

Research Article

The use of coping strategies as a means of fostering personal development for students with a disability: a case study

Cristiaan van Meurs¹ (*Emancipatie en Educatie Gehandicapte Arbeidskrachten Groep (EEGA) Institute*)

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Abstract

Students dropping out of mainstream education are considered a problem for students themselves, schools and society as a whole. Unemployment rates are higher for school dropouts, and besides economic consequences for both the individuals as well as society, there are also several social consequences involved. Within the group of school dropouts, a subgroup can be distinguished; students with a disability. These students can have a physical disability, a psychological grievance, learning disorder or a combination of these. Many students with a disability experience difficulties during their study. Some are related to a lack of specific adaptations, others involve a lack of social or planning skills because of a disorder, or an inability to cope with the daily demands in school and life and general. Based on reports from these dropout students, a trend can be seen that as long as they are in a classroom situation, in which there is a certain amount of guidance and understanding, students experience less trouble than when participating on the employment market in an internship. This study examines the reasons we see students dropping out during this phase in the later stages of their study. Applying a case study approach it examines the practice of the coping programme, a specific programme delivered at the institute EEGA, targeted on creating insight in students' own coping mechanisms. Findings indicate that although the programme is evaluated as useful by students in general, there is a difference between having insight in one's own behaviour, and actually changing this behaviour or adopting a new way of coping. While many students report a change brought about by coping strategies, it is uncertain whether the outcomes have been influenced by socially desirable answering.

Keywords: *school dropout; coping strategies; coping programme; disabilities; personal development; participation law*

¹ Corresponding author email address: christiaanvanmeurs@outlook.com

Introduction

This study examines the practice of *The Coping Programme*, a specific programme delivered at the *Emancipatie en Educatie Gehandicapte Arbeidskrachten Groep (EEGA) Institute* in the Netherlands, targeted on creating insight in coping mechanisms of students with a disability. Most students at EEGA have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or a combination of disorders which prevents them from completing a mainstream study successfully. In a case study, the different perspectives of students as well as EEGA staff are combined. The preferred coping strategies of the students are investigated, and the question is raised in what way the programme can support the furthering of students' personal development.

My study on the use of the EEGA coping programme as a method for fostering personal development aims to provide insight in key factors in the process of successfully completing a study and participating in work. The study looks for new perspectives, by which to view and ameliorate this process. This is not only of interest for EEGA, it is also anticipated that this study could be of interest for the local municipalities, as it could provide them with vital insights in how to approach the group of young people with a *Wajong* allowance, arising from the transition of responsibility mentioned above.

Research questions

The following research questions are the focal point of this study:

- . Which coping strategies do disabled students prefer?
- . How useful is insight into coping strategies in furthering students' personal development?
- . How can the EEGA pedagogy incorporate a coping programme, supported by technology?

Literature

The literature review suggests there is a relation between school dropout, stress, and the possible use of ineffective coping strategies. Also, a dominant use of passive coping strategies by students with a disability can be distinguished from prior research.

First, from the literature (Bridgeland et al, 2006) we learn that an important factor for students dropping out of mainstream education is the level of engagement. Rumberger & Ah Lim

(2008) note that active engagement is a key factor in success. A lack of engagement can result in the opposite; students dropping out of education. Bridgeland et al (2006) argue: 'Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches – and each absence made them less willing to go back.' (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p8).

Other reasons for dropping out can be found in the lack of support for students with a disorder or disability, who, as a result, will have more trouble obtaining a start qualification (Holter, 2008). The consequences of dropping out seem alarming, and do not only affect one's career, but also an individual's private life and future. In other words there are economic as well as social consequences. Literature also suggests that there is a correlation between mental health factors and school dropout, whereas stress in general has been identified as having a negative effect on student's performance and wellbeing by several researches.

