

Coping with schoolwork pressure in adolescents

**A qualitative study into factors and characteristics associated with abilities to cope with
schoolwork pressure**

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Samenvatting

In dit onderzoek werd gekeken naar factoren en karakteristieken die verband houden met het vermogen van adolescenten om met schooldruk om te gaan. Er is gebruik gemaakt van secundaire kwalitatieve gegevens (interviews, panelgesprekken en dagboeken) van 43 adolescenten tussen de 9 en 18 jaar oud. De meeste participanten gaven aan dat ze enige vorm van schooldruk ervoeren. Individuele factoren als veerkracht, optimisme, *self-efficacy*, zelfvertrouwen, maar ook sociale steun van familie en vrienden, vrijetijdsactiviteiten en behulpzame leraren lijken bevorderende factoren te zijn bij het omgaan met schooldruk. Lage niveaus van *self-efficacy*, optimisme, veerkracht en zelfvertrouwen, het geen gebruik maken van coping methoden, stressfactoren van leeftijdsgenoten en/of familie, geen/weinig sociale steun van familie en vrienden en niet/weinig betrokken zijn bij vrijetijdsactiviteiten lijken barrières te zijn bij het omgaan met schooldruk. Er lijkt geen groot verschil te zijn in leeftijd, geslacht en opleidingsniveau als het gaat om de mate van ervaren schooldruk, maar er lijken wel verschillen te zijn in de manier waarop participanten omgaan met deze schooldruk. Er zijn verschillende barrières en bevorderende factoren die naar voren komen met betrekking tot schooldruk. Vervolgonderzoek is nodig om het relatieve belang en de mechanismen van deze factoren in relatie tot schooldruk te onderzoeken.

Kernwoorden: kwalitatief onderzoek, omgaan met schooldruk bij adolescenten, bevorderende factoren en barrières, demografische kenmerken.

Abstract

In this study on coping with schoolwork pressure, secondary qualitative data (interviews, panel data and dairies) of 43 adolescents aged 9 to 18 years was used to investigate factors and characteristics associated with adolescents' abilities to cope with schoolwork pressure. Most participants indicated that they experienced some kind of schoolwork pressure. Individual factors like resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, confidence, but also social support from family and friends, leisure activities and helpful teachers appear to be facilitating factors in coping with schoolwork pressure. Low levels of self-efficacy, optimism, resilience and self-esteem, using no coping method, peer and/or family stressors, no/little social support from family and friends and no or limited involvement in leisure activities appear to be barriers in coping with schoolwork pressure. Within this study, there does not seem to be much difference in age, gender and educational level when it comes to the degree of perceived schoolwork pressure, but there appear to be differences in how participants cope with schoolwork pressure. There are several barriers and facilitators that emerge with regard to schoolwork pressure. Further research is needed to investigate the relative importance and the mechanisms of these factors in relation to schoolwork pressure.

Keywords: qualitative research, coping with schoolwork pressure in adolescents, facilitating factors and barriers, demographic characteristics.

