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Crisis Situations and Strategies for Coping with Stress in Children of Younger School Age

Sandra Kadłubowska¹**ABSTRACT:**

INTRODUCTION: In recent years, we have witnessed chronically difficult situations that lead to disorganization of everyday life. Early school students are affected by the phenomenon of growth with a crisis in the background. The research undertaken provides information on strategies for coping nine-year-old children with a crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The aim of this text is to present our own research, which is an attempt to find answers to the questions: What strategies for coping with the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic were used by nine-year-olds? How were coping strategies used in the crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic among nine-year-olds?

RESEARCH METHOD: Twenty-two nine-year-olds participated in this study. Visual ethnography was used. A qualitative analysis was made of two types of data-drawings and oral statements by the authors of the works.

RESULTS: Students used various strategies to cope with crisis situations. Six studies observed that task-oriented strategies were dominant. They included: action aimed at solving the problem, searching for information about a difficult situation and analysing solutions. In the remaining sixteen cases, the use of avoidance and emotion-focused strategies was observed interchangeably. Denial, minimizing the problem, ridiculing the source of fear, and using emotionally charged language were noted.

CONCLUSIONS: In the face of the changing reality and the crises affecting mental health, the need to provide assistance in this area and to set the direction for possible support at the institutional level was noticed.

KEYWORDS: strategies for coping with crisis situations, stress, pandemic, nine-year-olds, visual ethnography

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We walked "along an unknown road, trying to preserve the wisdom, prudence and pedagogical values that guide us" (Pyżalski 2020, p. 5).

Introduction

When a new threat arises, anxiety is a natural human reaction. In recent years, we have been facing chronically difficult situations that have shattered our sense of security and led to disorganisation of our daily life. In 2020, a pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus triggered a global crisis. A sanitary regime and a series of restrictions were introduced in educational institutions to protect human health and ensure safety. Educationalists and teachers also made efforts to take care of the mental condition of students. Emotional support was not a priority task (Report of the Minister of Education and Science. Ensuring the operation of educational system units during the COVID-19 epidemic). Another crisis shattering daily life occurred on February 24, 2022, with the onset of the war in Ukraine. The fear and anxiety triggered within Polish society by the armed attack on a neighbouring country had a significant impact on the mental health of students. Consequently, a need arose to take care of the emotional well-being of students who are growing up in an environment marked by stress and crisis. As a result, a study was conducted as described in this article.

The literature offers a range of definitions of stress. Reykowski defines it as the relationship of external factors to a person's characteristics and this person's response to these factors (1966). Strelau, on the other hand, states that stress occurs when there is a discordance between capabilities and demands placed on the individual, provided there is motivation to resist these demands. Both can be objective and subjective (2005). As a theoretical basis for interpreting the results of the study, the theoretical framework advanced by psychologists Lazarus and Folkman was adopted. They conceptualised stress as: a specific relationship between a person and the environment, appraised by the person as burdening or exceeding the person's own resources and threatening their well-being (1984). On the other hand, they defined coping strategies, also called preventive strategies, as a coping process in which cognitive and behavioural efforts are made to address specific external and/or internal demands (judged to be beyond a person's capabilities).

People have a variety of resources—a complex arrangement of personality, dispositional and cognitive factors that create opportunities to support ourselves, our mental resilience (Moos & Billings, 1982). Further on, the article outlines styles of coping with stress in a crisis situation in line with the approach of Norman S. Endler and James Parker (1990). They refer to the concepts of Lazarus and Folkman by defining a coping style as an individual's habitual manner of responding to a range of stressful

circumstances. They distinguish between task-oriented, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented styles (Strelau et al., 2005, p. 15). Following is a concise overview of their approach:

- **The task-oriented style** involves coping with stress by implementing specific actions to effect a change in a stressful situation or solve a problem by engaging cognitive processes.
- **The emotion-oriented style** is about focusing on one's own emotional processes. In this model, there is a tendency towards wishful thinking and less willingness to act in order to cope with the stressful situation.
- **The avoidance-oriented style** is characterised by the mitigation of stress by avoiding thinking about it. Researchers identify two forms of coping within this style: engaging in substitute activities or social relationships.

