statements. For each statement, six Likert-type categories of responses were provided:

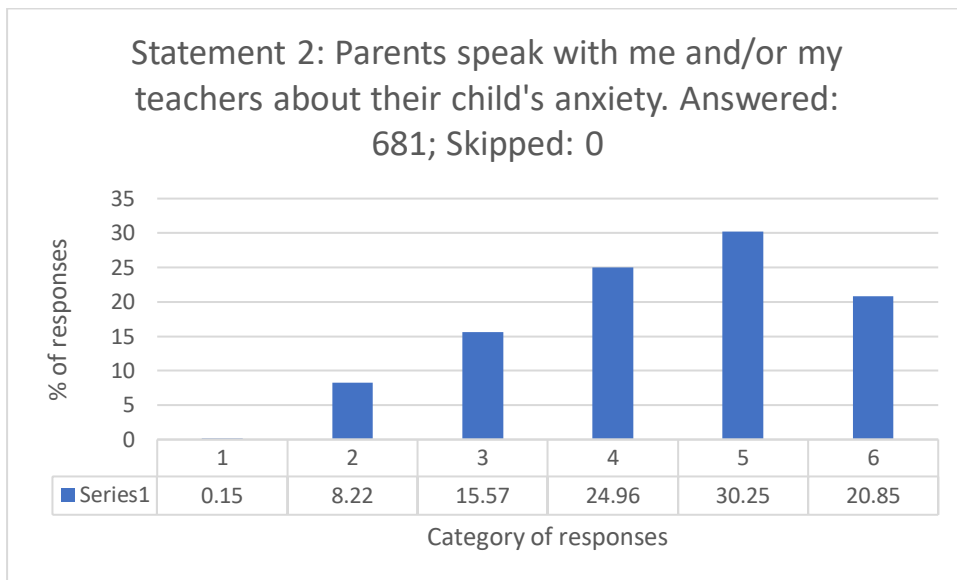
Legend:

- 1 = not at all / not available
- 2 = occasionally / limited availability
- 3 = regularly / adequate availability
- 4 = often / available
- 5 = quite often / easily available
- 6 = very often / fully available

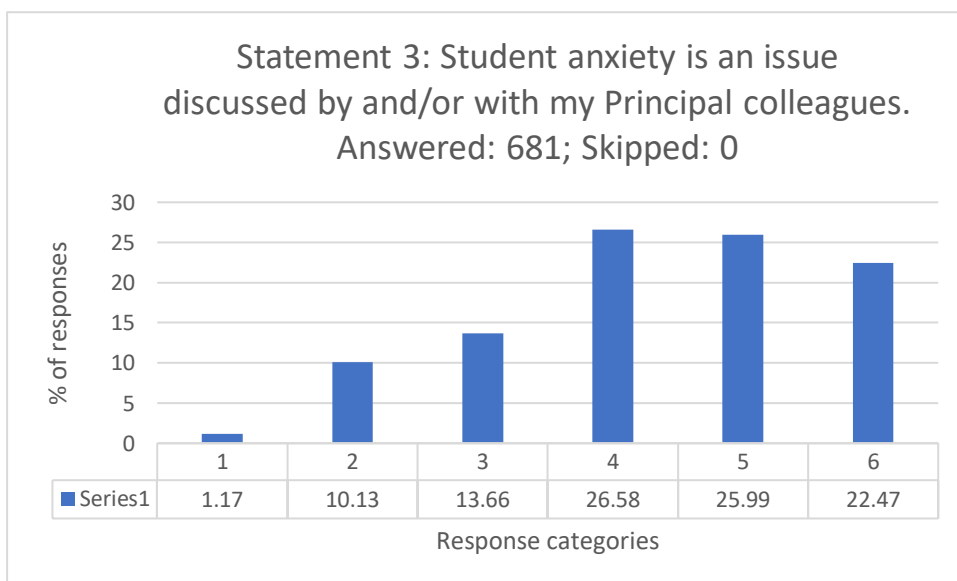
The data and brief descriptions are provided below.