Introduction

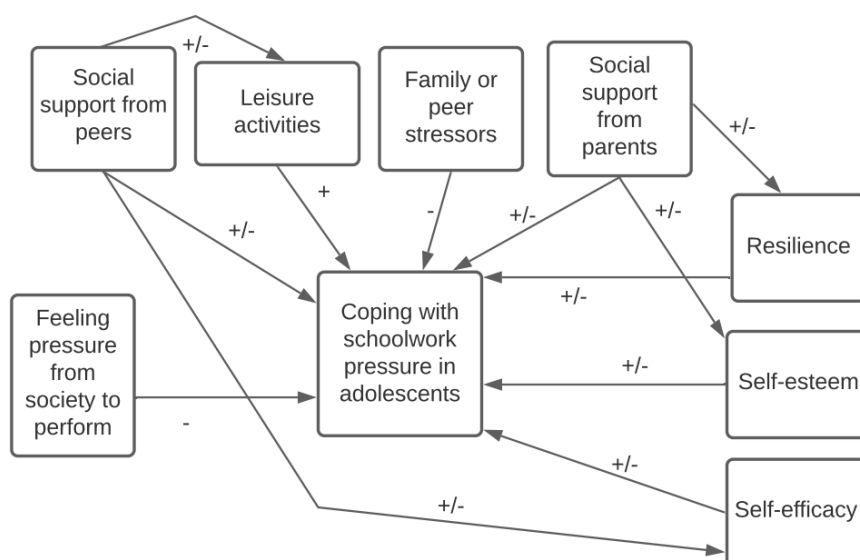
For decades, adolescents in the Netherlands had the highest levels of wellbeing compared to youth in other European countries (Inchley et al., 2016). But nowadays these high levels of wellbeing are declining (De Looze et al., 2020). Research shows that one explanation for this decline may be the increasing worries about schoolwork (e.g. schoolwork pressure) (De Looze et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018). The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (Stevens et al., 2018) showed that the percentage of students experiencing schoolwork pressure in the Netherlands increased from 15.9% to 35.4% between 2001 and 2017. This rise in experienced pressure from schoolwork is concerning, because schoolwork pressure can result in mental stress, which in turn can result in psychosomatic or psychological complaints (Cosma et al., 2020; Hjern et al., 2008) and lower life satisfaction (Cosma et al., 2020). Schoolwork pressure refers to the perceived pressure from schoolwork (Stevens et al., 2018). To reduce perceived schoolwork pressure in adolescents, it is important to understand what factors may help them in dealing with schoolwork pressure. The available literature on schoolwork pressure is mostly about its relation with reduced wellbeing. Few studies have focused on how youth cope with schoolwork pressure. The aim of the present qualitative study is therefore to investigate the facilitating factors and barriers in coping with schoolwork pressure. Subsequently, the following research question is formulated: ‘What factors are associated with adolescents’ abilities to cope with pressure experienced from schoolwork?’. To investigate the influence of demographic characteristics on factors associated with coping with schoolwork pressure, the following second research question is formulated: ‘To what extent are the characteristics gender, age and educational level associated with the ability to cope with schoolwork pressure?’.

Adolescents experience pressure to thrive in school from within, from others in their social environment or from society (Cheetham-Blake et al., 2019). According to Socio-ecological models behavior is formed through dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors. The Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1989) is an example of a socio-ecological model, where it is described that a person's development is directly affected by their direct and distal environment. Indeed, literature has shown that both individual and social contextual factors influence coping with schoolstress (Voltmer et al., 2012). The literature suggests important characteristics and individual, social and societal factors, which will be discussed below.

On an individual level, self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience are coping mechanisms that have been found to play a role in coping with pressure (Lavoie et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2007; Waaktaar et al., 2004). Being resilient means that one knows ways to cope with stress and can easily adapt to adversity (Eaude, 2009). Indeed, Kjeldstadli et al. (2018) show that resilient students have higher levels of coping abilities. High levels of self-efficacy, which is the perceived ability to perform according to what is required for a certain outcome, seem to help adolescents in their coping, because adolescents believe they have the capability to cope with the pressure (Lönnfjord & Hagquist, 2020). *The stress and coping theory* of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) states that a person's cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation and the coping strategy the person applies, determines whether someone can cope with the stress. Furthermore, adolescents with a high self-esteem, which is the confidence of one's own worth or abilities, perceive less stress and can cope more efficiently with schoolwork pressure than adolescents with a low self-esteem (Gerber & Pühse, 2008; Moksnes et al., 2010). Based on the literature, the first hypothesis of this study states that *adolescents high in self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience can better cope with schoolwork pressure*, as is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual model



