

STUDENTS' WELL-BEING, COPING, ACADEMIC SUCCESS, AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

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This article presents the results of a student survey conducted in 2004 at Tallinn University within the framework of the project "School as a developmental environment and students' coping." The questionnaire was completed by 3,838 7th, 9th and 12th grade students from 65 Estonian schools. The project arose from the need to prevent students from school drop-out and repeating grades. The main hypothesis was that by modifying a school's social climate, one can either help or disable the development of students' constructive coping strategies and thus support, or not, students' academic success. Our most important conclusion is that the school climate parameters, especially the school value system and teachers' attitudes toward students as perceived by the latter, influence students' optimistic acceptance of life, their psychological and physiological well-being, and academic success.

Keywords: students' psychological and physiological well-being, school climate, coping at school, school-related optimism, academic success.

The transition of Estonia to a liberal market economy by way of shock therapy brought, in addition to positive aspects, coping difficulties and the social deprivation of many people (Human Development and Social Coherence, 1997). Amongst these difficulties were a rapid economic stratification of the population, and unemployment. The risk of becoming unemployed is highest among people with a basic education and below, and the same group has much less hope of struggling out of their unemployment situation (Saar & Helemäe, 2005, pp. 24-

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25). By official data, the 8-14 year-old children enrolment rates fluctuated around 97% in the period 1993-2000, although education is compulsory for all children aged 7-16 (Rebane, 2002). As reported in the Population and Housing Census for 2000, the number of persons with no basic education was 2.4% for the age group 20-24 but only 0.9% for those from 30-39 (Statistical Office of Estonia, 2000). Clearly drop-out rates from compulsory education have increased since the restoration of national independence in 1991.

It is well known that students' academic success and school behavior are influenced by many factors such as the students' abilities or socioeconomic background. Also, pedagogical beliefs have their own role to play (e.g., Morris & Maisto, 2003). Estonian educators for students in their open discussions quite often express a viewpoint that school cannot do anything if the home is weak or if the student has limited abilities. The practice of redirecting problematic children out of their regular class is widely used (Maanso & Ormison, 2004). Almost two thirds of teachers and principals questioned in this project agreed that every school at every age level should have a class for children with problems or should get rid of troublemakers: about 40% of teachers and 36% of schoolmasters thought that a problematic child should change school (Ruus, 2005).

This project focuses on the factors under the control of school that are presumably connected to students' school avoidance behavior and limited or unsatisfying academic success. The study was planned in three phases. The goal of the first phase was to determine how the school supports students in following its academic demands. Relevant data about the views of students, parents, teachers and principals on different aspects of school life were collected in a survey in order to reach reliable generalizations. A school typology is formed according to the extent to which these generalizations represent characteristics which (in line with our empirical data) are important in preventing students from experiencing academic failure and dropping out of school.

In the second phase, it was planned to observe dominant pedagogical discourse in a number of schools that represent different school cultures in our empirically defined school typology and to examine more closely the coping strategies and academic performance of the at-risk and successful students. In the third phase, the means of intervention that would pre-date and prevent school failure and drop-out (through improved school climate and more constructive coping strategies of students, for example) will be worked out.

The methodology of the study originates in the ecological approach, which is mainly influenced in the psychological literature by Lewin (cf. Lewin, 1935; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939) and according to which relationships between an individual and his/her environment are seen as dynamic and mutually influential (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1996; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moos, 1976; Murray, 1938; 1996). Schools in this study were viewed as

developmental environments for the developing individual, to which one has to unconditionally adapt. We see school as a community that is characterized by a certain level of psychological well-being of its members (Cowen, 2000) and a social climate that, according to the classic approach of Moos, can be both stressing and supporting (Moos, 1976). According to Moos (pp. 320-356) social climate can be described by three dimensions: 1) human relations, 2) main directions/goals of personal development, and 3) maintenance of stability of the community as a system and system change. Bronfenbrenner (1989) supports a view of school as an environment with multiple levels, presuming that personal development also takes place in the context of macroenvironmental components (e.g., the national curriculum), still keeping in mind the ultimate importance of the microenvironmental context where the immediate contacts between individuals happen.