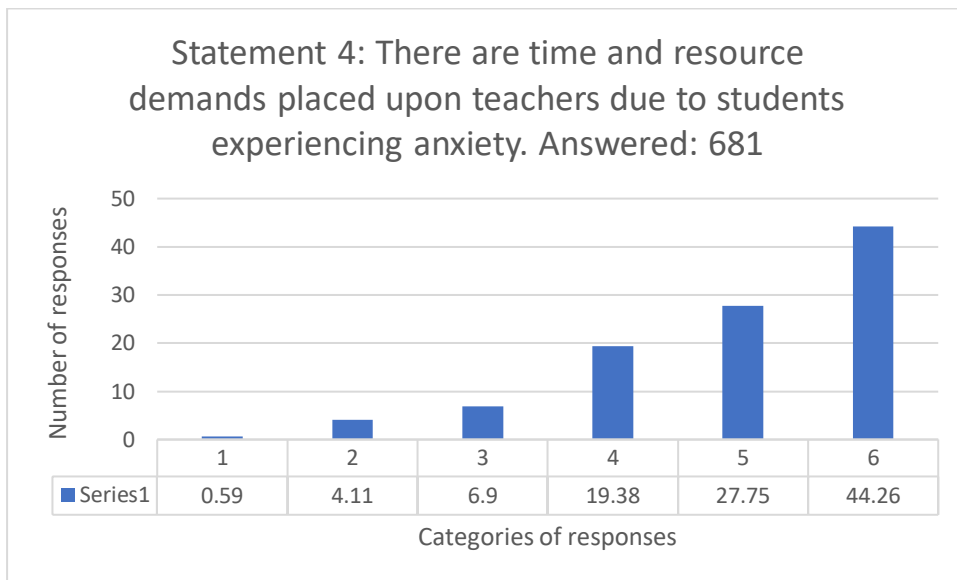
Student anxiety is a major topic of discussion between Principals and teachers. Approximately 80% of Principals identified with the highest three categories.



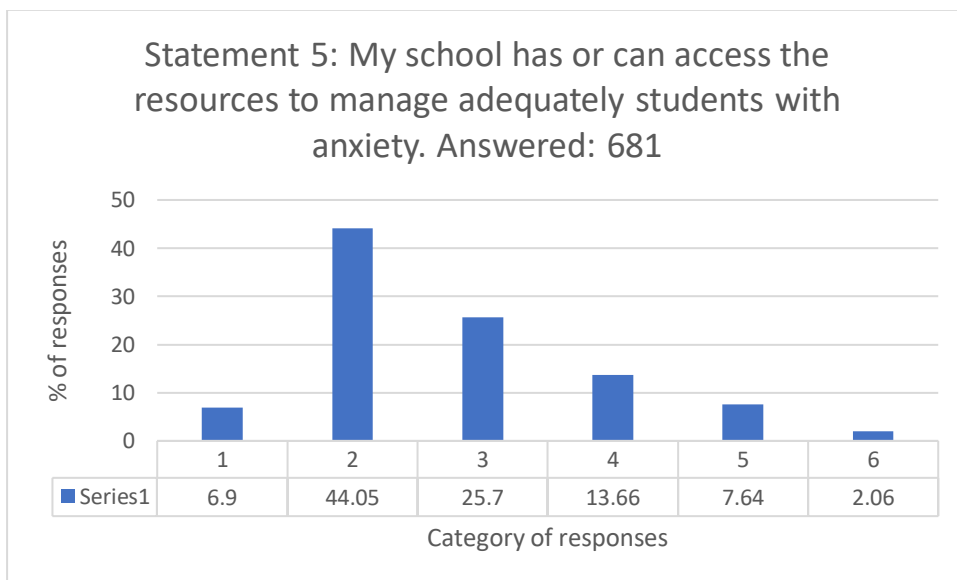
Approximately 75% of Principals identify with the highest three categories of responses. Principals and teachers are significantly involved in parent discussions about children’s anxiety.



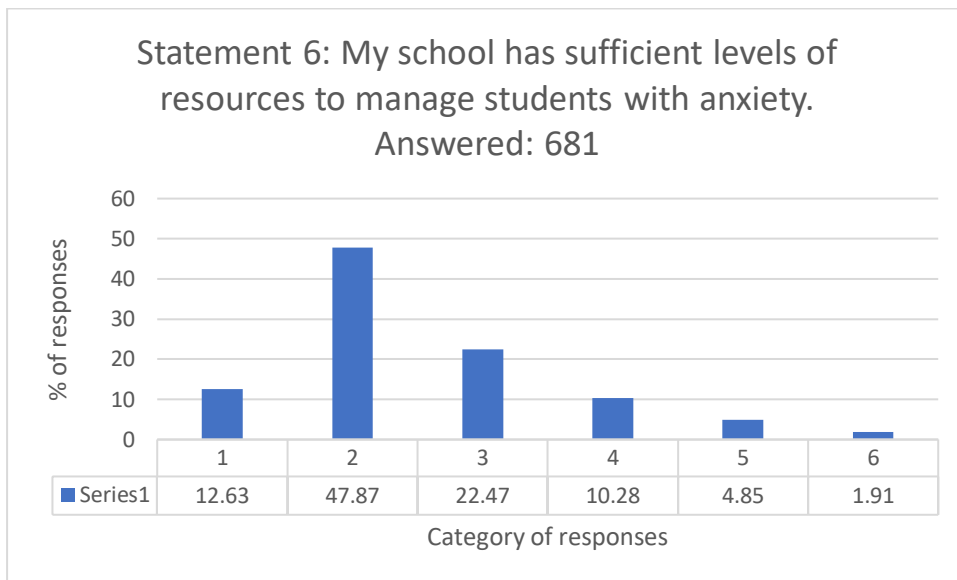
Approximately 75% of Principals identify in the top three categories. Many are significantly involved in peer-discussions about student anxiety.



