

COPING AT SCHOOL – ACADEMIC SUCCESS OR/AND SUSTAINABLE COPING IN FUTURE?

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Abstract

The purpose of the research was to monitor opinions of learners, parents and teachers on the aspects of coping at the second level of primary school in both Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools. The research was carried out from 2006 to 2011. The research used a questionnaire which was administered to 652 learners and their parents in Forms 4 through 6 at both Estonian-medium and Russian-medium general education schools. In the second part of the research, 30 teachers from the same selection were interviewed. The results of the research show that the learners, parents and teachers who took part in the research in both Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools link the aspects of coping with academic success. Additionally, teachers in schools with Estonian as the language of instruction consider the learners' skills of social coping also important. Both the Estonian-medium and Russian-medium school teachers consider home and parents the main factors that influence coping skills. According to the teachers, changes in society have changed common beliefs, attitudes and the way of thinking among the parents and the learners, causing difficulties in learners' academic as well as social coping. Based on the rapid changes in society, it is important to reorient teacher education. Social skills, forming the basic skills of learning, and accessing different websites for studying will become crucial in teaching the new generation.

Key words: learners, teachers, parents, coping, change in education paradigm

Introduction

In previous decades, changes in society have brought about changes in education. Estonia is characterised by the spread of market mechanisms, including the sphere of education, competition between schools, ratings and benchmarking of educational institutions, state examinations and standards for learning outcomes. The number of learners has been decreasing, which requires a reorganisation of the whole school network. The deepening social inequality and economic stratification influence learners' coping or failure at school.

In 2009, learners from Estonia were in 7th place in functional reading, 5th place in scientific literacy and 10th place in mathematics. Thus, the majority of the learners have gained basic knowledge and skills necessary for successfully coping in society. At the same time, many learners in Estonia still suffer from fatigue, consider classes boring,

their relationship with teachers – not trust-based, and they have also been bullied (Eesti Inimvara Raport, 2010). Research conducted at schools has shown that Estonian learners have little joy and contentment from school (Ruus, Veisson, Leino, Ots, Pallas, Sarv, & Veisson, 2007; Veisson & Sakk, 2009).

Poor academic performance is the tip of the iceberg since there are plenty of unsolved problems: conflicting relationships, bullying at school and low self-esteem. The beginning is Form 5 where the rate of at-risk children is 37%. From here, the number of at-risk children increases dramatically until Form 8 when 42% of learners admitted they had problems and could not cope with learning (Pettai & Proos, 2012).

In Estonia, at the second stage of basic school, there is usually a shift from the form-based learning (when all the subjects are taught by one teacher) to subject-based learning (when different subjects are taught by different teachers). Learners leave primary school, and their teachers change. During this period, learners' academic performance shows a decreasing trend and problems with coping begin at this school stage.

The dropout rate from school is high, especially in basic school, where the number of dropouts during the academic year 2009/2010 was 880 learners, and, in the academic year 2010/2011, 736 learners dropped out of school (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium [Estonian Ministry of Education and Research], 2012). The percentage of 18–24-year-old young people who have basic or lower level education and do not study is 14%, which is about the average in the European Union. According to the Europe 2020 Strategy, the indicator should not have exceeded 10% in the year 2020.

The Estonian education is also experiencing problems due to the transition of Russian-medium schools to Estonian-medium instruction. The Basic and Upper Secondary School Act enacted in 1993 states that Russian-medium upper secondary schools transition to Estonian-medium instruction. In 2000, it was stated that defining the language of instruction means that 60% of subjects are taught through the medium of the Estonian language. The state arranged the precise schedule for the transition in 2005. According to the current Basic and Upper Secondary School Act, in the case of young people entering Russian-medium upper secondary schools in 2011, 60% of the instruction was to be conducted in the Estonian language. The transition of Russian-medium upper secondary schools to the Estonian-medium instruction will be finalised in the spring of 2014, when state examinations will be taken by learners who will have studied in the Estonian language most during their upper secondary school experience (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2012). The educational reform has caused many worries among Russian parents, as the reduction of quality of subject teaching both in basic and upper secondary school is considered the main disadvantage. Adaptation to the new requirements has caused additional stress for learners, teachers and parents.

In the academic year 2009/2010, 141,802 learners studied in general education schools in Estonia. For 110,749 of these students, the language of instruction was Estonian, for 30,854 – Russian, and 199 learners studied in a language different from either of the two (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2011).

In 2011, 135,683 learners studied in general education schools. Of these, 105,273 learned in the Estonian language, and 30,410 learned in the Russian language (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2011). Thus almost 22% of learners learned in the Russian language. The results of the population census in 2011 show that more than one million people live in Estonia: 68.7% of them are Estonians, 24.8% are Russians and 4.9% are representatives of other nationalities (Eesti Statistikaamet, 2012).

The decrease in the dropout rate from school is an important issue for the whole of society. Preserving and valuing the human capital is one of the preconditions for the sustainability of society. People without an education are a social source that is costly from an economic point of view in addition to having a negative influence from the long-term perspective.

What are the reasons for dropping out of school? Does coping at school mean good marks or does it mean more than that? Is the education learners are obtaining at the moment going to help them in future? Estonian education looked for answers to these questions, and, in the autumn of 2010, the new National Curriculum for Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools was implemented. The curriculum provides schools with more opportunities and more freedom to organise their work based on the learners' needs.

Theoretical background

The theoretical foundation of the research is based on the mutual influences of individuals and the environment. The basis of the research is the bio-ecological systems approach of Bronfenbrenner in which the person and the environment are in a mutually influential relationship that is constantly changing. Changes occur as a result of the mutual influences and the time factor (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1996, 2000, 2005; Lazarus, 2006)

Coping is analysed on the basis of the theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Lazarus and Folkman defined coping as the individual's cognitive and behavioural effort to meet (reduce, minimise, solve, adapt) the internal and external needs emerging in the transaction of personal environment using existing resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This is fine as a process definition, but coping thoughts and acts are presented without reference to the personal meaning of what is going on. Meaning incorporates our goals, cherished beliefs and situational intentions (Lazarus, 2006).