Factors in the immediate social environment can also shape schoolwork pressure. For example, the resilience described above, can be strengthened by a supportive home

environment of adolescents by parenting practices and facilitation of self-esteem (Armstrong et al., 2005). But the home environment can also cause extra pressure when parents put too much pressure on their child about school performance (Raufelder et al., 2015). In addition, when adolescents have conflicts with their parents and/or teachers, this can raise their stress level (Murberg & Bru, 2004). In general, parental involvement in school is positively related to coping with pressure as parents can provide learning techniques (Hill & Tyson, 2009). In addition, research showed that, since 2013, there has been a decline in bullying victimization and an increase in parent-adolescent communication in the Netherlands (De Looze et al., 2020). These positive developments are helping adolescents to cope with schoolwork pressure (De Looze et al., 2020), but do not explain the rise in experienced schoolwork pressure. Parents high in responsiveness and warmth make adolescents feel protected and loved when they experience failure and stress, which protects them from experiencing too much pressure from schoolwork (Wang & Fletcher, 2016).

Peer relationships in the broader social environment can be seen as social support for coping with pressure (Humbert et al., 2006). Higher levels of resilience in adolescents are associated with closer friendships and higher perceived friendship quality (Graber et al., 2015). This association can be explained by friends supporting effective coping styles and self-efficacy. Having friends who value academic achievement can give adolescents more motivation to cope with schoolwork pressure (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008). But adolescents with friends resistant to school norms, show less motivation to cope with schoolwork pressure. Adolescents with trusting peer relationships feel more secure and safe in school context, which helps them in coping with schoolwork pressure. On the other side, if adolescents are rejected by peers or have conflicts with peers at school, the hostile environment is likely to affect their concentration in class and ability to study and eventually complicate their coping with schoolwork pressure (Murberg & Bru, 2004; Wang & Fletcher, 2016).

Another facilitating factor for coping with schoolwork pressure are leisure activities, like gaming, sports or drawing, as they provide relaxation during working on school (Luta et al., 2020). Friends are especially important in getting adolescents involved in leisure activities (Humbert et al., 2006). Adolescents with low levels of physical activity have more school-related stress (Haugland et al., 2003). Adolescents experiencing schoolwork pressure often also feel time pressure outside of school. Their days are full of traveling, domestic work, activities or jobs and they also have to do homework (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). Along this line,

organized leisure activities are more beneficial in coping with schoolwork pressure than unorganized leisure activities, because with organized activities, adolescents ‘have’ to go to the activity instead of spending that time on schoolwork and these activities learn adolescents to adopt emotional skills, such as self-reflection, which are helpful for coping with schoolwork pressure (Badura et al., 2016). Participation in physically active leisure activities declines with age, which may explain why older adolescents experience more schoolwork pressure (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). In this study, it is hypothesized that *adolescents who receive positive social support from parents and peers (hypothesis 2a), have less social stressors (hypothesis 2b) and are involved in leisure activities have less difficulty in coping with schoolwork pressure (hypothesis 2c)*, as is shown in Figure 1.

Changing expectations from society can also be a factor influencing the coping with schoolwork pressure of adolescents. The Dutch society is becoming more individualistic and performance focused (RVS, 2018). Students have to excel at school, from primary school to higher education, as this is important for gaining success in later professional life. This is becoming the standard nowadays, but some adolescents find it difficult to cope with this pressure (RVS, 2018). As is shown in Figure 1, hypothesis 3 states that *adolescents who feel pressure from society have more difficulty with coping with schoolwork pressure*.

Finally, there might be differences in factors associated with coping with schoolwork pressure with regard to demographic characteristics of adolescents. First, girls feel more schoolwork pressure than boys (Lönnfjord & Hagquist, 2020). Girls reported more difficulty in relaxing, never feeling free and doing many things at the same time (Landstedt & Gadin, 2012). Also, research states that girls feel more pressure to excel at school than boys, because women are still disadvantaged when it comes to achievements and success on the job market (Landstedt & Gadin, 2012). Second, the perceived schoolwork pressure in adolescents increases with age. Older adolescents experience more school-related problems and find these more stressful than younger adolescents (Gerber & Pühse, 2008; Lönnfjord & Hagquist, 2020). Third, students with higher educational levels perceive more schoolwork pressure than students following lower levels of education (Kleinjan et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2018). Educational level is also considered a proxy for SES (Social Economic Status; Barone, 2006). Performance related stressors were mostly reported by higher SES background students, especially by girls, because they put high demands on themselves and this is a common source of stress in this group (Landstedt & Gadin, 2012; Wiklund et al., 2012). Therefore, the final hypothesis states that *girls, older adolescents and adolescents with a higher education*

level perceive more barriers and less facilitating factors in coping with schoolwork pressure.