At EEGA, we see several students with anxiety disorders who appear to be very sensitive to stress, and tend to avoid stressful situations. The effects of stress may lead to both physiological and psychological health problems, as well as cognitive and behavioural issues, as suggested by Houtman, Jettinghoff & Cedillo (2007). EEGA students show different types of behaviour when confronted with stressors. When confronted with a problematic situation, one student may get emotional, where another will leave the situation or avoid it beforehand. These are described as 'coping strategies', the 'specific tactics that students may use to alleviate stress when demands in their environments exceed their resources to manage such demands' (Combs and Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Coping strategies can be different in nature, where some styles will be focused on influencing the situation itself, and others will focus on how the individual reacts to the situation. Some researchers make a distinction between 'productive' and 'non-productive' strategies. Several scales have been developed to identify how a person reacts to stress, which coping strategy he or she will use. EEGA makes use of the UCL93 Coping scale, which consists of seven scales:

- . Active tackling
- . Palliative reacting
- . Avoidance
- . Seeking social support
- . Passive reacting

- . Expression of emotion
- . Reassuring thoughts.

Several researchers studied a possible correlation between disabled students and coping strategies, which add to the idea that students with a disorder tend to use different strategies than non-disabled students (Robertson and Frydenberg 2011; Firth et al. 2010; Covic, Adamson and Hough 2000). It suggests that people with various disabilities tend to show more use of passive coping strategies, that there is a relation between disability and the higher use of passive or non-productive coping strategies. However it must be noted that there is a possibility that the nature of the problems individuals with a disability encounter differs from non-disabled individuals, hence the difference in reported coping strategies.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a case study was carried out. The case study methodology was chosen, as the analysis of the EEGA programme focuses on *how* the programme works and how it fits in the EEGA pedagogy. The case cannot be considered without taken into account the specific EEGA context; the unique contextual conditions at EEGA are highly relevant to the study. The data collection incorporated a questionnaire and interviews, in an effort to define the key elements that contribute to this goal. A quantitative test was included in the research in order to find out whether students with disabilities differ from students without a disability in the use of coping strategies, and whether having insight in coping strategies also leads to change in the use of coping strategies.

Quantitative data collection

The first research question which coping strategy is most commonly used by disabled students is addressed by a quantitative approach: the data is gathered from the UCL93 (Utrechtse Copinglijst) tests completed by the students, limited in time from January 2009 until December 2013.

Qualitative data collection

The second question and third research question are addressed by the use of questionnaires and interviews. In the first stage, a questionnaire was send to a group of 66 students, also randomly spread between the different stages of the EEGA programme. In the second stage of the data collection, interviews were held with four students, during different stages of their

course. Also, the trainer responsible for the coping programme was interviewed on points of view and experience with the coping strategy pedagogy, and the educational manager who developed the initial coping programme. A few 'themes' arose from the first analysis of the UCL test and the questionnaire, including:

- . Awareness/ insight on coping strategies.
- . Effectiveness of the coping programme
- . Continuity / pedagogy – After the initial coping training

These themes were used as a basis for the development of the interview questions. As a method, the 'Interview guide' approach was chosen to perform the interviews (Patton, 2002).

Findings

A summary of findings derived from the used methods of data collection as described above, is presented in this section.

The ULC test

The UCL test results from the EEGA student population, 287 in total, are compared with reference groups as included in the *Utrechtse Coping Lijst* manual (Schreurs et al., 1993) below. The procedure of obtaining the data consisted of three steps. First, all 287 test reports² were exported as separate portable document format (PDF) files from the online testing environment. These 287 reports were merged into one file for accessibility reasons. The individual test scores were then added to a spreadsheet one by one in order to calculate the total and average scores. For the translation, the English version of the UCL was used, which was developed by Turner et al. (2012). The coping scales were translated using this document. The UCL test distinguishes between male and female norm groups. Therefore the results of the test are presented separately for males and females, as shown below.

Table 1 below shows the scores on the different coping scales prior to starting the EEGA programme, male students only, N=182. For comparison, Table 2 below shows the scores of the norm group. Table 3 shows the scores on the different coping scales prior to starting the EEGA programme, female students only, N=105. For comparison, in the table below the scores of the norm group are shown on Table 4.