Coping can be viewed as a process that is subject to personal and social forces, a personality trait or style (Lazarus, 2006). When coping strategies change over time and circumstance, they must be thought of as a process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping is a function of the situational determinants and the individual's characteristics and perception of the situation and coping intentions. The individual brings a host of biological, dispositional, personal and family characteristics to the encounter. It is how these impact the perception of the situation and the response to the stress or concern that are of most interest (Frydenberg, 2004).

The two coping strategies are problem-focused (direct, active) coping, in the case where the focus is on the reason for the problem and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping can include gathering of information about the problem, considering of several solutions and being realising about the chosen solution. For instance, there might be the elimination of the danger of direct actions or a search for social support. Emotion-focused coping focuses on regulation of emotions and often represents the use of various protection mechanisms such as negation or avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping are two independent types of coping: one addressing problems and the other regulating the emotions (Lazarus, 2006).

Coping resources can be divided into personal and environmental. Character traits, abilities and skills and cognition as applied to the world can be considered personal coping resources. Financial resources and social support are associated with environ-

mental coping resources. Coping resources protect an individual from stress and affect evaluations of the coping process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The meaning of the previous statement is not clear and should be rewritten. At this time, there is a growing belief that all coping processes have both positive and negative consequences for a person, and the evaluation of each coping and adaptation should take into consideration different levels of analysis (both biological and sociological) as well as short-term and long-term consequences (Lazarus & Monat, 1985).

Coping is a key feature of the emotional process. Cognitive, motivational and relational processes lie at the heart of all our lives. Coping is concerned with our efforts to manage adaptation demands and the emotions they generate. Coping is an integral feature of the emotion process (Lazarus, 2006). The terms connected with the word coping are coping resources (social, personal and physical factors as parts of the situation), coping strategies (concrete plans, action used to reduce stress) and style of coping (habitual or stereotypical way to solve crises) (Rice, 1999).

Important aspects of personality include the participants' goals, goal hierarchies, beliefs about self and the world (including what they have learned to expect from each other) and personal resources. Resources include intelligence, social and work skills, health and energy, education, wealth, supportive family and friends, physical and social attractiveness (Lazarus, 2006).

Learners' coping within the school environment has been researched by Skinner and Wellborn (1997). Their research showed that the key question which affects learner's academic performance and contentment at school is the concept of academic coping or the way in which learners interpret academic challenges, difficulties or backlashes and react to them.

In Skinner and Wellborn's (1997) opinion, school stress is connected not only with learning, but also with relations in school. The way a learner reacts to stress depends on his/her evaluation of the stress. They also believe that different stresses connected with studying affect learner's coping and learner's reaction to school-related stress will also affect his/her future. In the learners' opinion, the majority of the problems at school are caused by school tasks, relationships with peers, personal achievements or failures and the loss of one's feeling of comfort. The school environment has its own rules following which can cause stress for learners. Children's coping responses were constrained by the power, structures, norms and rules of the classroom (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997; Wentzel, 1998; Pettai & Proos, 2012).

Patterns of coping can have a direct effect on the way others react to children's coping. The social context can either magnify or compound the problem. Optimal coping in academic contexts may not simply be to approach coping. In addition to problem solving itself, children also need to know how to move away from learning interactions in order to gather more information, to cooperate, to skip problems that they know how to solve, to conform or to get help.

The learner's achievement at school and his/her contentment depend on the teacher's attitudes and ability to convey knowledge, to guide and to be a supporter and a mentor. The way the teacher treats learners also affects their achievement. A teacher's negative attitude towards his/her learners influences the learner's academic performance, school stress, contentment and coping strategies (Piekarska, 2000). A good relationship with the teacher creates a safe classroom environment (Boulton et al., 2009). The way the teacher treats learners as well as his/her attitudes affect the learners' optimistic attitude

towards life, their physical and emotional well-being as well as their academic performance (Ruus et al., 2007).

Close relations between the teacher and learners, or conflicts between them influence social and academic skills. Children's skills at school are connected with the quality of the teacher-learner relationship. The teacher-learner relationship plays an important role in the formation of skills which are important for a child and which are extremely essential for successful coping in school. The quality of the relationship influences learners' coping in the long-term perspective (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 2009).

Learner's coping is influenced by his/her well-being, the way the learner feels at school, the extent of his/her involvement in the school life and the teacher's role, which is decisive. The way the learner feels at school depends on the teacher to a great extent. The effectiveness of the learner's coping strategies depends on his/her connectedness to school and the extent to which he/she feels involved in the school life. The learner's emotional well-being at school is positively connected to involvement in the school life. This is particularly the case with basic school learners (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009).

The quality of the children's relationship with the teacher is of crucial importance in shaping the children's interest towards learning and motivation for learning. The qualities of efficient teachers are emotional closeness, safety and trustworthiness. These are the qualities that provide learners with help when they need it and also hold up spirituality of the community and consideration in the classroom. These qualities support the development of learners' emotional well-being, positive self-image, self-esteem, motivated orientation towards social and academic achievements as well as social and academic skills. Research has shown that positive relations between the teacher and learners affect learners' motivation for learning as well as academic and social skills at school (Wentzel, 1998; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 2009).

Safe and emotionally supportive relations between the teacher and the learner support the learner's positive self-image, help him/her to have desired social values and achieve goals as well as support the development of social and academic skills (Wentzel, 2009). In social relations, learners need connectedness and closeness. In the school context, it means that if the learner feels that the school climate or teachers are cold, distant, uncaring or rejecting, then the learner has problems with coping (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997).

Parents' beliefs are influenced by current and past contextual and cultural elements and the micro-climate of the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 2000), relationships and values (Talts, 1997). An additional factor is the way the school impacts these beliefs. As noted by Vygotsky (1978), socio-cultural backgrounds, experiences and events impact learning and development. Similarly, teachers' and families' socio-cultural backgrounds affect their interactions and impact how parents are viewed and how the process of parent and family involvement is constructed (Suoto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Young people coming from a background of positive family relationships use more active methods of coping when solving problems at school and at home. Positive relationships with teachers support learners' active coping with problems, especially at school (Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007).