To conclude, within the present qualitative study, possible barriers and facilitating factors for coping with schoolwork pressure and differences in demographic characteristics in experienced factors in coping with schoolwork pressure will be explored.

Method

Sample

To answer the research question, qualitative data is used from the ‘Happiness under pressure’ study about youth mental health (Kleinjan et al., 2020). A total of 43 of the original 99 participants (43.4%) gave permission to re-use their responses for the secondary data analyses performed within the present study. Of the 43 participants, 22 were girls (51.2%) and 21 were boys (48.8%). The participants were 9 to 18 years old. A total of 22 participants (51.2%) followed preparatory scientific education (VWO), three participants (7.0%) followed higher general continued education (HAVO) and ten participants (23.3%) followed preparatory middle-level applied education (VMBO). One participant (2.3%) was already following higher vocational education (HBO). The rest of the participants was in primary school (seven participants (16.3%)).

Design

The qualitative data of the Happiness under pressure study was collected by the Alexander Foundation and consisted of nine in-depth interviews, five panel discussions and data from three diary studies with Dutch youth. The goal of the original data collection procedure was to gain insight in stressors, barriers, protective factors and coping mechanisms with regard to adolescent mental health and wellbeing. One of the more prominent stressors associated with mental health and wellbeing appeared to be schoolwork pressure. The qualitative data could be explored more in-depth by means of secondary data analyses. To this end, the current study used a deductive design, based on *Grounded Theory* with *sensitizing concepts*, because concepts have already emerged from the existing literature that give direction to the research topic of schoolwork pressure (Boeije, 2009). Sensitizing concepts were based on the literature described in the introduction; social support, resilience, self-esteem, self-efficacy, leisure activities, family/peer stressors and pressure from society.

Procedure

Adolescents were recruited through the social media channels of the Alexander Foundation, Unicef Netherlands and the Trimbos Institute and through intermediaries (social

workers, parents, teachers, etc.) from the networks of the researchers and organizations. The adolescents and parents received an information letter and provided active informed consent prior to the data collection. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone and a semi-structured topic list was used during the individual interviews and panel groups at school. The intention was to have non-directive conversations, because of the sensitivity of the topic. The participants of the diary studies had to fill in a diary every day for three weeks about their mental wellbeing. The larger 'Happiness under pressure' study had a participatory design and therefore included an advisory group of youth who were allowed to contribute ideas about the questions for the interviews and panel groups before the data collection.

Measuring instruments

Three different research methods have been used in this study to meet the principle of triangulation. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted, to give direction to the conversation but also leave room for spontaneity and input from the respondents. Second, panel groups were conducted to include different perspectives, create room for discussion and reach saturation on the topic. Both interviews and panel groups focused on how adolescents experience their mental health, potential stressors and what helps them cope with potential stressors. Third, the diary studies were conducted to measure the mental wellbeing of adolescents over time. It could be construed which factors influence the mental wellbeing of adolescents on a day-to-day basis, because participants wrote down which pleasant and less pleasant experiences they had on a day. In this study, the focus is on the stressor schoolwork pressure and how adolescents cope with this stressor.

Data analysis

The interviews, panel conversations and diary studies were transcribed verbatim. The parts about the stressor schoolwork pressure and the factors influencing the coping of adolescents with schoolwork pressure were coded in three phases. The first phase started with thematic coding by classifying the statements of respondents based on the sensitizing concepts. *Emerging codes* were added in case of bycatch. At the end of this phase, there was a list of emerging codes and codes fitting into the sensitizing concepts. The second phase was the phase of axial coding in which all codes were compared with each other, potentially redefined, and divided in main codes and subcodes. The last stage of the coding process was selective coding where all codes are organized into categories and relationships and connections were sought between codes. In this way a theory was formed. The three phases of coding ensured that data was stored chronically and constantly interrogated (Boeije, 2009).