² Note: The original UCL test is in Dutch

Table 1: Harcourt ULC93 test - EEGA students male only N=182

A - ACT – Active tackling	P - PAL - Palliative reacting	V - VER - Avoidance	S - SOC – Seeking social support	PR - PAS – Passive reacting	E - EXP – Expression of emotion	G - GER – Reassuring thoughts
18,21	20,53	19,21	12,54	14,63	6,65	12,38
Average	average	high	average	high	average	Average

Table 2: Norm group - Male students between 14 and 20 years of age (N=332)

18,6	18,3	15,8	11,7	10,7	6,7	12,3
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Table 3: Harcourt ULC93 test - EEGA students female only N=105

A - ACT – Active tackling	P - PAL - Palliative reacting	V - VER - Avoidance	S - SOC – Seeking social support	PR - PAS – Passive reacting	E - EXP – Expression of emotion	G - GER – Reassuring thoughts
17,51	20,41	18,07	14,61	13,91	6,42	12,64
average	average	average	average	average	average	Average

Table 4: Norm group: ‘Female students between 14 and 20 years of age (N=417)’

17,6	19,4	16,5	14,2	11,7	6,6	12,8
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The questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to get a global insight into the programme, experiences from the students, based on a selection of questions on awareness and appliance of coping strategies. The questionnaire was handed out personally to each student and filled out by hand. 65 questionnaires were returned. The data collected was merged into one spreadsheet, in order to calculate the averages, which were then converted to percentages. Then, the percentages were transposed to a list, which served as the basis for creating graphs. A selection of these graphs is presented below. Figure 1 shows when students first heard of the coping programme. More than 1/3rd of the students say they heard about coping first during the actual coping training. Almost half of the students hear about coping during the preliminary stage of the programme; the ‘Talenten Expeditie’ (TE), translated as ‘Talent Expedition’. This is the stage prior to the coping training.

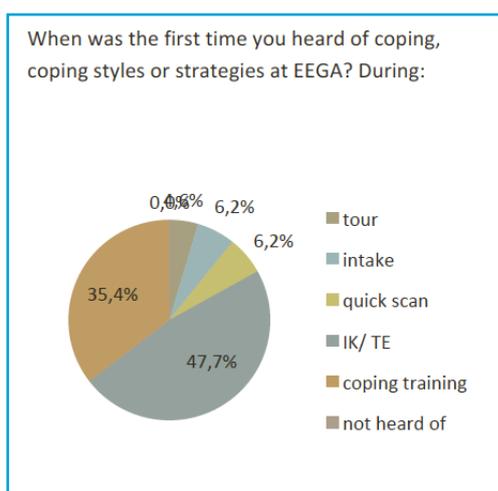


Figure 1: When hearing about

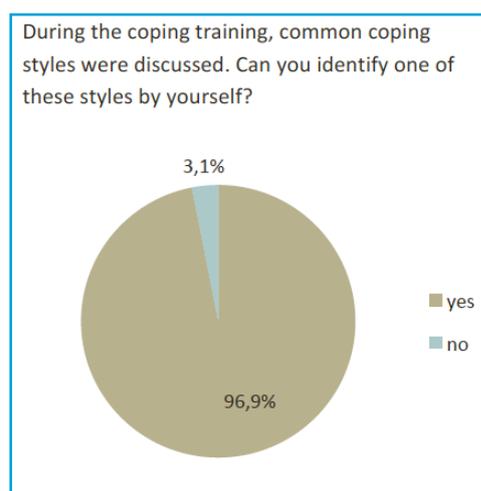


Figure 2: Identifying strategies

Figure 2, shows the number of students who are able to identify coping styles by themselves. Almost all students are able to name a coping strategy. Figure 3 shows the preferred coping style of students. All students that returned the questionnaire have completed the initial coping training, and should be familiar with the strategies. Figure 4 shows students’ opinion on whether they use different coping strategies then before, after having completed the coping training.