Method

The data was gathered using self-report questionnaires for learners and parents. Teachers were also interviewed. The questionnaire for learners consisted of 75 questions, and they incorporated different elements: 1) typical coping strategies, which learners think they use in the in academic environment; 2) questions about academic success and meeting the demands of the school (marks, school attendance/cutting classes, homework); 3) learners' self-esteem concerning psychological and physical well-being; 4) learners' future optimism/pessimism; 5) learners' evaluations of different characteristics of the school climate; 6) background factors, including learners' interests (Ruus et al., 2007).

The coping questionnaire consisted of 36 statements; the respondent was to decide to which extent one or another statement characterises his/her typical ways of coping in the school environment. The minimum score on the scale used was 1 and the maximum score was 4. The use of the scores 1 and 2 of the scale indicated that the respondent generally perceived failures occurring at school as threats and tended to use unconstructive coping strategies. However, the use of points 3 and 4 of the scale indicated that the respondent perceived the situation rather as a challenge and used constructive coping strategies.

Analysing the results, 13 indexed variables were identified to describe learners' coping processes through standardised means. The results of the research were analysed by the school type and the age group (ANOVA, t-test).

The questionnaire for parents consisted of 53 questions and used a 4-5-point Likert scales for most responses. The content blocks of the questionnaire were as follows: parents' evaluation of school as an organisation, including values, participation in decision making, motivation for learning, innovativeness; evaluation of the reality of professional work; relationships (between learners, between learners and teachers); parent-school cooperation, parental involvement; questions about coping strategies; personal data.

The interview with teachers contained questions based on the results of the previous research of Tallinn University and also specified questions from the pilot research. The semi-structured interview included the following aspects which influenced coping: learner's coping at school (academic/social), cooperation with parents, learner's relationship with his/her parents, relationships between learners within the form, learner's basic values, boredom in the lesson, tiredness at school and changes at school which occurred during the last five years.

The data was analysed using SPSS 14.0 and Microsoft Excel data analysis programs. In the analysis of the qualitative part of the research, content analysis and the NVIVO 8.0 program were used in parallel.

Procedure

The research was carried out from 2006 to 2011 in two stages. During the first stage, in 2006 and 2007, a survey was conducted among learners of Forms 4–6 in both Estonian and Russian-medium schools and their parents. The learners were instructed during the filling in of the questionnaire and completed in the questionnaire during a lesson. The learners were instructed according to the language they studied in, either Estonian or

Russian. The questionnaires were also either in Russian or in Estonian, depending on the language of instruction at school. The learners who filled in the questionnaires received questionnaires for their parents. Parents filled in the questionnaires at home and then returned them to school. Learners and teachers' questionnaires were encoded according to the schools to ensure confidentiality.

In 2006, a pilot research study with interviews was conducted with six teachers, three from Russian-medium and three from Estonian-medium schools. The results of the pilot study were analysed using the content analysis and the questions from the interviews. The reason for conducting the second stage of the research in five years was to study how coping factors of the same sample change over time. Interviews were conducted, accordingly, in Estonian or Russian.

At the second stage in 2011, teachers from the sample were interviewed in the Estonian and Russian languages. Each interview took from 30–110 minutes. If needed, the questions asked during the interview were repeated or clarified. Dictaphones were used to record the interviews and the results were transcribed word for word. The interviews were analysed using texts analysis where fragments of the text carrying the same meaning were encoded. Then the fragments were categorised and encoded. The text analysis was conducted in several stages by two different researchers, and the categories and sub-categories that were revealed in the encoding process were unified (identified may be better here).

Sample

The sample comprised Stage II of the basic school which was justified according to statistics of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. Most of problems with coping occurred at Stages II and III (Forms 6–9) of general education in the basic school, where the number of dropouts is also the highest.

The sample composition was based on the following principles: 1) both Estonian-medium, Russian-medium and bilingual or Estonian and Russian-medium schools (hereafter referred to as bilingual schools) would be included; 2) city and rural schools would be included; 3) schools with different academic progress (based on the results of the state exams for the last five years) would be included. In total, nine general education schools from different places in Estonia participated in the research conducted from 2006 to 2011.

The questionnaire was completed by 652 learners and 373 parents from Forms 4–6. The learners were from both urban and rural schools and schools of different languages of instruction. The schools were located in different regions of Estonia.

There were 383 learners from Estonian-medium schools, and the numbers of the learners by the form were as follows: Form 4 – 105; Form 5 – 133; Form 6 – 145. The number of parents who completed the questionnaire was as follows: Form 4 – 63; Form 5 – 85; Form 6 – 69.

A total of 269 learners from Russian-medium schools participated in the research, and the numbers of the learners by the form were as follows: Form 4 – 89; Form 5 – 88, Form 6 – 92. The number of parents who completed the questionnaire was as follows: Form 4 – 60; Form 5 – 64; Form 6 – 32.

A total of 24 teachers participated in teacher interviews. The interview sample included teachers at Stage II of the basic school, i.e. Forms 4–6. There were 14 teachers

from Estonian-medium schools and 10 teachers from Russian-medium schools. The age range of the teachers from Estonian-medium schools was between 25 and 58 years, with an average age of 46 years old. The length of work experience at the school was between 4 and 36 years, and the average length of work experience was 23 years. The teachers' education was as follows: 2 had secondary education and 12 had higher education. Out of 14 teachers, 13 were females and 1 was a male. The age range of the teachers from Russian-medium schools was between 33 and 59 years old, with an average age of 46 years. The length of work experience at school was between 12 and 43 years, and the average length of work experience was 24 years. All of the 10 interviewed teachers had degrees from institutions of higher education.

The research aimed at answering the following questions:

1. How do learners, parents and teachers evaluate learners' coping and factors affecting it at school?
2. To which extent do the evaluations of learners, parents and teachers differ?
3. What are the differences between the learning outcomes of the respondents from Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools?

Results

Learners evaluated academic performance as the most important indicator at school. Learners of both Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools also considered it to be the most essential indicator at school (Veisson & Sakk, 2009).