The data was arranged in Nvivo so that the coded text fragments were clearly interpreted and the reliability of the research was greater.

Results

Overall, the majority of participants answered ‘school’ to the question of what causes them stress.

Coping with schoolwork pressure

From the coding scheme (Figure 2) becomes clear that participants use certain coping mechanisms to deal with schoolwork pressure. Also, factors were identified that formed a barrier to the use of coping mechanisms.

Individual factors

Resilience. Resilience in the form of being able to handle stressful or difficult situations, helps participants to continue after getting a bad grade or not finishing the homework planned for the day. Resilience can help participants with coping with stress from school, as this quote shows: *‘I know now how I can turn off my negative thoughts after for example getting a bad grade. Then I focus on the next test’* (respondent 10).

Optimism. Another important coping mechanism that ties in with resilience is focusing on the positive things, or optimism. Many participants said that when they are stressed, they start looking at what is going well.

Self-efficacy. Participants with a high level of self-efficacy have faith in their own capacity. The next quote shows how participants use self-efficacy to cope with schoolwork pressure: *‘I told myself that I really could do it and although it became harder during the year, I kept believing in myself’* (respondent 7). Participants with a high level of self-efficacy often also seemed more confident.

Self-esteem. Having a low level of self-esteem is a factor that makes it difficult to stay positive and have a high level of self-efficacy. Participants with little self-esteem have serious doubts about themselves and are less likely to see the positive side of things. They are less likely to think ‘it will be fine’. Sometimes participants indicated that they were no longer able to use coping mechanisms, what appears from this quote: *‘I always try to get the positive out of it, but sometimes I have such hard times with school that I can no longer think positively’* (respondent 6).

‘Just keep going’ mindset. The participants using the ‘just keep going’ mindset said they experience pressure from schoolwork, but they are not looking for or applying strategies

to cope, which seems to have an unconstructive effect on dealing with schoolwork pressure.

Figure 2

Coding scheme

Name	Files	References
Schoolwork pressure	12	54
Family, peer stressors	11	39
Focus on positive aspects of life	5	7
Importance of family	8	25
Social support family	13	37
Importance of having friends	11	29
Social support peers	14	34
Importance of school	3	6
Future education and job	7	9
Just keep going	4	5
Leisure time	7	21
Leisure activities	17	68
Physical and mental complaints	10	23
Planning schoolwork	2	2
Pressure from teachers	3	5
Help from teachers	9	13
Resilience	7	11
Self-efficacy	5	8
Self-esteem	3	11
Time for homework	11	27
Too much to do on a day	8	15

Social factors

Social support. When participants had hard times coping with schoolwork, they often turned to family, teachers or friends for social support. For the serious issues, participants are more likely to go to their parents or siblings to discuss them, because of their unconditional love and this appears to feel safer. Social support from family means that participants can tell their story, that parents help plan schoolwork or help their child in finding ways to deal best with schoolwork pressure.

Teachers could also help participants cope with schoolwork pressure by helping with

setting goals or having a conversation when a student experiences problems, for example in this kind of situation: *'I was taking a test and it was not going well at all. Then I had to cry and I was very ashamed of that. The teacher took me aside and asked what was wrong and then I could go to the bathroom to dry my tears. That was very nice of him'* (respondent 24). Teachers helping with scheduling homework and learning for test weeks was also seen as a resource for dealing with schoolwork pressure.

Social support from friends seems to be of great importance for this age group in terms of feeling good and coping with schoolwork pressure. Participants indicated that they can talk to their friends when they feel stressed. A difference between boys and girls appeared when it comes to social support from friends. For girls, social support is more in the form of listening carefully and giving tips and advice, with boys it is more in the form of talking about the problems briefly and then doing fun things together with those friends for distraction.