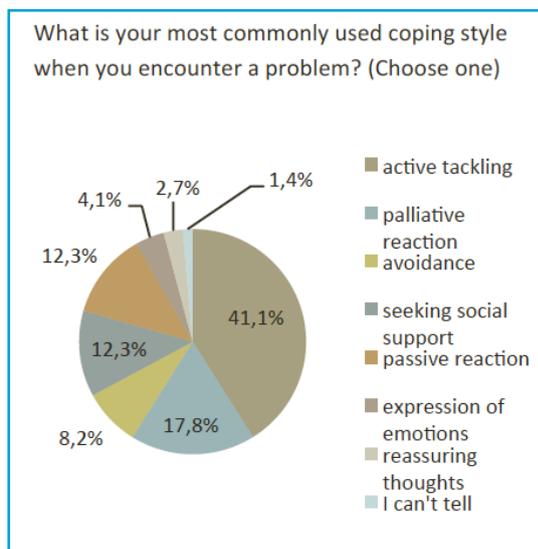


Figure 3: Commonly used coping styles

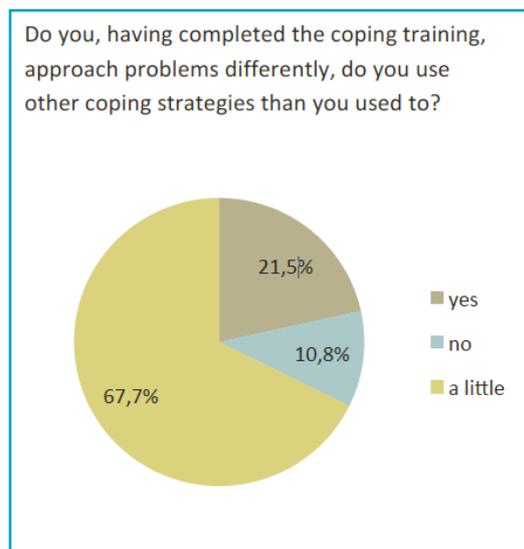


Figure 4: Use of new coping strategies

Interviews

A total of seven interviews were conducted in Dutch and translated for this paper. Four students were interviewed on their experiences with the EEGA Coping programme. These were ‘informal conversational interviews’, as described in the methodology chapter, also referred to as ‘semi structured’ interviews. The other three interviews used the ‘general interview guide’ approach. The interviewees were three EEGA employees directly involved with the coping programme. Triangulation was made use of on several questions, linked to the questionnaire. For example whether the students felt the coping programme contributed to their own personal development, and whether they made active considerations regarding coping strategies in case of running into a problem or conflict.

The origin of the EEGA coping programme is explained by one of the interviewed EEGA employees by giving an example: ‘Say, you arrive in a forest, as a naked human being, without a spear, and you are confronted with a large bear, that gives you a level of arousal. So, your system will try to control the situation, meaning there are basically two things you can do, because standing still would be the worst option. You can engage in fighting, the active coping, or you can think, no way I am going to do that, and run out of the forest. That, in its most basic nature, is a way of coping, called fight or flight.’ He explains that first, your biological system is switched on, then there is a short moment of thinking, and then an

execution of behaviour. This is deeply embedded in all psychological, behavioural studies. He argues: 'during later times, this concept was elaborated, because humans are smart beings, in line with the evolution of behaviour, different types of behaviours developed.'

Answers on the effectiveness, applicability and overall feeling about the Coping programme by the students.

All four students report unanimously that they have experienced the coping programme as useful. Participant A argues that from the programme he got insight into how he acts in certain situations, stating: '*it made me very aware of things, how I deal with it, how I react to it.*' Participants B and C agree on this, where participant C adds that it does not only give insight into herself, but also in how others react on her. Participants A and B share their overall opinion, where participant A states that it was '*instructive, positive, and gives people insight in how they act in with situations*', and participant B states that he experienced it as '*very fascinating during that period and I have learned a lot from it.*' Participant D answers that he experienced the programme as '*difficult and annoying now and then.*' He explains that this has to do with the fact that he was confronted with himself, realising that things hadn't gone as he had hoped in the past. Participant C emphasizes the importance of insight in own coping styles and argues that it is: '*very important, what all people need to have, and should be developing here.*'

This suggests that the students have benefited, but it is not easy to determine the type of change that occurred. The students suggest that the coping programme has effect, but does not lead to a change in behaviour by itself. The question is raised whether the programme has had an effect on their approach to coping with problems?

Participant A: 'When you're stuck in the middle of something, experience a problem or something like that, it does come back, the coping theory. When you're viewing at all sides of the case, it is something you take into consideration. That is something I have gotten out of the programme.'

