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Author(s)	Vilma D'Rozario & Michael Goh
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HOW ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH THEIR CONCERNS: A REVIEW AND STUDY OF SINGAPOREAN STUDENTS

Review by Vilma D'Rozario and Michael Goh

INTRODUCTION

The Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, recently outlined in his vision of "desired outcomes of education" (Sunday Times, 18 January 1998), characteristics of a more all-rounded and balanced student, and hence, citizen. The Ministry of Education's Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) branch also recently launched an integrated model for whole-school care called: Affective and Career Education – the "ACE Model" (1997). The mission of this approach is to "equip schools to develop well-balanced individuals who are able to face challenges, manage changes, work productively, live compassionately and contribute usefully to society".

While ACE focuses on the overall environment of the school and the comprehensive development of students within that caring and orderly school environment, little is known about how students cope with their concerns and worries. To understand how adolescents think, feel and behave, we need to obtain information regarding their concerns and worries, and to learn the ways in which they cope with their problems. This information can form the basis for understanding both individual and group behaviour.

PCCG, as it is currently practised in schools, and ACE are excellent proactive and preventive resources that allow our students to pre-empt difficulties usually

faced in the adolescent years. Notwithstanding our gallant efforts, students will still encounter many difficulties peculiar to 'growing up'. The authors of this article therefore believe that understanding how adolescents cope, both effectively and ineffectively, will place us in good stead to better develop and deliver programmes aimed at facilitating psychosocial competence in our young people.

This article presents a brief review of adolescent coping, a short study to demonstrate the context of adolescent coping in Singapore, and suggests implications for teachers and school practice.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

According to Lazarus and Launier (1978) coping consists of efforts to master, tolerate, reduce and minimize internal demands and environmental demands and conflicts.

In a study with 673 Australian adolescents, using the **Adolescent Coping Scale** they developed, Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) found that the coping strategies used most frequently by students were: *seeking relaxing diversions, working hard and achieving, focusing on solving the problem and using physical recreation*. The least used strategies were *not coping* and *seeking professional help*. Gender differences were noted: males reported using more physical

recreation to cope than did females, and females used more strategies involving social support, wishful thinking and tension-reduction strategies. The authors also found interesting ethnic differences in coping. Anglo-Australians tended to use more tension-reduction strategies (like drinking) to cope with stress and were less likely to respond to their concerns with diligent hard work. In contrast, the Southeast Asian-Australians were more likely to cope by working hard to achieve, organising social action to meet their needs, and by seeking professional help. The authors suggest that this latter response may be related to the refugee status of Southeast Asian-Australians and thus heightened ethnic group identity and political awareness.

Tan and Kikuchi (1998) used **The Ways of Coping Checklist** developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to study the perceived coping styles of Japanese college students to potential stressful situations. The study showed that:

1. Japanese students tended to select constructive strategies of coping;
2. male and female students tended to cope in different ways;

3. male students tended to prefer searching their past experiences to discover paths to successful problem-solving, seeking compromise to solve problems, and keeping problems to themselves;
4. female students tended to adopt a more 'interdependent approach' to coping, using strategies to harness social support from friends and relatives. They also tended to prefer seeking substitute activities to relieve distressful situations, like going for a vacation, engaging in physical exercise, and praying, as well as leaving the situation open, to see what may subsequently unfold.

In an earlier study using a modified version of this checklist and spontaneous responses of how they coped with their main concerns, Frydenberg and Lewis (1991) found clear differences between the ways in which Australian adolescent boys and girls coped. Like the Japanese female students in the study by Tan and Kikuchi (1998), Australian adolescent girls in this study were more prone to seek social support, focus on relationships, and employ more strategies related to wishful thinking and hoping for the best.