The analysis of the results in forms of Stage II of basic school showed that, in Form 4, learners' evaluations of the coping process standardised by the central values were higher in the case of each indicator. With age, the indicators decreased. In connection with the study process, the evaluations of the learners were relatively the same in all forms; however, in overall indicators, there was a significant difference in the evaluations of learners from Forms 4 and 6. Results indicate 6 were more negative. In the case of psychological well-being indicators, there was also a large difference between the self-esteem of learners of Forms 4 and 6 as well as in the way they felt at school. In the case of learners in Form 6, the evaluations of their self-esteem were significantly more negative. There were also negative evaluations in the case of optimism indicators and indicators of the teacher-learner relationship, and indicators of relationships with peers. Learners of Form 6 had more negative evaluations than learners in the previous forms in the case of such indicators as innovativeness, determination, the school values system and discipline. In the case of coping indicators, evaluations were negative already in Form 5, where relationships with peers and discipline also received lower evaluations.

The results showed that, even if Form 4 learners were relatively optimistic and positive about what was going on in school, then in Forms 5 and 6 the situation only got worse. Low evaluations connected with social coping influenced learners' academic performance and became obvious. At the same time, it is known that in basic school, the learners' priorities are rather social relations, while parents and teachers consider academic performance and the related factors important. The difference in the relationship between the teacher and learners is remarkable: teachers evaluated it positively, while learners' evaluations in this case were significantly different.

Learners' evaluations of coping indicators at different types of school

The analysis of learners' learning outcomes according to the type of school revealed no significant changes in the way Estonian- and Russian-speaking young people evaluated the study process and marks. However, evaluations of Estonian-speaking learners were somewhat higher. In the case of the psychological well-being, evaluations of the Russian-speaking learners were the highest and learners from Estonian-Russian-medium schools gave lower evaluations. The Russian learners' evaluations in the case of physical well-being and optimism indicators were also higher. However, a difference occurred in coping indicators that were evaluated the lowest by Russian learners and the highest by Estonian learners. Learners' opinions about relationships with the teacher and peers were relatively similar, although relationships with the teacher were evaluated as being better than relationships with other learners. The biggest difference was in the section on innovativeness and the value system; the corresponding indicators were evaluated by Russian learners higher than by learners from Estonian or Estonian-Russian-medium schools. Concerning the order and discipline, the lowest evaluations were given by learners from Estonian-Russian-medium schools. The most negative evaluations were concerning the coping indicators as well as relationships between learners, order and discipline. It indicated that learners from Estonian- and Russian-medium school have problems with their coping and social relations.

When taking into account the language of instruction, learners' evaluations indicated statistically significant differences in overall evaluations of the study process ($p < 0.036$) and psychological well-being ($p < 0.017$). The differences also included innovativeness/determination ($p < 0.000$), the school value system ($p < 0.000$) and order/discipline ($p < 0.026$) (Table 1).

There were statistically significant differences between different groups.

- Statistically significant differences appeared in the overall evaluations by learners from Estonian- and Russian-medium schools regarding such indicators as the study process ($p < 0.009$), coping ($p < 0.000$), innovativeness ($p < 0.000$) and school values ($p < 0.000$).
- A statistically important difference between learners from Estonian and Estonian/Russian-medium schools was revealed concerning order and discipline ($p < 0.004$).
- Statistically important differences between learners from Russian and Estonian/Russian-medium schools were revealed concerning psychological well-being ($p < 0.006$), innovativeness/determination ($p < 0.000$) and the school value system ($p < 0.000$).

Table 1. Statistically significant differences of standardised unified indicators of coping by different types of schools (ANOVA, t-test)

	Means		ANO- VA	t-test, Estonian/Russian		t-test, Estonian/ Estonian + Russian		t-test, Russian/ Estonian + Russian	
	Estonian n = 174	Russian n = 184		P	df	t	df	t	p
1. Learning process, marks	2.90 n = 172	2.84 n = 178	2.81 n = 172	0.501	348	0.821	0.421	0.821	0.269
2. Learning process (aggregated characteristics)	7.18 n = 172	6.86 n = 176	7.05 n = 171	0.036*	345.04	2.612	0.009*	341	1.117
3. Psychological well- being	12.74 n = 160	13.06 n = 169	12.43 n = 160	0.017*	327	-1.474	0.142	318	1.435
4. Physiological well-being	8.76 n = 167	9.06 n = 178	8.75 n = 168	0.379	343	-1.182	0.238	333	0.011
5. Group indicator of optimism	21.95 n = 173	22.43 n = 183	21.95 n = 175	0.498	354	-0.966	0.335	346	-0.001
6. Optimism, pessimism	3.21 n = 171	3.26 n = 182	3.18 n = 174	0.298	351	-0.902	0.367	343	0.631
7. Coping	2.77 n = 171	2.82 n = 182	0.065 n = 171	351	2.453	0.015*	340	1.001	0.318
8. Teacher/learners	7.11 n = 164	7.26 n = 176	7.30 n = 165	0.437	338	-0.968	0.334	327	-1.262
9. Peer relationships	4.41 n = 154	4.47 n = 153	4.49 n = 152	0.587	305	-0.839	0.402	304	0.096
10. Professional characteristics of teachers	7.08 n = 168	7.05 n = 174	7.26 n = 168	0.235	340	0.248	0.804	334	-1.348
11. Innovativeness, strength of purpose	6.47 n = 166	7.24 n = 168	6.42 n = 164	0.000*	325.94	-5.663	0.000*	328	0.389
12. Value system of the school	32.81 n = 153	36.70 n = 167	32.94 n = 145	0.000*	318	-5.663	0.000*	296	-0.170
13. Order/discipline	6.57 n = 166	6.40 n = 173	6.05 n = 170	0.026*	330.90	0.841	0.401	334	2.889
									0.004*
									0.000*
									0.000*
									0.080

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Learners' evaluations of school values by mother tongue

Comparing evaluations of school values by learners from Estonian and Russian-medium schools, no statistically significant differences were revealed in the case of two indicators. In the case of diligence and desire for self-realisation, the evaluations of all learners were similar, and, according to learners' evaluations, these were important in the case of the school with either language of instruction.