From the research conducted by Irena Heszen-Niejodek (2000), where the theoretical context was the concept of Lazarus and Folkman, it appears that different action strategies can intertwine and be deployed interchangeably; they constitute an individual's style of coping with difficult situations. The degree of coping effectiveness in a stressful situation and the choice of actions taken resulting from the preferred style are also contingent upon temperamental attributes and individual reactivity (Strelau et al., 2005, p. 44–45).

The actions taken by an individual to combat the psychological crisis or the perceived stress are aimed at regaining a sense of security, which is a primordial and existential value, dating back to the beginning of the world, an essential element of evolution. It ensures the survival and development of every human being (Socha, 2021).

The need for security, according to Abraham Maslow (2009), as well as physiological needs, have been assigned to primary needs, which are the foundation of normal development and are of great importance for the satisfaction of subsequent needs, such as a sense of belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. They assume the role of an active and "dominant factor that mobilises the body's resources only in critical situations, such as war, illness, natural disasters, crime waves, social disorganisation, neurosis (...) or persistently adverse conditions" (Maslow, 2009, p. 67). Psychologists indicate that the sense of security is shaped by biological characteristics, innate predispositions, individual differences that make up temperament, as well as emotional reactivity, which determines the readiness to react with anxiety and fear to various situations (Łoskot, 2022). When people experience a crisis, defence mechanisms are triggered—coping strategies, which consist of "a person's choice of such behaviour that aims to restore a state of security or prevent its loss" (Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010, p. 135).

Problem and objective of the research

The objective of the research was to identify the coping strategies of nine-year-olds in the crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic.

The research problem that emerged while working with nine-year-olds is coping strategies in the crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic. The research questions that guided the search were formulated as follows:

- Which coping strategies did the nine-year-olds use in the crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic?
- How were the coping strategies used in the crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic in nine-year-olds?

Research method and sample characteristics

An important source of knowledge about an individual and the surrounding reality is their own work. Janina Uszyńska-Jarmoc (2009) points out that the knowledge that comes directly from a child is a key, necessary supplement to the perspective of an adult, forming the image of a person during their childhood. In line with psychologists involved in development analysis, she reminds us

that the experiences of one's childhood recorded in an individual biography can be an invaluable source of knowledge about the child, their living space and learning space. This knowledge should be the basis for designing individual pedagogical work (2009, p. 124).

Since drawing is a way of getting to know the child's experiences, it should be used to supplement conversations, interviews and observations made.

Given these arguments, for the study, an approach within the qualitative paradigm was adopted. Our methodological choice is informed by the visual methods canon; Banks (2013) offers a compelling rationale for employing images as systematic research evidence. He states that images are a ubiquitous element in society; hence, when studying a group of people, they must be made the focus of interest and analysis.

Visual ethnography is a method entailing the analysis of images, photographs, films and drawings used to study communities (Banks, 2013, pp. 23–24). It is based on the collection of data, experiences and interpretations made by the ethnographer (Kunat, 2015). The choice of the appropriate method is confirmed by the fact that the

researcher also served as a class tutor—a person familiar with the characteristics and functioning of the school community. Research conducted by ethnographers expects them to

immerse themselves, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period, observing the course of events, listening to conversations, asking questions; to put it simply, the research requires the collection of any available data that illuminates the research subject (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000, p. 1).

Therefore, this method is applicable to the analysis of school life and has been deemed appropriate for use.

The visual resources presented in the article represent the work of third-grade elementary school students. Twenty-two individuals (12 girls and 10 boys) with no specific educational needs participated in the study. Twenty-two works depicting the vision of the coronavirus were collected, along with twenty-two statements by the authors of the drawings. One boy refused to perform the task. The drawings were made as part of art education in November 2020, just before the start of the next stage of remote learning. Verbal consent was obtained from students and their parents to anonymously collect and use the works for academic purposes during a parent-teacher meeting in September 2020. The verbal material was collected during school classes in compliance with established ethical standards.

The process of data analysis

To answer the research questions, a qualitative analysis was performed on two types of data: drawings and authors' statements. In the artwork, the theme was developed, and the children were asked questions prepared in advance. The creation of the "Virus vision" and the collection of student comments proceeded concurrently. The students' statements were recorded during the unstructured dialogue. Work on the obtained research material began with an analysis of the drawings.