Sam Cheah

In a cross-cultural study on adolescent coping behaviour in Germany and Israel, Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman (1990) found that three major coping styles were used: two functional coping styles, namely, *active coping* and *internal coping*, and one dysfunctional coping style, *withdrawal*. The authors found that both German and Israeli adolescents tended to employ the two functional modes of coping, usually in combination, whereas withdrawal was applied to a lesser extent. The authors were heartened to conclude that the demands of adolescence in both country groups were met by positive coping styles. In both cross-cultural samples, a difference in the ways boys and girls coped was noted. *Support seeking* was more frequently used by girls than boys in both cultures. The authors noted with interest, though, that German students placed greater importance on active coping, while the Israeli adolescents used more internal coping strategies.

In our study, we set out to determine the extent to which coping strategies were utilized by a sample of Singaporean adolescents to cope with their concerns in general, and in what ways gender and academic stream affect adolescent coping behaviour.

METHOD

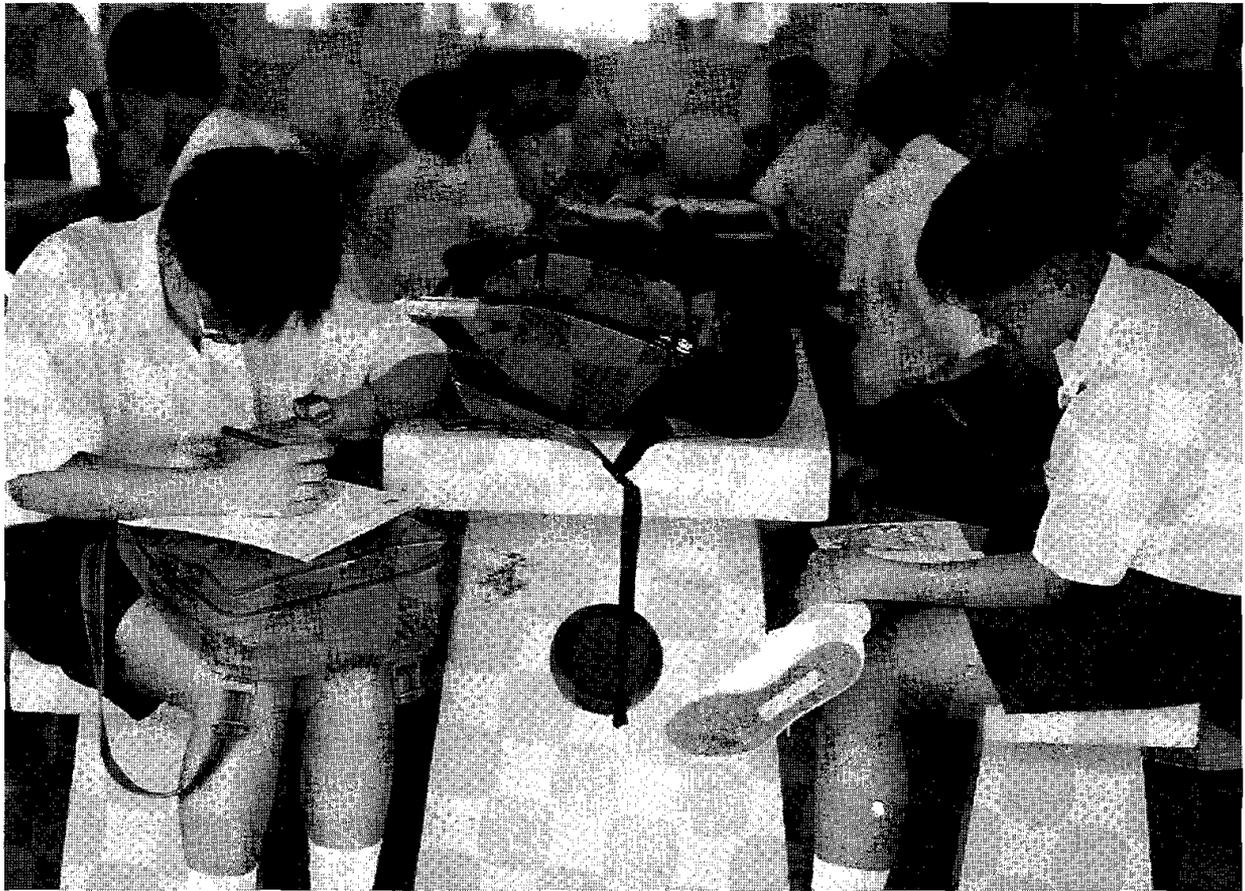
Our sample comprised 467 secondary students from three government schools in Singapore. Approximately similar numbers of students participated from each of the three schools. The gender ratio was also comparable across the three schools: 222 female students and 245 male students. All students were from Secondary Three. Students came from both the Express and