However, there were statistically significant differences in the case of all the remaining indicators (Table 2). In the case of learners' safety ($p < 0.000$), learners from the Russian-medium schools felt safer at school than their Estonian-speaking peers. There was also a statistically significant difference concerning learners' academic performance ($p < 0.009$). The reason may be that Russian-speaking learners are more motivated and orientated to learning because, in the future, it will allow them to get employment easily and secure their position in the Estonian society. An analysis of learners' health in the case of Russian-speaking learners also revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.000$). Learners' healthy behaviour and worries about their health in Russian-medium schools were also confirmed by previous research (Veisson, Kallas, Leino, & Ruus, 2007; Veisson & Sakk, 2009). There was also a significant difference in the case of learners' evaluations of the relationships between them ($p < 0.000$). Russian learners were more positive in evaluations of these relationships than their Estonian peers. The politeness indicator also had a significant difference ($p < 0.070$) and higher evaluations by Russian learners. The indicators of smart appearance ($p < 0.000$) and honesty ($p < 0.000$) were statistically different. There was also a significant difference between learners in the case of joy from school, curiosity and tolerance.

Table 2. School values of learners (t-test)

	Means				t-test		
	Estonian		Russian		df	t	p
Learners' security	3.18	n = 231	3.69	n = 162	391	-5.36	0.000*
Academic success	3.39	n = 287	3.55	n = 168	453	-2.62	0.009*
Learners' health	3.23	n = 258	3.56	n = 162	418	-4.45	0.000*
Good interpersonal relationships	3.16	n = 241	3.46	n = 156	395	-3.92	0.000*
Politeness	3.42	n = 282	3.55	n = 155	435	-1.81	0.070*
Correct appearance	2.43	n = 207	3.28	n = 144	336.2	-8.49	0.000*
Honesty	3.27	n = 263	3.53	n = 158	371.5	-3.51	0.000*
Helpfulness, caring	3.18	n = 246	3.33	n = 153	397	-1.79	0.073
Enjoyment of school	3.09	n = 240	3.35	n = 142	380	-2.71	0.007*
Discipline	3.25	n = 239	3.61	n = 164	401	-4.57	0.000*
Curiosity, brightness of thought	3.00	n = 206	3.32	n = 157	361	-3.87	0.000*
Tolerance	2.92	n = 213	3.32	n = 145	356	-4.21	0.000*
Wide knowledge	3.09	n = 232	3.50	n = 162	392	-5.40	0.000*
Wish to improve oneself	3.30	n = 244	3.38	n = 151	393	-0.969	0.333

* The mean difference is significant at the < 0.05 level

Learners' evaluations revealed that Russian learners' evaluations in the case of all indicators were higher, i.e. more positive than those of Estonian learners. Learners' attitudes to the learning environment of the school and its values were statistically different. At the same time, according to evaluations of learners from Stage II of basic school, the most important value is the academic performance, as the research conducted in 2009 indicated.

Learners' evaluations showed that the differences between Estonian and Russian learners concerned both indicators connected with academic performance, components of social coping and general human values that have been formed by the school.

Parents' evaluations of school values

The comparison of evaluation of school values by learners and parents showed that their evaluations have statistically significant differences in the case of learners' health ($p < 0.041$), appearance ($p < 0.000$) and tolerance ($p < 0.051$). Learners in Stage II of basic school are teenagers, and their understanding of health problems is different from that of their parents. In the teenage years, risky behaviour is rather typical as a means of finding one's identity or testing one's skills and abilities. At the same time, opinions of friends and group behaviour, where there is less responsibility, can influence different factors connected with health. That is why parents' worries for their children's health are understandable. Appearance is another issue in the case of teenagers who often disagree with their parents. Tolerance in school is connected with learners' relationships both with their teachers and peers. Social relationships are very important for learners in basic school; conflicts often occur due to different problems and misunderstandings. That is why learners often perceive tolerance differently than their parents, who see the school primarily through evaluations of their children. Parents are very often not aware of the conflicts in social relationships as learners would rather discuss their problems with friends than with parents. On the one hand, the reason can be the lack of trust at home and the child-parent gap. On the other hand, the reason can also be the fact that the learners do not want to burden the parents with their problems and try to cope with the problems on their own.

The comparison of the responses of parents of children from Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools revealed a statistically significant difference in the Estonian and Russian parents' evaluations of appearance ($p < 0.000$) and tolerance ($p < 0.003$). Thus, the disagreements between parents and learners from Estonian-medium schools are connected rather with learners' understanding of looks and tolerance.

There were no statistically important differences revealed in the evaluations of parents and learners from the Russian-medium school.

Evaluations of Estonian and Russian parents showed statistically significant differences in regard to several different indicators (Table 3). There was a statistically significant difference in the case of learners' safety ($p < 0.000$), and Russian parents were more worried for their children. There was also a statistical difference in the regard to indicators of academic performance ($p < 0.002$), learners' health ($p < 0.011$) and good relationships ($p < 0.008$) where the evaluations of Russian parents were also higher than those of Estonian parents. There was a statistical difference in the areas discipline ($p < 0.000$) and general knowledge ($p < 0.010$). Russian parents were more worried about safety and health of their children. At the same time, they considered academic performance and good relationships more important. They also indicated that discipline and general

knowledge were essential. Estonian parents' evaluations of school values were lower; this can be explained due to the fact that Russian parents feel the pressure of society and would like their children to integrate into the Estonian society as painlessly as possible. One possibility for such integration is supporting child's education and providing him/her with all the possible help and support.

Table 3. School values of parents (t-test)

	Means				t-test		
	Estonian		Russian		df	t	p
Learners' security	3.12	n = 59	3.54	n = 109	116.2	-4.27	0.000*
Academic success	3.36	n = 72	3.60	n = 130	200	-3.07	0.002*
Learners' health	3.13	n = 55	3.42	n = 104	117.4	-2.58	0.011*
Good interpersonal relationships	3.18	n = 61	3.45	n = 110	169	-2.70	0.008*
Politeness	3.34	n = 65	3.48	n = 110	173	-1.61	0.109
Correct appearance	3.02	n = 55	3.37	n = 112	165	-3.26	0.001*
Honesty	3.45	n = 65	3.53	n = 115	178	-0.862	0.390
Helpfulness, caring	3.27	n = 63	3.46	n = 108	169	-1.82	0.070
Enjoyment of school	3.22	n = 60	3.30	n = 101	159	-0.717	0.475
Discipline	3.27	n = 59	3.61	n = 110	167	-3.62	0.000*
Curiosity, brightness of thought	3.16	n = 50	3.31	n = 104	152	-1.17	0.241
Tolerance	3.22	n = 54	3.40	n = 98	150	-1.78	0.077
Wide knowledge	3.27	n = 60	3.51	n = 114	172	-2.61	0.010*
Wish to improve oneself	3.29	n = 55	3.43	n = 105	155	-1.28	0.201

* The mean difference is significant at the < 0.05 level

Teachers' understanding of learners' coping at school

In the teachers' opinion, learner's coping at school is how he/she copes with learning, his/her academic performance. Teachers indicated that learners' ability to cope with life in general, including independent living skills, is important. Learner's coping also includes communication with both teachers and peers as well as the skills to cope with teachers' instructions and tasks during the lesson and at school. Skills of playing and behaviour during the break are also coping skills.