Participants without such helpful parents, teachers or friends indicate that they find it harder to talk about their problems and feel more alone when coping with schoolwork pressure.

Social stressors. Family or peer stressors can also make it difficult for participants to cope with schoolwork pressure. These participants have often experienced something unpleasant at home or school, such as being bullied, parents being divorced, someone dying in their immediate environment, exclusion, and this can cause participants to experience having too much on their plate. This quote shows why this can be too much to handle: *'my parents had a lot of fights in front of me before they got divorced and that made me very sad. Sometimes I didn't go to school, because that was too much and I needed distraction by doing things on my own or going to sport'* (respondent 13).

Leisure activities. Almost all participants indicated that doing leisure activities such as doing a sport, gaming or another hobby can make them forget everything about school for a while. This quote shows how leisure activities can work relaxing and help coping with schoolwork pressure: *'When I play soccer, it is just like you can forget all the work and stress about school. It ensures that I am not going to be stressed out'* (panelgroup 5). Many participants do these activities with their friends and that is often seen as extra relaxing, because they also enjoy meeting their friends. Leisure activities seem the biggest distraction for participants from school. Participants who are not involved in leisure activities indicated that they sometimes have too little rest in their head and do not have enough relaxation.

Societal factors

Although the role of society in coping with schoolwork pressure in adolescents was not much openly referred to in the interviews, some participants indicated that the schools and Dutch government should lower the schoolwork pressure for young people. They suggest shorter school days, longer breaks, less homework, no test weeks with too many tests to learn and less focus on grades.

Differences in demographic characteristics

Gender. At first sight there did not seem to be much difference in the frequency and intensity of perceived schoolwork pressure between boys and girls. But the interviews did indicate that girls and boys cope with schoolwork pressure in a different way. Girls seem more likely to seek help from parents or friends when they have stress from schoolwork, and boys seem more inclined to think about what they can do themselves to deal with it or solve it.

Age. Primary school students, compared to secondary school students, do not actually seem to experience schoolwork pressure. These students do not mention school as a stressor in their lives. Within secondary school participants, participants in the earlier years do experience schoolwork pressure but they still do leisure activities in addition to schoolwork, while the participants in later years often indicated that they have so much schoolwork that they have little time for leisure activities and that they sometimes have to cancel fun things, like leisure activities or hanging with friends.

Educational level. Here also, no difference appeared between how much schoolwork pressure participants from different educational levels perceive, but a difference appeared in the way of coping with schoolwork pressure. Preparatory middle-level applied education students seem more likely to say: *'you have to have time for yourself so when I have not finished my homework yet, so be it. I'm also not going to do much homework on weekends'* (respondent 6). These students seem to find it easier to avoid getting overinvolved in schoolwork. Preparatory scientific education students seem more inclined to finish all of their homework at all costs and to obtain a good grade. Higher general continued education students are somewhat in between.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate individual, social and societal factors associated with adolescents' abilities to cope with schoolwork pressure. In addition, differences in demographic characteristics and perceived barriers and facilitating factors in coping with

schoolwork pressure were explored.

With regard to individual factors that seem to play a role in coping with schoolwork pressure, results showed that participants who indicated that they have higher levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem or resilience, appeared to report less trouble in coping with schoolwork pressure and seem to act as facilitating coping mechanisms, which confirms the first hypothesis and is conform the literature, in which it has been shown that participants with lower levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience are more at risk when coping with schoolwork pressure (Gerber & Pühse, 2008; Lönnfjord & Hagquist, 2020). Optimism as facilitating factor and the 'just keep going' mindset as barrier were emerging factors in the current study and are conform the literature. The study of Dougall et al. (2001) indeed shows that optimism is associated with effective coping strategies in stressful situations. The 'just keep going' mindset leads to avoidant coping, which is associated with reduced wellbeing, because it is an ineffective way to cope with school stress (Chao, 2011). This mindset is the participants' cognitive appraisal of the situation and conform the aforementioned *stress and coping theory* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) states, this might determine that the person chooses an avoidant coping strategy which is unhelpful in coping with the stressor.