Studies that view individuals in relationship with their social environment may put an emphasis on several factors (Holahan & Moos, 2001). We prefer the transactional approach. Coping is seen as a psychological mechanism that creates premises for finding an adequate response to environmental demands and challenges. In the school environment this means following school demands and performing school tasks. According to Lazarus and Folkman, *coping* is conceptualized as *effort that is given to manage stressful demands, and is, due to cognitive control mechanisms, a goal-oriented process* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the course of *primary appraisal* the person decides how and to what extent environmental influences are important to him/her, if they concern, endanger, or on the contrary, promise him/her some benefits. During the *secondary appraisal* the person raises a personal question, of whether he/she should do anything at all. If the answer is yes then those questions arise: what is the given demand? How does what he/she is doing, and what is about to happen, influence his/her well-being? (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 31-38; Lazarus, 1991, pp.133-4). There are fundamentally three options: a) *harm/loss* is an appraisal a person makes in case he/she has in the past lived through something which cannot be changed; b) *threat* is an appraisal which is made when a person presupposes that he/she might become hurt or expect a loss in the future; c) *challenge* is a call for effort, for mobilizing coping resources. An encounter with a perceived threatening environment evokes negative emotions and these block a person's functioning. When a person evaluates the situation so that he/she feels an inability to cope with demands because of lack of resources, or does not have enough resources to cope with the demands, the result is stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

To sum up, we see coping as an individual's adaptation to the environment, meaning an individual's efforts to maintain control over events. What appraisal the individual gives to the situation and what coping strategies he/she accordingly

initiates, depend on both the environment (novelty, predictability, for example) and the many personality characteristics (commitments to certain demanding situations, beliefs) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Two types of functions of appraisal/coping processes have been highlighted: to regulate the emotional state and to give an adequate answer to the problem the emotions have evoked and, in certain conditions, ability to change situations. The effectiveness of coping is determined by such characteristics of an individual as good/bad health, satisfactory/unsatisfactory functioning in society, psychological well-being, and so on (Kallasmaa, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Not all coping strategies are equally adaptive. Unadaptive strategies include, for example, problem negation, inactivity, alcohol use, day-dreaming, and self-blame (Carver, 1995; Kallasmaa, 2003; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Self-deceit cases are also common (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Schools function as mechanisms of social regulation (Popkewitz, 1997). By choosing tasks and behavioral models and evaluating performance, the student is kept on the developmental path preferred by society. The school acts as the individual's developmental engine. From the learner's perspective, the school places one constantly into situations with which one must cope. A student can view everyday school life in one of two ways: 1) as a positive challenge which encourages the student to test his/her abilities and perform better, or 2) as a threat which creates fear, anxiety, and stress.

Surprisingly, there are relatively few studies that explore coping in relation to school. To date the following results should be highlighted. First, of personality traits that help to form positive coping strategies and help with managing stress related to school demands, the most commonly noted are general ability to adapt, self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism and orientation towards problem solving. Of environmental factors, the family is most often mentioned; the school, as well as peers and community is also named. Different classifications of coping strategies are available. For example, Hampel, Dickow, and Petrman (2002) divide all coping strategies into three categories: problem focused, emotion focused and maladaptive. Rijavec and Brdar (1997) classify strategies as taking responsibility, searching for comfort/forgetting the problem, and looking for parental help. Garnefski and colleagues (Garnefski et al., 2002) distinguish between self-blame, rumination about the situation, catastrophizing and positive reappraisal. Donaldson, Prinstein, Danovsky, and Spirito (2000) refer to resignation, redirecting activity, social withdrawal, wishful thinking, self-criticism, and blaming others – among other factors.

Although school is mentioned as one of the important stressors, there are few such studies that deal with factors that help or hinder students' coping at school. One of the most distinguished works is that of Skinner and Wellborn (1997) which focuses particularly on students' coping in the academic domain. The

authors addressed how academic success can depend on what appraisal is given to school demands by students – how threatening or challenging they consider them. According to Skinner and Wellborn, children themselves are able to give information about their coping. Three most frequent stressors that children, even preschool children, mention are school, family and peers. Developing their conceptual framework, Skinner and Wellborn drew the following conclusions. First, reaction to a school stressor is determined by the appraisal given by a person to that environment. Second, tense situations taking place in the academic domain affect the learner more than it is usually thought. Third, the way the learner copes at school now has an impact on him/her in the future (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997: pp. 389-340). The theoretical concept of Skinner and Wellborn is based on fundamental needs of human beings: *relatedness*, *competence* and *autonomy*. An individual decides whether a situation is favorable or threatening based on his/her own needs.