According to the established concept on coping styles in crisis situations by Norman S. Endler and James Parker (1990), the following three key categories emerged:

- task-oriented style,
- emotion-oriented style,
- avoidance-oriented style.

The analysis consisted of three stages: description of the drawing, coding of the description (the elements and features of the drawings that determined the classifica-

tion of the work as a particular style were indicated), and selection of the resulting sets of works (categories). Given the adopted purpose of the research, the focus was on student works from which the use of coping strategies in crisis situations could be read. This article also analyses the statements of the authors of the presented works in terms of key categories (task-, emotion- and avoidance-oriented style) and the words that are the commentary of nine-year-olds on their works.

Results

This part of the article presents the results of the author's own research, their analysis and interpretation. It contains descriptions of selected children's works and statements from third graders. The text in italics is the comments of students—authors of works.

The intertwining and interchangeable use of different action strategies was observed in students, which may represent their individual style of coping with stress. Below are excerpts from the analysis with information on the emerging style. This is the response to the research question posed.



Figure 1. Artwork by a girl, age 9

Source: own research

The central part of the artwork shows a frightened, screaming girl (the author) holding her hands over her face. Attention is drawn to her wide-open eyes, the blush on her face and the hand-written text: "This virus is terrible!" She is surrounded by green spirals that symbolise airborne viruses. It can be inferred from the student's account that she fears the virus, which she feels is dangerous. The child expresses concern for

her and her family's safety. While creating, the girl said: "It's still safe at home, but I'm afraid for my family because the air is infected everywhere. This virus is terrible!" Confirming these words is the girl's drawn home, which she still sees as the safest place for her. However, looking at the vision of the house, one gets the impression that it is not a stable building; its foundation has a cavity. When asked why the spring flowers appeared in November, the girl explained that the coronavirus appeared in the spring (that is, when the first lockdown occurred in Poland). The girl spoke openly about her fears, her memories of the first months of remote learning, and reflected on where she still felt comfortable and safe. A strategy for coping with stress in a crisis situation emerged, referring to an emotion-oriented style due to statements focused on difficult emotions and the indicated main theme of the work (fear, anxiety for herself and the family). The next stage of the interview also included looking for solutions and analysing the situation. This was not the only work where a child drew their home threatened by the virus. There were visions of bacteria "crushing the crumbling house". One of such visions can be seen below:

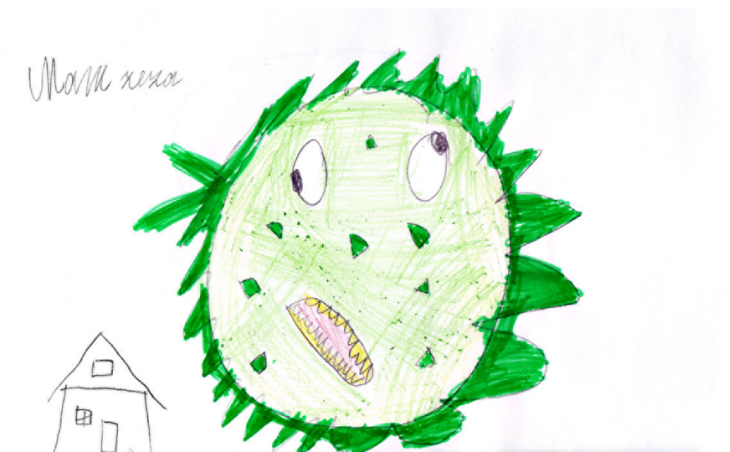


Figure 2. Artwork by a boy, age 9

Source: own research

The boy's work depicts a huge virus in the central part of the drawing, disrupting the macro and micro scale proportions. The green bacterium is heading towards a house that consists of five dashes, has no foundation and has two windows and a carelessly marked door. The author decided to add the comment "I have strabismus" above the house. His account indicated that the family had not contracted COVID so far. The boy hoped that the squinting, unwieldy bacterium would still not find its way into his home. In the first stage of creating the work, he playfully talked about his idea

of a virus that has a vision problem. However, the child's later statements confirmed that his home was no longer a safe place for him. The student was unable to point to another place where he did not feel at risk. He said: "I don't know where it's safe now..." The main stress coping strategies observed were avoidance: denying difficult situations, ridiculing the source of anxiety.