the Normal stream with 221 students from the Express stream and 246 students from the Normal stream. Students from each of the major ethnic groups were represented in the sample: Chinese ($n = 370$), Indians ($n = 3$), Malays ($n = 81$), Eurasians and other ethnic groups ($n = 8$). The ethnic composition of the sample did not approximate the national ethnic composition, as the classes used for the study were low in the numbers of Indian students represented.

Adolescent coping strategies were measured by **The Adolescent Coping Scale** (ACS; Frydenberg and Lewis, 1993a) which is a self-report inventory that identifies eighteen distinct coping behaviours. The authors of the scale define coping as the adaptive processes that individuals utilize to deal with diverse problems, situations, and contexts.

The students answered the 'General Form' of the ACS which addresses how an individual copes with concerns in general. They were asked to read through a list of 79 statements describing ways in which young people deal with their concerns or worries. The 79 statements were rated using a 5-point scale where 1 = doesn't apply or don't use it; 2 = used very little; 3 = used sometimes; 4 = used often; 5 = used a great deal. The respondents were also given the opportunity to write in their free responses at the end of the list of given coping strategies. The eighteen coping strategies are described in Table 1.

With the help of the principals of each of three schools, Express and Normal students were randomly selected to participate in the study. The researchers administered the ACS (General Form) at the participating schools. Students took about 30 - 40 minutes to complete the survey.



William Oh

To work or relax?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Like adolescents in the studies conducted by Frydenberg and Lewis (1993b), Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman (1990), and Tan and Kikuchi (1998), adolescents in this study also tended to choose positive coping strategies when faced with problems. They tended to use strategies like:

1. seeking relaxing diversions;
2. working hard and achieving;
3. using problem-focused strategies to tackle problems systematically; focusing on the positive; using physical recreation;
4. seeking ways of coping which did not contradict others' thinking or

relationships; and seeking social support.

Many students also indicated that they worried about their current problems and about the future. Coping strategies which were less used were seeking professional help, releasing tension by crying, screaming, using alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, as well as getting involved in social action activities in order to solve a collective problem.

The findings tended to show that boys may be using more positive coping strategies than girls. Boys chose strategies like investing in close friends, exercise and physical recreation, focusing on solving the

problem, working hard and achieving, seeking professional help, and social action. Girls, on the other hand, expressed that they were 'not coping'. This finding is consistent with findings among girls in other parts of the world, too (Frydenberg and Lewis, 1991, 1993b; Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman, 1990; and Tan and Kikuchi, 1998). A possible reason why girls seemed to be using less of the more positive coping strategies and tend to use more passive coping strategies as opposed to the more active strategies used by the boys may be due to a perceived lack of self-efficacy. There is also the question of whether boys were responding to the items in a more socially desirable manner than girls. As in the studies conducted in Australia, Germany, Israel, and Japan mentioned previously, adolescent girls in this study used social support networks more than adolescent boys.

The findings also indicated that students from the Normal stream tended to choose more healthy coping strategies than their counterparts in the Express stream. Normal students tended to invest more in close relationships and would choose to seek professional help more than Express students. On the other hand, Express students tended to prefer keeping their problem to themselves. They also indicated that they tended to blame themselves for having problems. Perhaps this could be explained by the observation that Express students tend to often 'be hard' on themselves.