Essentially, school systems are designed to improve the competence of students so they are more capable of controlling their environment. The learner who perceives his/her incompetence as chaos also tends to respond with panic and hopelessness about performing similar tasks in the future. A less competent learner with lower control ability uses more negative strategies, while learners who feel they are competent and have more control over events, generally use more constructive coping strategies (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). The motivation to belong originates in the need to experience love, sympathy and caring. In schools, this need may not be filled if teachers neglect students. As a rule, satisfaction of one's need for belonging creates more efficient coping strategies (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Autonomy means that a student feels him/herself as an agent of his/her actions. If the learner is forced to perform obligatory tasks and has no chance to choose them, his/her autonomy is decreased. This most probably results in students finding situations threatening and using unconstructive coping strategies, rebelling or conforming.

The first outcome of coping in the school milieu is that learning becomes either a motivating factor or unpleasant activity. In the latter case, the possible long-term effects are negative, retarding the student's cognitive, social and personality development (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Students who have positive attitudes toward learning and school are better at adjusting, less emotionally disturbed, and can use their resources better (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The more constructive a student's commonly used coping strategies, the more likely it is that he/she will perform well at school and will be optimistic about the future. This in turn triggers an ascending developmental spiral.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses of the empirical study in phase 1 were:

- 1) Students' successful functioning at school – their academic success and proschool behavior (the lack of school-avoiding behavior), their psychological and physical well-being – are related to the coping strategies they use;
- 2) Students' coping indicators and indicators of coping success are related to their optimistic/pessimistic future perspectives;
- 3) Besides other influencing factors like home, students' coping at school is first and foremost – influenced decisively by how they perceive the school climate;
- 4) The characteristics of school climate, according to what extent schools offer support to students, enable the creation of a school typology.

GOALS

We set the following goals for this study:

- 1) to define empirically the strength of relations/dependencies between the results of students' coping, school social climate characteristics and future optimism;
- 2) to create a typology according to the social climate characteristics of schools as perceived by students;
- 3) to interpret the results of the self-responding questionnaires on the basis of school climate parameters, students' coping indicators, their academic success and optimism about their future; and
- 4) to draw pedagogical conclusions from the study.

METHOD**SAMPLE**

The sample was formed according to the representativeness of schools (not students), since our main hypothesis was related to relations between the school climate and students' coping. Schools were chosen on the basis of results in state examinations (the first, middle and last schools according to their position in the official "league table" are represented in the sample). Also, there is a proportional representation of country and city schools, Estonian, and Russian language schools, as well as schools where both Estonian and Russian language groups are present. The questionnaire was administered to 7th, 9th and 12th grade students. (Besides, an analogous questionnaire was filled in by 624 teachers, 120 principals, and 2,048 parents from the same schools, however, these results were not included in the current study.) The 7th grade was chosen because it has the highest level of student drop-outs and grade repeaters, the 9th grade is the final grade of 9-year basic school, and the 12th is the final

grade of the upper-secondary school. The premise was that the school-leavers' attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs about school life are well developed and thus considerable. The questionnaire was filled in by 3,838 students from 65 Estonian general education schools. Among the respondents about 72% spoke the Estonian language at home. The relatively large and heterogeneous sample enables us to overlook respondents' individual psychological differences and most probably assures the representativeness of different family types and homes with different educational and cultural backgrounds.

INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire as our main research method included six content blocks: 1) questions about the effectiveness of students' academic coping (academic success, participation in learning activities); 2) students' self-evaluation of their psychological and physiological well-being at school; 3) students' optimism/pessimism concerning the future; 3) students' typical coping strategies as described by the students themselves; 4) school climate as perceived by the students; 5) students' interests; and 6) background factors.

Self-descriptions characterizing students' coping were gathered by the use of questions that were based on Skinner and Wellborn's (1997) formulation of coping strategies. The typical cognitive, emotional, and behavioral coping responses of learners to challenges or threats originating from the academic environment were given, and the students decided whether or not these applied to them. (It must be noted that Skinner and Wellborn followed a theoretical aim and have not used these categories in empirical studies.) The reliability of this section of the questionnaire, based on data obtained from 36 items, was high (Cronbach's alpha = .90) and the use of the questionnaire in an aggregated form was justified.

