



Mathematics Anxiety In Higher Education Stakeholders: Uncovering Causes, Identifying Symptoms, And Overcoming Strategies

Shobha.V M.Sc.,Mphil.,(Perusing P.hd in VTU in Mathematics) Assistant Professor,
Department of Mathematics, Government First Grade college, Kengeri, Bangalore [Email-
shobhabharath2006@gmail.com](mailto:shobhabharath2006@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT: The article emphasizes that overcoming mathematics phobia can only be achieved through collaborative and unified endeavors involving all stakeholders in higher education. This likely involves active participation from students, teachers, parents, college administrators, and policy makers. By addressing the root causes and implementing strategies to enhance the teaching and learning environment, it is possible to mitigate mathematics phobia among students and cultivate a more positive perception of the subject.

Keywords: Mathematics, Anxiety, Phobia, Symptoms, Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Mathematics, an all-encompassing and utilitarian field of study, assumes a universal significance that transcends boundaries. Its relevance extends seamlessly into higher education, where it occupies a prominent and indispensable position. Across the global educational landscape, mathematics features prominently in curricula, asserting its status as an interdisciplinary language and tool. Within higher education, mathematics not only retains its foundational essence but also takes on a sophisticated role, shaping and enriching the academic pursuits of students. Mathematics delves into the exploration of quantity, structure, space, and change. This field encompasses the study of various measurement systems, such as time, distance, and diverse distance measurement approaches that have evolved globally.

The word 'mathematics' comes from the Greek word 'mathema', which means learning, study, science and additionally came to have the narrower and more technical meaning 'mathematical study' even in classical time. Mathematics is an important subject with broad applicability to everyday life, yet mathematics is often considered as a difficult subject in schools.

There is a gradual decline in students' mathematical performance as they advance to higher grades. This decline can be attributed to several factors, such as unfavorable attitudes,

anxiety towards mathematics, and diminishing proficiency in the subject. Within this array of factors, there is a prevailing notion that mathematics phobia holds a significant role. This perspective aligns with the widespread perception that mathematics is universally regarded as a challenging subject.¹

The root cause behind subpar performance in mathematics remains unclear; nevertheless, a range of factors may exert influence on students' achievements in this subject. Arguably, one contributing factor lies in the oversight of students' perspectives within mathematical teaching practices. This oversight could stem from negative perceptions of mathematics, potentially leading to mathematics phobia that could manifest from the early stages of schooling.²

Similarly, another contributing factor could be the failure to cultivate a positive attitude towards mathematics due to various shortcomings in the educational system. ³These may encompass inadequate teaching resources, large class sizes, uninspired educators, deficient access to laboratories and libraries, insufficient oversight, and an inadequate overall assessment system for students. mathematical difficulties pertain to the subpar mathematical accomplishments of children, arising from an array of factors ranging from ineffective instruction to environmental influences. This phenomenon is posited to be linked to an inherent deficiency in mathematical cognition, distinct from socio-cultural or environmental factors

Significance of the Study

Mathematics can be a very interesting and fun provoking subject for those learners who can really enjoy their learning. On the contrary, mathematics can also be a frustrating subject for many students who have problems with computation and application ⁴. This shows that, many people have mixed feelings about mathematics. Thus, many students feel mathematics as a boring and disengaging subject and they hate mathematics, and try to avoid it by the cause of mathematics anxiety. Even teachers and parents have negative attitudes towards mathematics; it is expressed as a hard subject that is inaccessible, uninteresting, and it is not for cool and engaging people, and not for girls . Of all the most important cause of poor performance in mathematics at school level may be the phobia in mathematics.⁵ Thus the study can help the concerned teachers and the educational administrators to run and support the students who are suffering due to the lack of support and other resources, and the perceived barriers that impact on classroom instruction and supports .

The study aims to accomplish the following objectives:

- i) To cultivate awareness among higher education students, educators, and parents regarding the intricacies of mathematics fear and phobia within the context of advanced academic pursuits.
- ii) To augment educators' comprehension of the multifaceted nature of mathematics phobia at the higher education level, encompassing its root causes, indicators, and viable approaches for mitigation.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this article predominantly takes a descriptive approach. The researcher extensively employs the desk study method to delve into the multifaceted aspects of mathematics fear and phobia. This method involves a meticulous review of an extensive range of sources, encompassing both published and unpublished literature. These sources are drawn from various global online platforms. Recent articles and research reports specifically relevant to mathematics phobia are meticulously scrutinized to construct a holistic comprehension of its diverse dimensions. Furthermore, valuable insights from books dedicated to the theory of mathematics phobia also contribute to the comprehensive analysis conducted in this study.

Phobia in General:

- A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder or mental illness characterized by an extreme and irrational fear of a specific situation, activity, object, or concept.
- The term "phobia" is derived from the Greek word "phobos," which means fear or panic.
- Phobias can lead to a compelling desire to avoid the feared object or situation.

There are three main categories of phobias: specific phobias, social phobia, and agoraphobia.