Well, he/she copes with learning, communication with peers and can cope during the break. If a learner understands what he/she is told and can organise his/her things nicely, can work independently with a textbook already in Form 4.

In the opinion of Russian teachers, learner's coping depends primarily on the child's motivation in terms of school and learning. Academic performance and learning skills are among the most important indicators of coping. The child's physical preconditions, health and psychological characteristics also play a role in coping.

First of all, it is the result the learner gets in the learning process. And the learner can achieve this result if he/she systematically works in a class and at home. Then there is a result.

Well, I think the most important is if the child wants to go to school. If he/she comes to school and if he/she studies, then the child copes if he/she wants to. Well, motivation, in any case, if there is a target, a goal. If there is no goal, then the child comes to school just to spend time, he/she is not successful; he/she does not cope.

The difference between opinions of Estonian and Russian teachers is that Estonian teachers consider social skills to be a part of coping, too, while Russian teachers mentioned health only.

When speaking about factors that influence academic coping, teachers, first of all, mentioned different factors that can cause problems. Lack of motivation for learning and poor learning and cognitive skills cause difficulties in learning. Academic coping can also be influenced by personality. Health problems, emotional state and learner's helplessness can also cause academic failure.

Home was mentioned as the second factor. Parents' lack of time, social problems at home, parents' attitude towards school and education, their attitudes towards life and their values can influence the child's coping along with parents' level of education and the demands they set on the child.

The family certainly matters, and, well, the learners in the form and their background. To the extent children are successful or how many of them are successful. Not successful in the sense of how many of them get fives, but how motivated to learn they are.

The school and related influences were mentioned as a third factor. Teachers found that the teacher, his/her attitudes and requirements influence learner's coping. At the same time, learner's coping can be influenced by a change of class, teacher or subject teachers during the academic year.

The form's general influence was mentioned as a factor related to school. Relationships between children in a form, the micro climate of the form can also influence child's coping.

Such general mood and attitude, which create the microclimate of the form and help to achieve good marks, good academic results and contribute to knowledge in general are favourable.

The last major factor teachers mentioned was the environment in which the learner is and which influences the learner.

Well, it is also about environment, I imagine that it is influenced by many things – it can be influenced by media, neighbours, school staff. I cannot say even. Everything can influence it. It is all, all which surrounds the learner.

In their evaluations of learners' social coping, teachers mentioned, first, factors connected with the learner which can cause problems, including communication and behavioural difficulties with peers and classmates as well as problems connected with learners' self-esteem and confidence, lack of attention or desire to dominate in class. Learners may also have problems with adaptation in new situations, unstable emotional states and negativism. Teachers also thought that health and peculiarities of teenage years could also cause problems in social relations.

Yes, yes, confidence and all like that, so that there is no confidence at home and, then, at school, and the student does not have courage even to ask a question.

The second factor which, in the teachers' opinion, influences learners' social coping is the home. Teachers thought that family's life style, relationships within the family, the number of children in the family and parents' divorce influence child's social skills. Children are also influenced by parents' education, social status, unemployment and resulting poverty and alcoholism. Parents' own coping with everyday life, material security, working abroad, which is a growing tendency in Estonia, cause social problems at school. In the last years, the number of parents working abroad has been increasing, and children are left by themselves or in the care of grandparents. The number of the so-called European Estonians is increasing, thus bringing drastic social problems to school.

Child's social coping is influenced by child's home environment, the family's own coping and the example of parents. If there is a family, but one parent has to work outside Tallinn or farther, for example, abroad, it also matters.

The third influence teachers mentioned are those connected with school. They thought that transition from primary school to basic school with its subject-based system causes learners' problems with social coping. Social coping is also influenced by trust in the teacher or lack thereof. On a class level, teachers pointed out the influence of relationships within the form, existence of leaders and their attitudes and values in the form.

I think that every student has a self-image, the way the student sees him/herself, the way he/she feels and where he/she would like to be. Some values and beliefs are brought from home: what a value is and what – is not.

What changes have happened within the class in the last five years?

Broadened horizons due to better possibilities like travel around the world were mentioned as a positive change. Teachers think that modern learners' way of thinking is different, it is getting more and more difficult to understand each other.

Almost all teachers pointed out that learners spend a lot of time with the computer. Teachers believe that the indifference has increased while the ability to concentrate and pay attention has decreased. Reading skills have worsened, and there is a lot of learned helplessness and insufficient skills of independent work.

Learners' attitudes towards learning have changed. The mark is not the motivator for learning any more. Education is not as valued.

If comparing to previous forms, then the older I myself become, the more difficult it is to understand them. Their thinking world is different – ethical issues, the way they express themselves, even this money thing. I do not understand their games or their jokes. The attitude to learning has changed; they have become indifferent, even to marks.

Teachers believe that relations with parents have also changed in the last five years. Social and financial situations have worsened drastically. Parents have less and less time for children. At the same time, children are increasingly unsupervised due to the fact that parents are at work. Some of them work abroad, and children are by themselves. Parents cannot cope with their children, and parents' responsibility for their children has decreased.

There are many families where parents become unemployed before the child finishes school, because there are unemployment issues in some places. I

think that there are many such families where one of the parents goes to work abroad.