Psychological well-being has a wide range of interpretative possibilities (Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003; de Haan & MacDermid, 1998; Hunter, 2003; Shek, 2002; Spruijt & de Goede, 1997). According to our goals, the study was focused on questions about students' feelings about school. Students' perceived physiological well-being was measured by questions about the extent to which the respondents feel tiredness and other physical complaints.

To develop the questions about school climate we started with Moos' three dimensions of human relations (1976); valuing certain personality traits, maintenance of status quo, and innovation.

The questionnaire also included questions about students' interests, an area that is probably related to students' academic success and attitudes towards school (Hidi, 2001). This article does not include interests and other background factors.

The survey was conducted in 2004. The statistical analyses mostly include aggregated items based on factor analyses. In the case of aggregated data it was ensured that the Cronbach's alpha was at least .60.

RESULTS

To test the main hypotheses of the current study we were interested in the relations between the main factors under scrutiny. The correlation analysis revealed significant statistical relations ($p < .001$) between 1) students' successful functioning at school (their academic success and proschool behavior/lack of school-avoiding behavior), 2) their psychological and 3) physiological well-being, and 4) school-related future optimism and typical coping strategies employed. Due to theoretical considerations, it was possible to describe students' coping on the basis of an aggregated factor. A higher numeric value indicated more constructive strategies, meaning that the student relates to school tasks as challenges rather than threats. The correlations between coping strategies and coping effectiveness indicators are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF-DESCRIBED COPING STRATEGIES (HIGHER NUMERIC VALUE MARKS MORE CONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGIES) AND THEORETICALLY PRESUMED EFFECTIVENESS INDICATORS OF COPING AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

Effectiveness indicators of coping	Self-described coping strategies
Academic success and proschool behavior (grades, regular school attendance, etc.)	.28
Psychological well-being (willingness to go to school, interest towards school life, belongingness to school, etc.)	.42
Physiological well-being (lack of headaches, tiredness etc.)	.23
School-related future optimism	.37

Note: All correlations were significant at $p < .001$

TABLE 2
INTERCORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE THEORETICALLY PRESUMED EFFECTIVENESS INDICATORS OF COPING AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

Academic success and physiological well-being	.17
Academic success and psychological well-being	.26
Academic success and school-related optimism	.42
Physiological and psychological well-being	.30
Physiological well-being and school-related optimism	.16
Psychological well-being and school-related optimism	.37

Note: All correlations were significant at $p < .001$

Intercorrelations between all theoretically presumed coping effectiveness indicators (academic success, physiological and psychological well-being and school-related optimism) are also statistically highly significant. The numeric values of the respective correlations are presented in Table 2.

According to the central focus of the study – school drop-out and grade repeating – we submitted the data to regression analysis with academic success/proschool behavior being the dependent variable. As well as the parameters mentioned in Table 1, data on how the students evaluate the support they get from home when facing difficulties in school were included in the list of independent variables. The predictive power was strongest in case of the *optimism* parameter (beta = .33), followed by *supportive home* (beta = .10) and coping indicators (beta = .09).

The data suggest that our hypotheses 1 and 2 found support. The above presented data indicate regularities that are meaningful for an educator:

- school-related future optimism is important in respect to students' academic success and school behavior;
- school-related optimism is strongly related to current academic success and psychological well-being;
- coping strategies used by students are essential in respect to their academic success and school behavior;
- coping strategies used by students are strongly related to their psychological well-being and future optimism;
- a supportive home (as perceived by the student) is important in respect to academic success and school behavior, however, this factor is not the only determinant.

On the basis of the presented data we can draw a reliable general conclusion: there are means under the control of schools which can create conditions to improve students' academic success.