- **Specific Phobias:** These involve fear of certain objects, animals, natural environments, or specific situations.
- **Social Phobia:** Also known as social anxiety disorder, this involves fear of being judged or negatively evaluated by others in social situations.
- **Agoraphobia:** This is the fear of leaving a safe environment or a familiar area, often accompanied by the fear of experiencing panic attacks.

Mathematics Phobia (Arithmophobia or Numerophobia):

Types of Mathematics Phobia:

1. **General Arithmophobia:** Fear of all numbers, which can severely impact a person's mathematical abilities, limiting their educational and professional opportunities.
2. **Specific Arithmophobia:** Fear of specific numbers, often rooted in superstitions or religious beliefs. Examples include triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13) and fear of numbers like 4 and 666 due to cultural associations.
3. **Cultural and Religious Factors:** Different cultures and religions attribute varying meanings to numbers, leading to specific phobias. Some numbers are considered unlucky or lucky based on cultural beliefs.

Significance of Mathematics in higher education

The significance of mathematics in higher education is profound and multifaceted. Mathematics serves as a foundational pillar across various disciplines, offering valuable skills and insights that enrich students' academic experiences and prepare them for the complex challenges of the modern world. Here's a breakdown of its significance:

1. Analytical Thinking and Problem-Solving: Mathematics cultivates critical thinking skills, enabling higher education students to analyze intricate problems, identify patterns, and formulate logical solutions. This skill is crucial in fields such as science, engineering, economics, and computer science.

2. Quantitative Literacy: Higher education students gain the ability to interpret and manipulate numerical data, enhancing their capacity to make informed decisions based on evidence and statistical analysis.

3. Cross-Disciplinary Applications: Mathematics transcends academic boundaries, applying to various fields like physics, biology, social sciences, and even humanities. It provides a common language for expressing complex ideas and phenomena.

4. Technological Advancements: As technology continues to evolve, mathematics underpins innovations in areas like artificial intelligence, data science, cryptography, and more. Higher education students proficient in mathematics are better equipped to navigate and contribute to technological advancements.

5. Research and Innovation: In higher education, mathematics fosters a strong foundation for research and innovation. Complex mathematical theories and models drive advancements in diverse areas, from healthcare to environmental studies.

6. Professional Opportunities: Many careers demand a solid mathematical foundation. Fields like finance, engineering, architecture, and research heavily rely on mathematical skills, and higher education equips students for success in these domains.

7. Cognitive Development: The rigor of mathematical study in higher education sharpens cognitive abilities, including logical reasoning, memory retention, attention to detail, and abstract thinking.

8. Global Competitiveness: In a globalized world, mathematical competency enhances a student's competitiveness on the international stage. Mathematical skills are universally valued and transferable across borders.

9. Problematic Analysis and Decision-Making: Mathematics equips higher education students with tools to dissect complex problems, assess risk, and make informed decisions, which is crucial for leadership roles.

10. Personal Empowerment: Mastering mathematics in higher education instills a sense of accomplishment and confidence. It empowers students to tackle challenges head-on, fostering a growth mindset.

In essence, mathematics is not just a subject confined to textbooks; it's a dynamic and versatile skill set that empowers higher education students to excel academically, professionally, and personally. Its universal relevance and applications make it an essential component of higher education across diverse disciplines.

Causes of Mathematics Phobia:

- **Teaching Method and Background:** Ineffective teaching methods and inadequate teacher knowledge can contribute to the development of mathematics phobia.
- **Negative Teacher Characteristics:** Aggressive, stressful, and demotivating teaching behaviors can lead to anxiety and fear in students.
- **Mathematical Problem-Solving:** Inability to solve mathematical problems, especially when compounded by excessive homework, can lead to anxiety.
- **Teacher-Student Relationships:** Poor relationships between teachers and students, as well as negative teacher behaviors, can create an environment of fear.
- **Learning Difficulty:** Students with dyscalculia (mathematics learning difficulty) might struggle with math, leading to fear and anxiety.
- **Community Influence:** Negative perceptions about mathematics within the community can contribute to a fear of the subject.

- **Low Self-Esteem:** Poor performance in mathematics can erode self-esteem, further exacerbating the fear.
- **Lack of Confidence:** Inability to solve problems and understand concepts can result in low confidence.
- **Test and Examination Pressure:** The pressure to perform well in tests and exams can induce anxiety and fear.
- **Parental and Teacher Influence:** Parents and teachers who exhibit mathematics anxiety inadvertently convey the idea that math is difficult, contributing to the fear.
- **Negative Attitudes:** A general negative attitude toward mathematics, whether from teachers, peers, or individuals themselves, can lead to phobia.
- **Abstract Nature of Mathematics:** The abstract nature of mathematics and its perceived lack of real-life relevance can contribute to the fear.
- **Lack of Supportive Environment:** Not having a child-friendly teaching environment or not understanding math concepts during class can lead to anxiety.

It's important to address mathematics phobia through supportive teaching methods, positive reinforcement, counseling, and creating a positive learning environment. Acknowledging the diverse factors that contribute to this phobia can help educators and individuals develop strategies to alleviate the fear and enhance mathematical learning experiences.