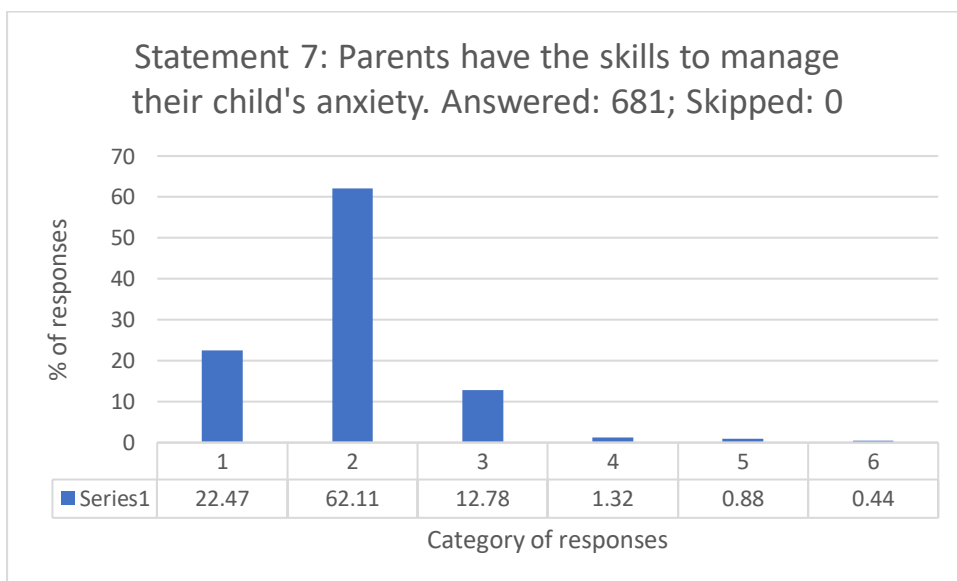
Approximately 90% of Principals identify in the top three categories. Approximately 70% of Principals identify in the top two categories. High percentages of teachers experience major demands in time and resources to provide for anxious students.



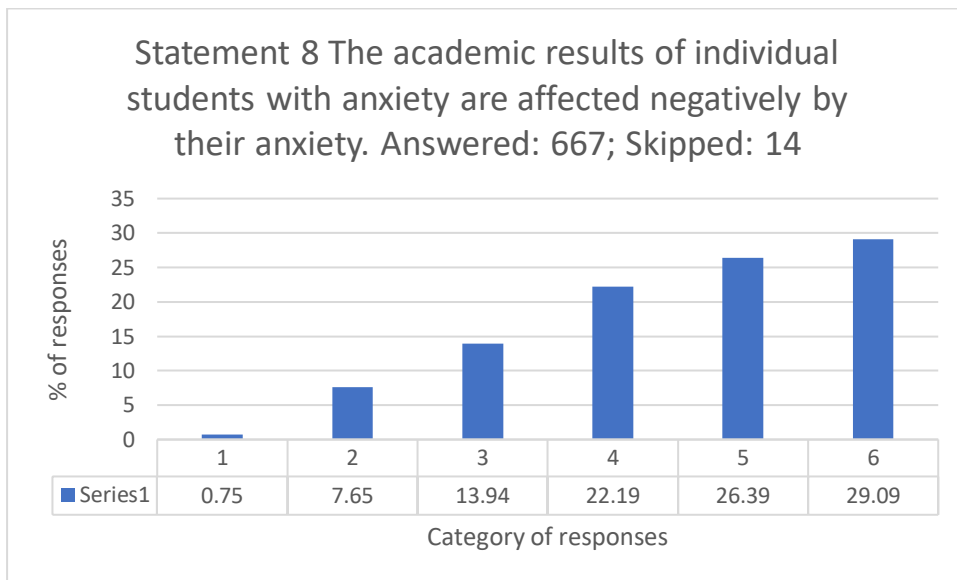
Approximately 51 % of Principals neither have nor can access adequate resources to support anxious students.