We also controlled the hypothesis about the relationships of school social climate parameters with coping indicators. Defining the characteristics of the school's social climate, Moos' three-dimensional model was operationalized. The following characteristics were differentiated: 1) human relations at school as perceived by students, including the communication style of student-teacher relations in everyday school life (teachers' help to students at lessons, listening to the students); relations between students (mutual help and solidarity); teachers' requirements at lessons; teachers' professional skills (interesting way of teaching, knowledge of the subject); 2) parameters that support the maintenance and innovation of school as an organization (discipline, traditions and, at the same time, innovation); and 3) the school value system as perceived by the student (altogether 14 values). The statistical analysis of the last mentioned block (3) indicated significant differences in the schools' value system: there are schools

where all 14 values, both “soft” (such as good human relations, enjoyment of learning, striving for self-improvement) and “hard” values (school discipline, academic achievement) are considered important, and also schools whose values are one-sided (academic success is the highest priority). Using the results of factor analysis, an aggregated indicator for characterizing value systems was elaborated. The results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF-DESCRIBED COPING STRATEGIES AND PARAMETERS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

Parameters of school climate	Self-described coping strategies
Type of student-teacher relations	.28***
School value system	.23***
Professional qualities of teachers as perceived by students	.23***
Maintenance of traditions/ innovation at school	.21***
Order, discipline	.17***
Mutual relations between students	.17***
Teacher's demanding requirements at lessons	.001

Note: *** Marked correlations were significant at $p < .001$

TABLE 4
INTERCORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE SCHOOL CLIMATE PARAMETERS

School value system and traditions/innovation	.52
Teacher/student relationship type and professional qualities of teachers (as perceived by students)	.46
Professional qualities of teachers (as perceived by students) and school traditions/innovation	.44
Professional qualities of teachers (as perceived by students) and school value system	.41
Teacher/student relationship type and school value system:	.41
Teacher/student relationship type and school traditions/innovation	.39

Note: All correlations were significant at $p < .001$

The highest, all very significant ($p < .001$), intercorrelations between school climate parameters are shown in Table 4.

It is worthwhile highlighting the strong relationship between the school's value system (as perceived by students) and students' coping strategies, connections between the value system and how the students evaluate teachers (their professional qualities, their communicative style), and how they imagine their school (as having honorable traditions and/or being innovative or not). According to our study, it is very important for students that the school emphasizes not only academic achievement, but also humane values, such as caring, self-improvement, security, and good interpersonal relations. It is

somewhat surprising that students' relations with peers did not relate as strongly to coping or to other school climate parameters. We found no explanation for the fact that there was no correlation between the teachers' requirements at lessons and the other school climate parameters.

It is noteworthy that correlation coefficient values differ in different groups of students, although their statistical significance is very high across all groups. In the case of Estonian and Russian language schools there is a statistically significant difference ($t = 2.68$, $p < .05$) in the correlation between coping and order/discipline, which in solely Estonian language schools is significantly higher. Also, differences existed between the results of boys and girls. The correlation of coping indicators with the school value system, as well as with innovation, was statistically significantly higher in the case of boys compared to girls ($t = 2.36$ and $t = 2.11$, $p < .05$ in both cases). This result is obviously essential, since approximately 75% of school drop-outs and class repeaters are boys.

The regression analysis, with coping as dependent variable and school climate parameters as independent variables, indicated that the best predictor of the latter was teacher's relationship style with students ($\beta = .16$), whereas the weakest predictor was order/discipline ($\beta = -.10$).

We argue that hypothesis 3 concerning the influence of school climate on coping has found support.

Since previous analysis indicated a strong relationship between students' optimism about the future and their psychological well-being and school success, we used regression analysis to explore which factors influence optimism. As well as previously mentioned independent variables, we included school climate parameters. It appeared that students' optimistic attitude toward school success was best predicted by how successful they are at school at the moment ($\beta = .26$), followed by their relationship with the teachers ($\beta = .22$) and coping strategies used in the school environment ($\beta = .16$). Hence, the students' school-related habitual ways of coping affect their future expectations, while their current academic success and relationships with teachers are the most important factors.

To identify the differences in schools' social climates and to create a typology on this basis, we used cluster analyses. Four clusters were highlighted.

Unwelcoming to students/high pressure. The school climate of the first cluster, which includes 137 students (3.6%), is characterized (compared with all others), by a very narrow selection of values. Most important in this type is academic success. This type of school climate could be called *unwelcoming to students/high pressure*. We must admit that there are no schools where the majority of students perceived the school atmosphere in this way; however, there are schools where over 10% of students perceive the school climate as hostile. Still, our sample also

included schools (15 out of 65), where there were no such students.