In teachers' opinion, learner's coping is connected rather with studying or academic performance. In the case of Estonian teachers, social coping was also mentioned as a part, which influences children's coping in a more general perspective. Teachers value learner's social preparedness and skills which support academic coping at school. Factors operating at the micro level – home-parents, school-teacher, form, classmates – directly influence learner's coping at school. Teachers also pointed out factors of the environment. They also mentioned the time factor, which also influences children's coping. It is the fast changing society, changes in society with time. Constantly developing information technology causes changes in both social and academic coping of learners.

Discussion

As a result of the previously stated research, it can be argued that fast changes in society are also reflected in the educational life. Society's expectations and schools' possibilities as well as understanding the learner's coping are contradictory. Expectations of both learners, parents and teachers are connected with academic performance at school.

How do learners, parents and teachers evaluate learners' coping and factors affecting it at school?

The results of the research indicate that the learners, parents and teachers who took part in the research in both Estonian and Russian schools link the aspects of coping with academic success. Additionally, teachers in Estonian schools consider the learners' skills of social coping to be important.

Valuing academic achievement is also confirmed by previously conducted research in Estonian-medium and Russian-medium basic and secondary schools in Estonia from 2004 to 2007 (Veisson et al., 2007; Sakk, 2008; Veisson & Sakk, 2009).

Both the Estonian as well as Russian school teachers consider home and parents the main factors that influence coping skills. According to the teachers, changes in society have changed common beliefs, attitudes and the way of thinking among the parents and the learners, causing difficulties in learners' academic as well as social coping. Parents and teachers of the Russian community are more demanding and more worried for the future of their children, which has been shown by results of previous research (Lukk, Sakk, & Veisson, 2008).

The teachers of the upper primary stage of schools or at the secondary level are focused on teaching their subject and on learners' learning (in its narrow meaning) rather than on the social development of children. School values are oriented towards academic success and soft values like tolerance and helpfulness are relatively less important (Lukk et al., 2008).

The current situation clearly shows that, in the teachers' opinion, independent thinking, creativity, critical and analytical thinking and social skills are not constituents of learners' coping. However, these are the skills and qualities school graduates are expected to have to help them make the right choices and decisions in their lives. In Estonian-medium as well as in Estonian/Russian-medium schools, the main focus is on academic success, i.e. successfulness of coping is evaluated by marks. There are certain scales, and the teacher's role is to prepare a learner for state level tests and examinations

which are the basis for evaluation of teacher's skills. At the same time, social skills and independent thinking skills are not the focus of attention. Learners' independent thinking, skills of cooperation and team work, analysing capability, public speaking skills, confidence, the skills to make the right choice and bear responsibility for the decisions made – development of these skills is not a priority at school. Emotional competency and social competences presuppose teachers' conscious and skilful guidance of learners, learners' cooperation with teachers on partnership conditions, learners' active participation in the study process, discussions and possibilities for making mistakes. However, at schools, the role of the teacher is still understood in the outdated way meaning the teacher is to convey knowledge. Thus, the role of the teacher does not allow learners to express their opinion or thoughts. Teachers' understanding of learning is contradictory to new requirements to the study process, and this contradiction is reflected in learners' learning outcomes.

The fact deserving attention is that, when the teachers evaluated the aspects of learners' coping, they focused on the learner, parents-home, environment, but none of the teachers mentioned his/her role as an aspect of learner's coping. Teachers' low reflection capabilities illustrate the fact that they do not see their contribution to or role in formation of learner's coping skills. The responsibility for success or failure of coping was directed outside the classroom/school. However, the initial and basic role of the teacher is to form learners' learning skills, emotional competency and social skills so that they could cope at school.

The research of the efficacy of Estonian basic schools carried out in 2009 showed that teacher training in Estonia is directed to development of learners' cognitive rather than social competences. The reasons can be both requirements of the curriculum and educational priorities acknowledged by the society (state level tests, international tests) (Uibu, 2009). Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of the the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also revealed that teachers relations with learners are problematic, and the reason for that, in the teachers' opinion, is the low capability of learners. Teachers who evaluated their relationships with other teachers as being better also assessed learners' capabilities higher (Loogma, 2010). Teachers' low self-efficiency and reflection capabilities are also connected with the feeling that the teacher established a good contact with learners and could influence his/her learners and motivate them. Teachers' with high self-efficacy, i.e. professionally confident teachers, felt more secure in a lesson, and they used new teaching methods more boldly. In comparison to teachers from other countries, teachers from Estonia have low self-efficacy (Sarv, 2008; Loogma, 2010).

To what extent do the evaluations of learners, parents and teachers differ?

The results showed that the most troublesome issues for learners were, first of all, social relations, coping, relations with teachers and peers. These issues were also revealed by the research "Prevention of drop-out from basic school", which was conducted in 2012. According to the results of this research, learners consider school-related problems to be connected primarily with studies. However, in the second place, there were relations/ conflicts with teachers which caused students to get behind in their studies and drop out of school (Pettai & Proos, 2012).

The results of the research showed that learners' evaluations of studies-related aspects and the school, as the learning environment, turned negative in Form 5, and, in Form 6,

the situation worsened, and that was the case of both Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools. The reason may well be the fact that the form teacher and the school stage change, and learners begin with subject-based learning at the second stage of basic school.

Poor academic performance is the tip of the iceberg below which there are plenty of unsolved problems – conflicting relationships, bullying at school, low self-esteem. The beginning is Form 5 where the rate of at-risk children is 37%. From here, the number of at-risk children increases drastically till Form 8. 42% of learners who admitted they had problems could not cope with learning. The main bottlenecks for children at school are languages and mathematics, where falling behind begins from (Pettai & Proos, 2012). That was also shown by the result of the given research.

Contradictions in the values and evaluations of learners and adults can be explained by the different understandings between generations and age-conditioned peculiarities of learners. The results of the research among parents conducted in 2008 revealed that, in the parents' opinion, school for a child is the place where he/she belongs and where he/she finds friends easily. Thus, parents consider that the school plays a positive role in the life of their child. In parents' evaluation, the school values children's safety and considers academic success very important. For the parents of children from Russian-medium schools, the indicator of academic success is more important and considered to be a very important indicator. For the parents, the important issues are learners' success at school, safety and health, while for learners themselves social relations are important (Sakk, 2008). The parents evaluate learners' learning potential higher than teachers do (Kärkkäinen & Rätty, 2009).