Symptoms of Mathematics Apprehension in Higher Education:

- **Avoidance of Complex Mathematical Concepts:** Higher education students may tend to avoid courses and topics involving intricate mathematical concepts.
- **Sense of Confusion and Disarray:** When encountering advanced math-related tasks, higher education students might experience feelings of bewilderment and disorganization.
- **Heightened Anxiety and Panic:** Complex mathematical problems can trigger heightened anxiety, panic, and a sense of helplessness among higher education students.
- **Physical Reactions:** Physical reactions like sweating, trembling, and breathlessness can manifest when higher education students engage with challenging mathematical content.
- **Physical Discomfort:** Higher education students might experience physical discomfort, such as tightness in the chest and headaches, while grappling with complex math-related challenges.
- **Cognitive Struggle:** Advanced mathematical concepts can lead to cognitive difficulties, impacting higher education students' ability to articulate their thoughts clearly.
- **Desire to Withdraw:** An immediate desire to leave a lecture or classroom setting might arise when higher education students encounter intricate mathematical topics.

- **Detachment and Avoidance:** Feelings of detachment from the subject matter and avoidance behaviors may surface when higher education students confront challenging math problems.
- **Stress and Nervousness:** Higher education students may feel heightened stress and nervousness when presented with complex mathematical tasks.
- **Academic Aversion:** The avoidance of classes or coursework that involves advanced mathematics can be a sign of apprehension among higher education students.

Ways to Overcome Mathematics Phobia:

Reinforce Confidence and Competence:

- Empower higher education students by reinforcing their belief in their mathematical abilities and fostering a growth mindset.

Promote Supportive Learning Environments:

- Cultivate an environment that encourages questions, discussions, and exploration, where higher education students feel valued and supported in their mathematical endeavors.

Embrace Challenges:

- Encourage higher education students to tackle complex mathematical challenges as opportunities for growth and mastery, promoting resilience and critical thinking.

Highlight Practical Relevance:

- Illustrate the real-world applications of mathematical concepts to higher education students, demonstrating how mathematics enhances problem-solving skills across various disciplines.

Utilize Interactive Tools:

- Integrate interactive software, simulations, and visual aids to enhance higher education students' understanding of intricate mathematical concepts, making learning engaging and experiential.

Incorporate Playful Learning Elements:

- Introduce mathematical games, puzzles, and interactive activities that cater to higher education students' intellectual curiosity while fostering a dynamic learning environment.

Encourage Individual Progress:

- Foster an environment where higher education students focus on personal growth, recognizing that each individual's mathematical journey is unique.

Diverse Teaching Approaches:

- Implement a blend of traditional and modern teaching methods that cater to the diverse learning styles and preferences of higher education students.

Cultivate Strong Student-Teacher Bonds:

- Build meaningful relationships with higher education students, creating an atmosphere of trust and open communication that supports their mathematical exploration.

Promote Positive Perspective:

- Motivate higher education students to perceive mathematics as an exciting avenue for intellectual exploration and problem-solving, fostering a positive attitude towards the subject.

Provide Access to Resources:

- Offer higher education students a range of reference materials, libraries, online resources, and academic support services that facilitate independent and holistic learning.

Leverage Technological Advancements:

- Harness the power of modern technologies, digital tools, and online platforms to facilitate higher education students' interaction with complex mathematical concepts.

Integrate Digital Learning:

- Incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) seamlessly into higher education math courses, equipping students with skills relevant to the digital age.

Promote Consistent Practice:

- Encourage higher education students to engage in regular and purposeful mathematical practice, reinforcing their understanding and application of mathematical principles.

By adopting these strategies, educators and individuals can work together to help students overcome their mathematics phobia, build confidence in their abilities, and develop a healthier attitude towards the subject. Addressing the fear early on can prevent it from escalating into more serious problems and hindering the students' future educational and professional opportunities.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, mathematics holds both practical and theoretical importance in our lives, playing a significant role in our educational systems worldwide. The prevalence of mathematics phobia among school-level students is a notable issue that can arise from a variety of sources, including teachers, parents, peers, individual backgrounds, teaching methods, and abstract nature of the subject. These factors contribute to a negative mindset towards mathematics, potentially hindering students' academic progress and overall well-being.

Recognizing the pivotal role that teachers play in shaping students' perceptions, it becomes evident that positive teacher-student relationships are instrumental in fostering a genuine interest in mathematics. The early stages of education are crucial, as mathematics phobia can escalate into a more profound psychological challenge if not addressed promptly. Therefore, it is imperative to provide the necessary support to students, both at home and in school, to help them cultivate a constructive attitude towards mathematics.

By delving into the causes and consequences of mathematics phobia, teachers can equip themselves with effective strategies to counteract this issue. Collaboration between educators, parents, and the education system is essential to create an environment that not only diminishes mathematics phobia but also instills a sense of enthusiasm for the subject. In doing so, we can empower students to overcome their fears, encouraging them to embrace the world of mathematics with confidence and curiosity.

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