CONCLUSION

Being in close contact with students, teachers play a critical role in identifying adolescents who may not be coping. Early detection allows for follow-up and the necessary guidance. Together with or apart from the ACE curriculum, schools and teachers may also set up other support systems to ensure that our adolescents do not cope alone. Such programmes have taken the form of buddy systems, peer support groups, annual camps by level as well as orientation camps targeted at specific populations for the main purpose of easing the stress of adjustment and transitioning.

More important than a record that such programmes exist, adolescents must recognise these programmes, teachers, and other helping professionals as acceptable, appropriate, and viable options to seek out when in need of help. As with the ideals of PCCG, ACE believes that every teacher is a potential caregiver and is in a vital position to help students. The onus, therefore, is not simply on students to come for help, but for teachers, programmes, parents, etc. to reach out to them, establish a rapport and trust with them, so that together, we can all cope better.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the research reviewed and the findings of the local study, the authors suggest that teachers may wish to consider the following to create a positive and supportive environment:

1. ***Provide ample opportunities for physical recreation and relaxing diversions during the school curriculum.***
2. ***Encourage the building of good relationships in the classroom,*** thus ensuring a supportive network of peers to help students cope with their academic and social life.
3. ***Never assume that all academically able students are also equally able to cope with stress.*** Spend time getting to know your students personally so that you are aware of how they may be coping with school and with life in general. Do not underestimate your academically weaker students and their psychosocial competencies.
4. ***Provide for the deliberate, comprehensive, and consistent delivery of Lifeskills For Effective Living (1997),*** a programme for the development of psychosocial competence. This programme, developed by the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Branch of the MOE, is published as resource packages for primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes. We emphasise *deliberate* because we believe that the goals that Lifeskills activities hope to achieve are skills that all our children should develop, if not through the family, then definitely through schools. We emphasise *comprehensive* because we believe that ***all*** the competencies outlined in this programme – namely for personal and interpersonal effectiveness, for effective and transitional learning, and for fostering a caring community – are necessary and essential. We emphasise *consistent* because we believe that such skills should be developed from as young an age as possible, in this case the primary schools, and encouraged and sharpened throughout the years. Consistency not only primes the effect of prevention but also suggests that such skills are relevant across age groups, scholastic abilities, school cultures, and for life.

Table 1: Description of Coping Strategies as Measured by the ACS (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993a)

Scale	Description	Example of item
Seek to Belong	Indicates a caring and concern for one's relationships with others in general and more specifically, with what others think	Improve my relationship with others
Focus on the Positive	Positive outlook on current situation	Look on the bright side of things and think of all that is good
Invest in Close Friends	Engage in a particular intimate relationship	Spend more time with boy/girl friend
Ignore the Problem	Consciously block out problem	I ignore the problem
Keep to Self	Withdraw from others and keep others from knowing problem	Keep my feelings to myself
Not Coping	Inability to deal with problem and development of psychosomatic symptoms	I have no way of dealing with the situation
Physical Recreation	Play sport and keep fit	Keep fit and healthy
Seek Professional Help	Use a professional adviser, like teacher or counsellor	Discuss the problem with qualified people
Seek Relaxing Diversions	General relaxation, leisure activities	Find ways to relax, for example, listen to music, read a book, play a musical instrument, watch television
Self-Blame	See themselves as responsible for the concern	Accept that I am responsible for the problem
Social Action	Letting others know what is of concern and enlisting support by writing petitions or organizing an activity like a meeting or rally	Join with people who have the same concern
Seek Social Support	Inclined to share the problem with others and enlist support	Talk to other people to help me sort it out
Focus on Solving the Problem	Problem-focused strategy which tackles the problem systematically	Work at solving the problem to the best of my ability
Seek Spiritual Support	Belief in the assistance of a spiritual leader or God	Pray for help and guidance so that everything will be all right
Tension Reduction	Make oneself feel better by releasing tension	Make myself feel better by taking alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs
Wishful Thinking	Hope and anticipation of a positive outcome	Hope for the best
Work Hard and Achieve	Commitment, ambition and industry	Work hard
Worry	Concern about the future	Worry about what is happening

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