Indifferent to students/ focusing on outcomes. School climate of the second cluster, including 1,498 students (39.2%) was characterized by a narrower than average selection of values (again academic success is the most important), less caring teachers, lower than average innovation/respect for traditions, and more modest professional qualities of teachers. At the same time, teachers were perceived as more demanding and relatively strict in respect to discipline. We named this school climate *indifferent to students/focusing on outcomes*. There were 13 schools out of 65 where more than 50% of students perceived school climate in this way, however, the number of schools where at least 45% of students characterized their school climate in this way was 18, approximately 28% of schools in the current sample.

Welcoming to students/with high expectations. The third cluster, which includes 497 students (13%), is characterized by a school climate that has a wider than average system of values, has relatively high innovation and respect for tradition, has a stricter school order, while the communication style of teachers with students is supportive and respectful, although in general the teachers are also demanding. Teachers' professional abilities are perceived as better than average. We named this type of school climate as *welcoming to students/with high expectations*. There were 5 schools out of 65, where at least a third of students characterized their school's atmosphere in this way.

Normal practice. School climate of the fourth cluster, which includes 1,693 (44.3%) students, is characterized by the proximity of all factors to the average and we call this school climate *normal practice schools*. The number of schools where more than half of the students perceived their school atmosphere as average or normal was 20 out of 65 (approximately 31%).

The typology created on the basis of school climate parameters corresponds to the intuitive idea about differences between schools. To some extent it was surprising that school types differed from each other mostly by their value system. This was followed by relationships factors and discipline.

Below we highlight the most important results of the study from the viewpoint of an educator who is concerned with students' academic failure and wants to find means to prevent their dropout:

- *academic success/proschool behavior* has strong correlative relationships with 1) students' positive coping strategies (in that case the students perceive academic demands mostly as positive challenges and not as threats); and 2) with the students' psychological and physiological well-being;
- *academic success/proschool behavior* is more probable when the students are optimistic about their academic future and use more positive coping strategies; also a caring home is very important;

- *students' school-related optimism* is influenced by the school climate parameters, among them relationships with teachers (perceived by the students) are especially influential; also coping strategies used by the students are important;
- *positive school climate* for students is created when the school recognizes, in addition to achievement values, soft values;
- *values* cultivated by school (as perceived by students) are related to the overall image of school life (school's prestige, teachers' communicative style, their professionalism and attitudes towards students again as witnessed with the students' eyes);
- *the school climate* of different schools in the view of students is significantly different, also the students of the same school may perceive the school climate differently; the following *types of school climate* as perceived by students have been identified: 1) unwelcoming to students, high pressure, 2) indifferent to students, and focusing on outcomes, 3) welcoming to students with high standards, 4) normal practice schools.

On the basis of the results, the following principles of professional work in schools can be stated:

First, while aiming at the academic performance of students, it is also necessary to pay attention to the students' well-being and to developing their coping strategies, because these are all interrelated. Encouraging the students only to achieve better without supporting their personal growth, including the development of their coping strategies, can have an adverse effect.

Second, the school should aim to support the students' belief in being continuously successful in their achievement. This is especially important in the case of students who do not get sufficient support from home. In the case of learning difficulties, students should be advised to adopt and practice positive coping strategies and to be optimistic about the future, with support and assistance from a teacher if needed.

Third, the school should make efforts to develop a friendly, but challenging climate of learning, where the competitiveness of students on the basis of learning achievements will be balanced by humanitarian values, human dignity, parity in human relations, and the students' willingness to grow personally through learning. In this respect, it is crucial that the students feel the support from a teacher whom they can rely on.

Fourth, the strategies of prevention and intervention, which aim at avoiding the students' academic failure and antischool behavior, should be focused on individual students (for example, training in coping strategies) as well as on study groups and whole schools. What we need is a new school culture relying on respect for wisdom, search for truth, human happiness and dignity.

Such school culture can emerge only with co-operation between schools, their communities and the public at large.

DISCUSSION

Our most important conclusion is that school – not just students and their families – is responsible, as a living and learning environment, for students' optimistic acceptance of life, psychological and physiological well-being, and, last but not least, their academic success. More precisely, school has the responsibility for a creating favorable climate where students are encouraged to perceive learning tasks as challenges and opportunities for self-improvement, develop constructive coping strategies, where they are supported by teachers if necessary, and feel psychologically and physiologically well. One must not forget that school climate is to a great degree under the control of its pedagogical staff.