Academic development is social both by the environment and by the essence. In addition to learners themselves, the essential participants of learning are teachers, classmates, family members and other people important for the child. Learners' relations have an impact on academic development, and, in primary school, beside the important role of adults, relationships with peers become more essential (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Sakk, 2008; Mailend, 2009).

The results of the research showed that the differences between the responses of learners from Estonian-medium and Russian-medium schools lie in Russian learners' higher evaluations of aspects of coping as well as in Russian parents' and teachers' larger concern about the results of learning outcomes. Russian parents and learners were more concerned about health, which was also revealed from answers of Russian teachers. At the same time, the focus of Russian teachers in the coping process was directed to learner-related aspects. They considered learner's learning outcomes, motivation and active involvement to be important. Social coping was not mentioned. Thus, for Russian teachers, learning is acquisition of classic knowledge where learners are not seen as cooperation partners and learner's social skills do not play any role. Russian teachers are also more authoritarian, which, supposedly, is due to their background, teacher training that they had in the Soviet Union times and acquired understanding that the teacher is the decision-maker at school. The higher level of authoritarianism of Russian-medium schools in Estonia has also been shown by previous research (Veisson et al., 2007).

At the societal level, it is important to reconsider learning and teaching-related issues. It is essential to change the way of thinking of the whole educational life, which can cause changes in the education paradigm.

Learning is a continuous process; it is not only a concentration of knowledge in the learner's head. Learning and teaching is a cooperative venture between the teacher and

the learner where new knowledge or skill is born as a result of the contribution from both sides. Provision of learners with basic knowledge requires a teacher to have increasingly new knowledge and skills about the ways of involving learners actively into the study process.

The important question here are numerous: *What basic knowledge and skills does a young person need to cope successfully in the future? Is the previous fact-based knowledge enough or is it important to pay more attention to the formation of human values and to the development of personality? Should we rather support the development of coping skills, social skills, communicative competences, skills of cooperation, team work, creativity, independent thinking and responsibility?*

How do we use different modern learning environments in formal education, and how do we use knowledge gained in informal education for the learning process? These are the new challenges in teacher education and training as well. Reconsideration of the teacher's role and keeping up with the times is the key of sustainability of education.

It is important for learners to gain a positive experience from learning, to be able to study, to evaluate their resources adequately and to build their career and learning paths. Life-long learning is an important part of sustainable education.

One of the possibilities to find a solution is to provide working teachers with corresponding skills via in-service training. In initial training, it is important to provide the teacher-trainee with corresponding basic skills and practice. Based on the rapid change of society, it's important to reorient teacher education and training. Social skills, forming the basic skills of learning and using different websites for studying will become crucial in teaching the new generation.

Limitations of the research

The questionnaires used in the present research were developed by the Institute of Educational Sciences of Tallinn University within the framework of the research project "School as Developmental Environment and Learner's Coping" (registration code 0132495s03). The questionnaires were designed with the goal of finding out how learners feel at school and which aspects affect learner's coping. Different questionnaires were developed for different target groups. As questions for learners and parents (except for number 14) were not analogous, the results allowed comparing of general characteristics of coping. The given research did not use the academic achievement of the sample of learners as the background research. The results of this research were presented based on the learners' own evaluations of factors of coping.

Recommendations and suggestions to improve the situation

- In order for the school to support learners' academic and social coping when they move from Form 4 to Form 5 and also to receive an overview of their learning skills and habits, it is necessary to establish cooperation between the class teachers in the primary school and learners' future subject teachers and the class teachers in the basic school. The aim of the cooperation should be to find out about the level of learners' knowledge and learning skills as well as to equate requirements in transition to the subject system.
- It is necessary to value the role of the class teacher and the importance of extra-curricular activities at stage II of the basic school.

- During the transition from the primary school to the subject system of the basic school, each teacher is to find out and be aware of the level of learners' learning skills and of their learning habits. The teacher is also to provide an overview of the way his/her subject is taught and which learning skills are required for the subject.
- Using different forms of cooperation, it is necessary to make parents aware of the importance of their role, their support and its effect on the learner's academic achievement. The school and teacher are the counselling support for those parents whose children have problems with coping.
- It is necessary to apply the school system of mentors who support learners who have problems with coping.
- In the development of study materials, it is necessary to pay more attention to the content, its correspondence to learners' ages and abilities, taking into consideration peculiarities of their development. It is also essential to apply different digital and media environments in the teaching and learning processes as in these environments because learners' skills enable them to acquire this knowledge in an appropriate environment.
- In initial and in-service teacher training, more attention should be paid to teachers' skills/possibilities to form and support the development of learners' social skills.
- In the case of initial teacher training, the important aspects are personal qualities of teachers-to-be, good communication and cooperation skills, emotional intelligence, empathy and creativity. The modern approach to education supports the child-based learning concept (the socio-constructivist approach), in which adults create different possibilities for initiation of the learning process. These skills and this knowledge should be valued more and dealt with in teacher training.
- You may want to add a conclusion about the importance of teacher efficacy as a goal since it was mentioned in the study.

Possibilities for further research

As a first step, it would be essential to carry out research which focuses on teachers' own reflection and possibilities as well as on teachers' vision of their role in supporting learners' coping in school and their own efficacy. Secondly, it would be necessary to carry out research on learners and parents where the research questions would be analogous for the both sample groups. And it would be possible to bring them into compliance through coding. This would allow finding out how parents and learners evaluate the role of the teacher in the formation of learner's coping skills and to what extent the school uses different methods to support learners' academic learning skills and social skills. Thirdly, it would be useful to take characteristics of learners' academic and social coping for the background data of the sample. The characteristics should be measured and described so that they could be compared to the future results.

In teacher education and training, a significantly greater attention should be paid to the development of emotional competences and social skills, which help teachers to cope more successfully in the classroom (Bosacki, 2008; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012). Emotions and emotional information are an important part of problem-solving and adaptation in everyday life (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

The globalised world is open for youth, and the labour market offers possibilities of equal competition for everybody. The challenge that schools and teachers face is to provide learners with coping skills, which guarantee their successful coping in the future.

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