With regard to social factors, participants often indicated that they turn to family or friends when they feel stressed about school and that it is helpful to be able to tell their story and ask for advice, which confirms hypothesis 2a. Social support, like help with schoolwork and a listening ear from parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009), as well as distraction, advice and relaxation from friends (Humbert et al., 2006) help adolescents cope with schoolwork pressure, which is in line with the findings of the current study. Social support from teachers as facilitating factor, but also pressure experienced from teachers as barrier, were emerging factors in this study. The study of Moksnes (2016) states that teacher-student interaction can support or complicate students' coping with stress, which supports this finding. The absence of helpful teachers, friends of family might be a possible barrier in coping with schoolwork pressure. The study of Taylor (2011) shows that a lack of social support makes it harder to cope with mental problems. This may also be the case for coping with schoolwork pressure, since schoolwork pressure seems a risk factor for mental health problems (e.g., Kleinjan et al., 2020).

Participants who indicated to perceive multiple social stressors from family or peers seem to have more difficulty in coping with schoolwork pressure, confirming hypothesis 2b. Indeed, previous studies show that having multiple stressors like having a sick relative and

experiencing schoolwork pressure is associated with diminished mental health and functioning (Evans & English, 2002).

Leisure activities were indicated as a big distraction and source of relaxation, especially with friends and appeared to help participants cope with schoolwork pressure, which confirms hypothesis 2c and is conform previous studies that found leisure activities to provide relaxation and a break from schoolwork (Luta et al., 2020). The other way around, participants not involved in leisure activities indicated that they think too much about schoolwork and have too little rest in their head, which shows that this might be a barrier when coping with schoolwork pressure. This is in line with the study of Haugland et al. (2003) which states that adolescents with low levels of physical activity suffer more from school-related stress.

Contrary to the expectation, no mention was made with regard to perceived pressure from society in the interviews. Therefore, hypothesis 3 can not be confirmed. It could be that participants just do not feel such pressure, but it could also be the case that because the Dutch society has become more individualistic and performance focused (RVS, 2018), this has come to be perceived as the 'normal' society and participants do not perceive societal pressure as such. They may not be directly aware that some of the pressure they feel may be caused by societal factors. The study by Cosma and colleagues (2020) shows that the increase in perceived schoolwork pressure appears to be consistent across high-income countries, including the Netherlands. Economic change generates more stress in school (Högberg, 2021). Thus, the trend in high-income countries seems to show that societal factors do influence the perceived schoolwork pressure.

With regard to the differences in demographic characteristics, it seemed that both genders experience more or less the same kind and type of pressure. However, as the results showed, girls seek more help from parents or friends and boys seem more inclined to solve it themselves. These differences may make it seem like boys experience less trouble when coping with schoolwork pressure than girls, but boys seem less likely to show this than girls. This finding is also addressed by Frydenberg and Lewis (1991) who state that girls are more likely to seek help when they experience trouble in coping with stress than boys.

From the results, it seemed that older participants have more difficulty in coping with schoolwork pressure, mostly because they reported to have little time left for leisure activities compared to primary school children and participants in early years of secondary school. This is in line with the study of Hilbrecht et al. (2008) which states that participation in leisure

activities declines with age.

The results showed that preparatory middle-level applied education students seem to find it easier not to become overinvolved in schoolwork, where preparatory scientific education students seem more inclined to do what is needed to obtain a good grade. Preparatory middle-level applied education students thus seem to be able to deal better with schoolwork pressure by setting limits to what they do for school. Hypothesis 4 is thus confirmed for age and educational level but not confirmed for gender.