As mentioned before, one of the central school climate factors connected to students' coping and its effectiveness is the value system accepted by the school. Our results support the perspective of community psychology as opposed to traditional applied psychology. Thus, relying on the ecological perspective, community psychology authors, Nelson and Prilleltensky, stress the balance between personal well-being, collective well-being, and well-being in interpersonal relations (2005). Personal well-being for them means self-definition of a person (based on the need for mastery, control, self-efficacy, development and autonomy), caring and compassion (based on the need to be accepted, need for love, empathy) and health (need for emotional and physical well-being). Well-being in interpersonal relations includes values such as respect for differences (based on the need for identity, dignity, etc.) as well as participation/co-operation (based on the need to be involved, mutual responsibility); collective well-being includes such values as strengthening of community structures (need for solidarity, for social coherence and support) and social justice and accountability.

Similarly, our students give meaning, not just to single values in school life, but to the balanced representation of all values necessary to human well-being. Our results indicate also that side by side with the school value system, the school climate is determined by teachers' attitudes toward students and teacher-student relationships manifested in everyday classroom communication. Obviously, teachers are obliged to coordinate their relations with students. Fiske and Haslam (2005) differentiate four fundamental coordination types: 1) based on communal sharing; 2) on ranking of authorities, in linear hierarchies for example; 3) on equal relationships; 4) on market values. Our results do not allow us yet to claim which is currently the dominant human relations coordination type in

our schools, however, there is no doubt that our prevalently right-wing politics force coordination on market values. The absolute precedence given to academic success in students' perception of school values signals this domination. Our data raise a question of whether or not Estonian schools are governed by a deficit of existential (e.g., sense of security, health) and other humane values (e.g., open-mindedness, helpfulness, caring, tolerance). This can have negative consequences for coping and its effectiveness, including in the area of academic success.

When designing a school environment, one should also consider the findings about sympathy and human affection. Namely, it has been found that human beings have an innate need for trust, love, and affection (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Human beings develop their own affection style, whether positive and secure, or, on the contrary, anxious and/or avoiding affectionate relations (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Studies have established that people who feel secure in affectionate relationships are optimistic, fully participate in life, and are creative and caring about other people (Mikulinger & Shaver, 2005). Teachers who are interested in students' learning cannot ignore the fact that emotional relations with others are the first source for self-development (Mikulinger & Shaver, 2005).

Both theoretical considerations as well as the empirical data obtained in our research bring us closer to the schools of thought of educational sciences and social psychology, which stress that individuals' psychology and development have been too separated from the sociocultural context. Thus, Reynolds and colleagues, for example, argue that one of the biggest shortfalls of contemporary psychology is that the environments in which human behavior is in action are not described and diagnosed well enough (Reynolds, Gutkin, Ellit, & Witt, 1984). This shortfall might have serious practical consequences. The Western individualist approach to man which dominates both psychology and educational sciences places all responsibility on the individual, thus individualizing responsibility for behaviors such as suicides, drug use and stress in young people. This, however, may seriously harm our ability to avoid or prevent them (Tuffin, 2005).

In the future, our study will continue in two directions. First, schools will be analyzed as the developmental environment of children, comparing the perspectives of students, teachers, schoolmasters and parents, noting what similarities and differences are dominating their viewpoints and ideas about school life. At present, school as an organization has already been observed from the teachers' perspective, relying on the theoretical models of the learning organization and knowledge management (Sarv, 2005a, 2005b). Similarly, parents' expectations of school have been analyzed in questionnaires to parents (Lukk, 2005) and schoolmasters' perspectives according to a schoolmasters' survey. We have also begun with comparative analyses of students' and teachers' coping patterns (Veisson, Ruus, & Ots, 2005). We found that the weakest component of teachers' coping was autonomy. In the light of conclusions presented here,

this result gives reason to ask whether the macroenvironment of schools sends enough signals to teachers about the need for a warm and friendly school climate, or rather makes them cultivate authoritative or market-type power.

The other research direction will be a (mostly qualitative) discourse analysis and psychologically oriented research. We are interested in prevalent pedagogical discourses, both inside and outside the classroom, in schools with different types of school climate. We will continue studying coping strategies of different students from different schools. We are especially interested in students who are resilient in stressful academic situations and who have developed constructive coping strategies which allow them to keep their school life under personal control.

As a result we hope to make some generalizations and to work out adequate strategies for preventing school drop-out and grade repeating, or to intervene actively in such cases.

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