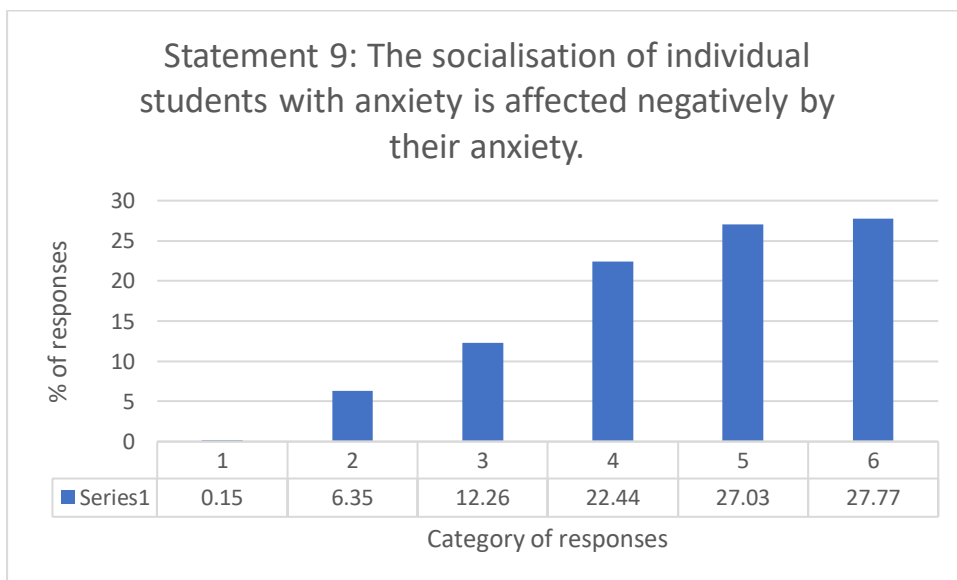
Approximately 60% of Principals say that their schools have insufficient resources for anxious students.



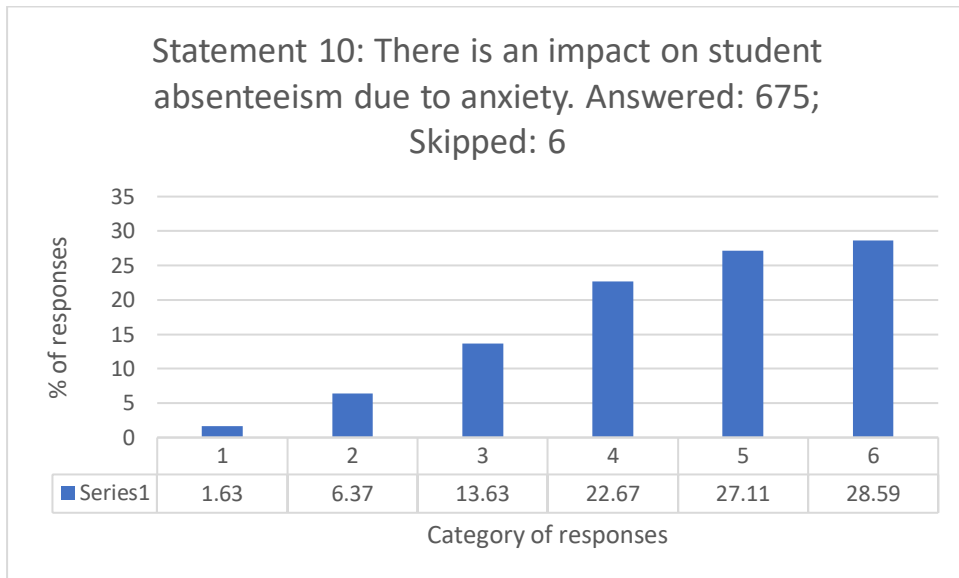
Principals say that approximately 85% of parents with children experiencing anxiety do not have the skills to manage that anxiety.



Approximately 80% of Principals say that their anxious students' academic results are significantly affected by anxiety.



Approximately 80% of Principals say that anxious students have significant difficulty in socialising at school.



Approximately 80% of principals say that anxious students have difficulty attending school.