Pandemic-themed jokes were made during art education. One student asked: "Did you hear about the gentleman who went shopping wearing a face mask ONLY?" The author of these words was a boy who refused to illustrate the coronavirus and decided to write on a piece of paper: "the coronavirus is shit" [in Polish: *guwno* (spelling error according to the original)]. The child author of these words used stress coping strategies such as denying difficult situations, downplaying them, distancing himself and avoiding calling the pandemic a threat. Later in the class, the boy explained that he chose not to create a virus because dealing with something that does not exist is a waste of time. The reluctance to create a "virus vision" that arose at the beginning of the class and the tension associated with it were relieved fairly quickly with laughter. Turning the situation into a joke was another strategy that improved the mood effectively, and that was used by many other participants in the class. A leading stress coping strategy emerged, referring to the avoidance-oriented style.

Some of the viruses had attributes of the devil, dragon and monster. Third-grade students depicted the character of the works with pitchforks, claws or sharp fangs. The authors intended to emphasise its strength, superiority over humans and menacing disposition. The children explained that the virus was as difficult to control as a dragon, as frightening as a devil, and incalculable.



Figure 3. Artwork by a boy, age 9

Source: own research

In one of the works, the virus is depicted as a boxer waving his gloved hands with a menacing expression. The green creature has creepy, slanting eyes. The author accentuated them in red; the pupils were marked in such a harsh way that the structure of the paper was distorted. The virus has a moustache and beard. Its angry mouth is open, its red and black tongue is visible. The figure is shouting. It is standing with its legs wide apart. In addition to boxing gloves, wears shorts and shoes. Two flags are also visible (an element typical of competing athletes, not assigned by the student to a specific country). Behind the virus's back, hosts of its comrades are visible, ready to attack. Their number may indicate that the child is pointing to the global dimension of the pandemic. In a conversation with the teacher, the boy repeatedly provided information about where, in which countries, the virus had existed before it reached Poland. A commentary posted by the author also appeared on the work: This virus is an invented virus. Perhaps this is indicative of the defence strategies used by the child. The boy uses interchangeably a stress coping strategy referring to the avoidance-oriented style (denial) and the task-oriented style (monitoring the status of the threat). The increased scrutiny manifested itself in reporting the status of infections on a municipal, national and global scale.



Figure 4. Artwork by a girl, age 9

Source: own research

Another, more common vision of the coronavirus was the one created by the media (TV, radio, internet). The children's statements demonstrate that both they and their families obtain information regarding the pandemic from these sources. "We already have XXX new infections! XXX people died, I watched the news with my mum and remember (...) They will close our school for sure (...)", said the student with poignancy. Sourcing of information in this way from the media is by no means an isolated

case. A significant number of students kept up to date with the latest news. This is confirmed by frequent statements, full of concerns of the type: "There will be remote learning. (...) Should we pack all the books from the lockers today?" In the students' conversations among themselves and with the class tutor, questions about the immediate future arose on a regular basis, implying their fears and confusion. This is confirmed by another drawing by a girl.

In the centre of the child's work, there is a green virus particle in a crown, wearing a protective mask, but put on the wrong way. All around the virus, there are smaller green particles and blue protective gloves. An important element of the work is the TV set, clearly marked in black. There, the prime minister informs about the current restrictions. The depicted figure stands behind a lectern, has his hands raised in the air and shouts. There are three symbols around the lectern: a virus, a mask and protective gloves. Right next to the screen, there is a handwritten sentence: "This virus is terrible!" The author of the artwork at first hesitated whether the person depicted was a health minister, prime minister, president or TV presenter. In the process of creating her work, she decided as to who the character was and what he was communicating to the audience. The girl was not convinced that the masks kept people safe. Hence, the idea to present the "Coronavirus" wearing a surgical mask. This may indicate an element of misinformation that affected the child. The girl is aware that the prime minister, one of the most important people in the state, is speaking in an emotional way, presenting restrictions, and is upset about the raging pandemic. Based on the analysis of the work and excerpts from the author's statements, it was concluded that a dominant strategy for coping with the crisis had emerged—a task-oriented style, i.e. seeking information about the subject (difficult situation) and analysing multiple solutions and choosing the right one.