The present study has several strengths and limitations. The different qualitative interview and data collection techniques provided a broad understanding of coping with schoolwork pressure, because it enabled the assessment of the issue from different angles; both the individual perspective and the group perspective through the interviews and panels. Also, the diary study provided some first tentative insights into the temporal relations between the variables. Because of this, the present study provided a good explorative view of the factors related to adolescents' coping with school pressure. A limitation of this study was that not all participants of the original larger study 'Happiness under pressure' (Kleinjan et al., 2020) gave permission to use their data, which resulted in a smaller sample. This has had implications for the representativeness of this study, since a selection of the original participants was included. Another limitation of using secondary data in this study was that the questions in the interviews were not a perfect fit with the research question of this study. The data could have been richer when follow-up questions were asked when the theme of schoolwork pressure came up. Next to this, the questions about the participants' stress and mental wellbeing may evoked the tendency to answer socially desirable, people tend to say that they are doing well (Grimm, 2010). This may have had implications for the levels and roles of reported self-esteem, involvement in leisure activities, use of coping mechanisms, perceived social support and family/peer stressors.

To further test the explorative associations found in this study, to increase the representativeness and to assess the relative impact of the factors described on coping with schoolwork pressure in adolescents, a quantitative study is recommended. A quantitative longitudinal study could not only assess the associations between the variables, but also provide indications for the direction of these associations. To better assess the possible effect of societal pressure in relation to schoolwork pressure, a qualitative study specifically focusing on if and how participants experience pressure from society and whether this can be seen as a source for schoolwork pressure, a barrier for coping with schoolwork pressure or

both, could be useful. In addition, a study researching how adolescents who experience difficulty in coping with schoolwork pressure can best be helped or guided into effectively coping with schoolwork pressure, could provide insights to help adolescents in practice.

The results of the current study and the fact that school was the most frequently given answer to the question of what causes participants stress, already provided some indications for practice. Seeing the facilitating roles that self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience seem to have in coping with schoolwork pressure, the implementation of interventions that aim to strengthen these factors might be beneficial. An useful intervention could be 'Levensvaardigheden' [in English: Life skills] for students in secondary school aimed to reduce feelings of tension in difficult situations and to teach a positive way of thinking by learning core competences (Gravesteyn et al., 2004). The program is taught by teachers at the school and this might also enable the improvement of the bond between teacher and student. The study of Whear and colleagues (2013) showed that mental health interventions are most effective when students, teachers and parents are involved. Therefore, a combination of 'Levensvaardigheden' and the intervention 'Triple P' might be considered. Triple P is an intervention aimed to support parents with parenting, which can go from light help to intensive support for families with risk factors (Shapiro et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This study has attempted to sketch an explorative picture about possible facilitating factors and barriers associated with adolescents' abilities to cope with schoolwork pressure. Several individual and social factors were identified. To decrease perceived schoolwork pressure and to increase wellbeing, it is advised to help adolescents find effective ways to cope with schoolwork pressure and to enable a good support system in their immediate environment.

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Appendix 1: Contract data use (TED)

Utrecht, 2021

This letter constitutes formal confirmation of the fact that the data from the Utrecht University ‘Geluk onder druk’ (2020) have been made available to Carlijn Vree of Utrecht University.

These data will not be made available to others, and the data may be used only for analysis and reporting on topics for the thesis, about which agreement has been reached with Marloes Kleinjan.

Carlijn Vree will receive access to the data from the dataset in order to answer the following research questions within the framework of the thesis:

Research question: ‘what characteristics and factors are associated with adolescents’ abilities to cope with pressure experienced from schoolwork?’

Qualitative data will be received from the Alexander Foundation via Marloes Kleinjan as contact person of Utrecht University. It concerns nine elaborated interviews, five panel discussions and data from three participants in action-research, within which the concept of schoolwork pressure is further investigated.

No report based on the data from the project entitled ‘Geluk onder druk’ may be made public, unless permission has been obtained in advance from the Project Coordinator for the ‘Geluk onder druk’.

After the expiration of this contract, dated 1 July 2021, Carlijn Vree shall delete the ‘Geluk onder druk’ data.

Dates and signature:

26-01-2021

Carlijn Vree

Marloes Kleinjan