SURVEY RESULTS – PART 2

In addition to obtaining Principals' Likert-scale responses (Part 1), leaders responded freely to two open requests:

- **Request 1:** "Without identifying your school or any individual, please provide any general comments you wish to make related to childhood anxiety in your school or in primary schools generally"
- **Request 2:** "Please provide any comments you wish to make in relation to the prevalence of childhood anxiety over the last 3 - 5 years" **NOTE:** As the comments were very similar to those for the first request, an analysis at the level for Request 1 was not applied.

Responses to Request 1:

494 individual comments were given for **Request 1** and were coded thus:

1. Comments relating to prevalence of anxiety: 211/494 ~43%
2. Comments relating to parents: 201/494 ~41%
3. Comments relating to staff: 92/494 ~ 19%
4. Comments relating to hypothesised causes of anxiety: 79/494 ~ 16%
5. Other: 47/494 ~ 10%

The following provides details of each set of responses.

Set 1 - COMMENTS RELATING TO PREVALENCE OF ANXIETY: 211/494 ~43%

43% of all comments (211/494) referred to the prevalence of anxiety amongst Primary school children. Almost all 211 comments indicated a high concern about the incidence of Primary School children's anxiety and/or an increase in the incidence.

Words beginning with '*increas*' (for 'increase', 'increased', 'increasing') occurred 122 times. *Rise* (22), *rising* (4), *risen* (1), and words including '*grow*' ('grow', 'growth', 'growing') (21 times) signified increases in prevalence. (Total: 170 instances.)

Respondents are highly concerned about the incidence of anxiety and its increase.

Set 2: COMMENTS RELATING TO PARENTS: 201/494 ~41%

Comments relating to parents were **segmented**.

Segment 1 of 4: Parents' mental health issues. 41% of the 201 comments related to this matter.)

For Set 1, 201 comments referred to parents. 43% of the 201 comments referred to a relationship between parents' anxiety concerns and their children's anxiety concerns. Respondents said or implied that many children's levels of anxiety were attributable to their parents' levels of anxiety.

Segment 2 of 4: Parents' practices. (42% of the 201 comments related to this matter.)

For Set 1, 201 comments referred to parents. 42% of the 201 comments referred to a relationship between parents' practices and their children's anxiety concerns.

Segment 3 of 4: Parents feeling “at a loss”. (~15% of the 201 comments about parents related to this matter.)

Segment 4 of 4: Parents transferring improvement responsibility to the school. (5% of the 201 comments related to this matter.)

For Set 1, 201 comments referred to parents. 5% of the 201 comments referred to a relationship between parents transferring responsibility for change to the school and their children’s anxiety concerns.

*This information is important as a correction for any suggestion that parents are absolving themselves of responsibility for their children’s problems with anxiety.

Set 3 - COMMENTS RELATING TO STAFF: 92/494 ~ 19%

For Set 1, 92/494 (~19%) unedited comments referred to consequences arising for staff due to the incidence of Primary school students experiencing anxiety.

Set 3, Concerns Relating to Staff, presents major concerns for staff. In relation to caring for and providing for high, and increasing, levels of students with anxiety, they describe themselves as

- undertrained
- under resourced
- at risk of psychological and physical injury and
- time-poor.

In each of these four senses, then, leaders and teachers are personally vulnerable as they struggle to provide for anxious students, those students’ peers, and themselves.

Set 4: RELATING TO HYPOTHESISED CAUSES OF ANXIETY: 79/494 ~ 16%

79/494 comments referred to hypothesised causes for the incidence of Primary school students experiencing anxiety.

Set 4 presents three major hypothesised causes:

1. Parenting (26 references)
2. Children's performance anxiety (19 references)
3. Societal influences (17 references)

Set 5: OTHER: 47/494 ~ 10%

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the survey results indicates that levels of Primary students' anxiety are major concerns for Principals, teachers, and parents. Principals say that student anxiety is increasing and is a major topic of discussion between themselves, with their teachers, and with parents. They say that they are under-prepared and under-resourced to provide adequately for anxious students.

They see parents as heavily implicated in solutions for the students. Many parents come to schools with their concerns but feel very much like the Principals and teachers to whom they come; they feel uncertain and confused and look to schools for solutions. Some even hold schools responsible for providing the solutions.

A few Principals offered explanations for anxious children's difficulties. Explanations are critical for solutions and must be integral to the many possible implications that can arise from Principals' responses. Without explanations, identifying the best implications is very difficult. Consequently, this report requires further discussion with members and eventual planning and resourcing.

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