When analysing the works, a division was also apparent between drawings made aesthetically, with attention to detail, and those made carelessly. The students whose works usually stood out for their ingenuity and richness of detail this time worked quickly and carelessly. In the process of explaining the pace of work, it became clear that the topic did not appeal to third graders. On the back of one sheet, a comment by the author appeared: "This virus is: unpleasant, uncool, ugly." This may explain the lack of attention to the aesthetics of the works.

During the research into the drawings, modification of the real world using micro and macro scales was noticed; the virus particles in the works grew to the size of people or even residential buildings. This may have been intended to emphasise the magnitude of the crisis faced by the third-grade students. This corresponded with the narrative of the children, whose goal was to present "Their own vision of the virus". The thesis is justified by statements and comments from students ("The virus is everywhere, it is strong, it even attacks houses.") and answers to the question: Why is the

virus particle bigger than the house you painted? ("Because it is so terribly dangerous and reaches everywhere!").

Summary of results

Social researcher Banks states that incorporating images "(...) in the process of creating and collecting data can allow the kind of insight into society that no other tools can achieve" (2013, p. 23–24). The use of such methods often leads the researcher in new, previously unknown directions, "thus reflecting the fluidity of human experience" (Banks, 2013, p. 198). Through the implementation of the research done using visual ethnography, children's understanding of their difficult experiences related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic was captured, and material was obtained to formulate suggestions that prompt a necessary course of action for educationalists.

The works created by the students are a valuable resource. Their analysis helped to interpret and understand the action strategies and emotions experienced by children in difficult situations involving threats to their health. The authors of the drawings revealed the use of various coping strategies in crisis situations. It was observed in six artworks that the dominant strategies used by children were task-oriented. They consisted of: action to solve the problem (while maintaining their positions), seeking information about the subject (difficult situation) and analysing multiple solutions and choosing the right one. In the remaining sixteen cases, interchangeable use of avoidance- and emotion-oriented strategies was observed. Denial, belittling the problem, ridiculing the source of the anxiety, and the use of emotionally charged language were noted.

The results correspond with J. Kowalczyk's observations; he reviewed international studies indicating a significant impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and adolescents.

Increased levels of experiencing anxiety, depression, experiencing psychological stress, more frequent use of emotional stress coping strategies, reduced quality of life, greater attachment to the caregivers, more negative behaviours are observed, among others, and long-term consequences for the mental health of children and adolescents are perceived (Kowalczyk, 2023, p. 158).

Bałachowicz and Zbróg (2023) also wrote about early childhood education students' experience of change in a crisis situation. According to their results, the children experienced social isolation as a strong multidimensional pressure that caused difficult emotions, as well as feelings of emptiness and closure.

The incoming information about threats to health and life disrupted the sense of security and changed the emotional climate of students' daily experiences, evoking feelings such as sadness, despair, fear, anger, uncertainty, and pain (Bałachowicz & Zbróg, 2023, p. 324–325).

Conclusions

Currently, students in early childhood education and other educational stages are affected by the phenomenon of growing up with a crisis in the background. In view of the dynamically changing reality and the difficulties that occur, this article can be taken as an inspiration to undertake further research and develop proposals for measures to promote a sense of security, which is the foundation of normal child development. Taking care of the mental well-being of students, even though it is currently a major challenge for educationalists, teachers, class tutors and parents alike, should be a priority task. This is confirmed by the basic directions for the implementation of the state's educational policy in the 2022/2023 school year, as defined by the Ministry of Education and Science: "Supporting the educational role of the family (...) Protecting and strengthening the mental health of children and youth" (Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, 2022).

It can be assumed that educationalists and other adults around the child may have used different strategies to cope with stress in a crisis situation. The students' statements and attitudes may also have been emulations of narratives experienced at home.

Research limitations

The article considers the impact of a crisis situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic. Although those experiences are already behind us, information related to the illnesses is still emerging, and for some, the emotions associated with it are still vivid. Therefore, it seems important to analyse the impressions and reflections of being in and dealing with difficult situations both from the point of view of the individual's functioning and the provision of assistance. This is especially valuable for children.

When using a qualitative paradigm, it should be kept in mind that the results obtained are representative and cannot be generalised or analysed statistically. With the emergence of crises affecting mental health, the need to provide assistance in this area and to set the course for possible support at the institutional level has been recognised.

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