This however does not yet suggest a change of act. Participant B gives detailed information on how he experiences a problematic situation and suggests that at that moment, it is not always possible for him to adapt to a more efficient copings style. He explains:

'when you are in the middle of such a situation... Then I find it difficult to think rationally. In the sense of, problem: a; solution: b. It confounds me. Afterwards you are able to think 'I should have done this instead of this, so for the next time...', but being in the middle of the situation this is hard.'

This clearly suggests that for him, being aware of own coping mechanisms is valuable, but does not always lead to the adoption of a different coping style when he experiences a problem. He emphasizes:

'When I am experiencing a problem, if I can find room for it, I'll try to use my rational thinking abilities. But if I am in a 'panic button' situation, I don't have room for it, and fall back on old habits.'

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

This study demonstrates that, although the programme is evaluated as useful by students in general, there is a difference between having insight in own behaviour, and actually changing this behaviour or adopting a new way of coping. Although many students reported a change in used coping strategies, caution must be taken with this finding, as the outcomes might have been influenced by socially desirable answering. Below the findings of this research are summarized for each research question:

Which coping strategies do disabled students prefer?

In summary, the quantitative research show that EEGA students with a physical, psychological, or combined disability, show significantly higher on the scales *Avoidance* and *Passive reacting*, prior to starting their programme at EEGA than the norm group students 14-20 years of age.

All students who have completed the coping training were invited to complete the questionnaire for the qualitative research. In this questionnaire, students were asked what their most commonly used coping style was at the moment, when confronted with an issue or problem, in an attempt to gain insight in their *current* preferred coping styles. No less than 41.1 percent of the students choose *Active tackling* as their most commonly used coping style,

followed by *Palliative reacting* (17.8 percent), *Passive reaction* and *Seeking Social support*. *Avoidance* is chosen by 8.2 percent. This outcome is not logical. First, I would like to emphasize the fact that this was only an inquiry, a questioning; therefore no conclusions can be based on this answer. Second, there is a chance that this has to do with social desirability bias. Verstraete (2008) conducted research in this area and states: 'Social desirability, or, the tendency of respondents to provide answers that are 'right' or 'wrong' in their expectance, is a source of systematic bias in any self-reporting research.' The questionnaire itself was handed out personally, and returned or personally collected by the researcher. A possible negative side effect of this could be the fact that the anonymity was affected in the eyes of the student, leading to social desirability bias.

How useful is insight into coping strategies in furthering students' personal development?

No hard evidence can be drawn from the research that having insight in the use of own coping strategies leads to fostering personal development. However during the different methods of research (questionnaire and interviews), the participants did show insight in their own coping styles by being able to recognize own coping styles, or even emphasized the importance of it in their answers. This means that from the study can be concluded that the students do obtain insight in their coping by participating in the EEGA coping programme. This finding was based on triangulated data collected during the questionnaire as well as the interviews. Regarding the validity of these findings, it must be noted that the student selection for the interviews was based on convenience sampling.

How can the EEGA pedagogy incorporate a coping programme, supported by technology?

In the findings of the study, two main themes stand out. The first one is the place of the programme in the pedagogy; the findings show that the attention to coping decreases during the entire course. At the same time, students suggest repeated attention, continuity regarding to coping as desirable, for example by means of a refreshment course or multiple sessions of reflection. A recommendation based on these findings would be to expand the programme over a longer period of time. As the initial coping training could serve as a starting point, these moments of reflection could serve as periodic intervention moments.

From this research several new research directions can be derived. It would be valuable to research the development of coping strategies in more detail. This research shows that people

do find it important to learn the theory about coping strategies because it gives them awareness. Whether they profit from this by actually changing their styles or adapting to other coping strategies in new situations cannot be answered by this research.

Secondly, it would be valuable to see whether students with a physical disability use different coping styles compared to students with a psychological disability like ASD, because the problems they face are different in nature. In this research, no distinction was made between types of disability. Also, gender difference in the use of coping strategies of students with a disability, would be an interesting new research direction. This study does suggest differences in the use of coping strategies by females compared to males, but this was not a main theme in this study, and therefore not studied in detail.

Finally, further research could be conducted on the use of technology to support the programme. This was beyond the scope of this research, but prior research suggested the use of for example online social networks and specific online platforms.

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