Under Pressure? Stress and Coping in Adolescents During Preparation for the Leaving Certificate

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Summary

This study utilised multiple focus groups to explore the concepts and experiences of stress and coping for adolescents preparing to undertake Leaving Certificate examinations. Inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; informed by Charmaz, 2006) was used to develop the following themes from the data:

Stress Conceptualisation:
- Theme 1: Stress as a feeling
- Theme 2: Origins of stress

Causes of Stress:
- Theme 1: The self
- Theme 2: Other people
- Theme 3: School stress
- Theme 4: The Leaving Certificate
- Theme 5: Growing up
- Theme 6: General things in life

Coping Conceptualisation:
- Theme 1: Carrying on
- Theme 2: Moving away:
- Theme 3: Acting on stress

Stress Reduction:
- Theme 1: Things others could do
- Theme 2: Solitary coping
- Theme 3: Resting
- Theme 4: Social/ peer relations
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Introduction

In 2013 a report on the epidemiology of psychiatric illness across young people in Ireland noted that one in three will have had a mental disorder by age 13, rising to one in two by age 24 (Cannon, Coughlan, Clarke, Harley, & Kelleher, 2013). This report also notes that not only are young people at risk for issues such as self-harm and suicide, but that Ireland measures higher than many other developed countries for these issues. If people cannot cope with the normal stresses of life, then their wellbeing will arguably suffer, and as a result, other areas of their lives may be negatively impacted, such as their mental health. These statistics indicate that older adolescents in particular are at high risk of having lower wellbeing levels in Ireland and preclinical mental health issues may arise as a result.

While we understand that young people in Ireland suffer widely from mental health problems, the adequate care and treatment of these young people has been shown to be an issue. A recent report published by the Mental Health Reform Commission (MHC) on their review of Ireland’s mental health system for the year 2017 (MHC, 2018) highlights some important failings in the treatment of mental illnesses in young people. Some of these issues included young people being admitted to adult psychiatric facilities, a lack of planning for those who come to be diagnosed with a mental illness, and a general lack of adequate community and mental health service provision. This last point means that often young people may not be seen or treated for their mental health problems until they become urgent cases, presenting at emergency departments and requiring immediate admission to inpatient facilities which, as evidenced by the first issue noted above, may be already full. If young people are not getting the types of
mental health care that they need until they are experiencing a mental health crisis, perhaps a different perspective might be helpful.

It could be useful to take a step back from acute mental illness and examine wellbeing from a different viewpoint. If it is recognised that young people are receiving care too late into their mental health/illness experience, and if the current services that exist are not in a position currently to meet the need of these young people any earlier than that point, then perhaps a view other than treatment should be examined. For example, if Ireland’s youth mental health is indeed worse than in other countries (as suggested by Cannon et al., 2013), perhaps a preventative stance should be considered. This could open up the possibility of including other elements than are currently being included, such as context. By examining some specific contexts, it might become possible to better understand why so many young Irish people are suffering such high levels of mental illness.

The Leaving Certificate is an experience shared by most older adolescents in Ireland. The Leaving Certificate is, according to the State Examinations Commission, “the terminal examination of post-primary education” (State Examinations Commission, n.d.). They also note that most candidates of the Leaving Certificate are aged either 17 or 18 but that the Senior Cycle - which is the years of secondary education during which students prepare themselves to sit the Leaving Certificate - caters for those who are aged 15 to 18 years old.

The Commission began releasing yearly statistics in relation to the Leaving Certificate in 2003, which was the first year that the Commission began overseeing state exams (State Examinations Commission, 2003). In that year,
43,255 people sat the Established Leaving Certificate. In 2017, this was noted to be at 41,745 (State Examinations Commission, 2017). While the 2003 report notes a rise in the numbers of students sitting the Leaving Certificate for the first time since 1998, they were noted to have stabilised again, and as seen above, are still fairly stable year on year. This shows that on average, between 40,000 - 45,000 students complete the Leaving Certificate exams each year, which equates to approximately 12-13% of the overall population (Central Statistics Office, 2017).

There is a high chance that an adolescent will simultaneously sit their Leaving Certificate exams while suffering with mental health problems. If the reported figures are stable, as they are indicated to be (Cannon et al., 2013), then it is reasonable to assume that there is anywhere between 13,000 to 20,000, or approximately 41% of students each year who are both sitting the Leaving Certificate and experiencing a mental illness at the same time. While those figures are in no way indicative of a causal relationship, when taken in the context of the reported state of the Irish mental health system (MHC, 2018), a need for concern becomes apparent. This does not consider the Leaving Certificate and the exams themselves may impact on wellbeing in terms of how it may factor into student stress levels. The Leaving Certificate must be considered as part of adolescent wellbeing if the aim to is truly understand the experiences surrounding their wellbeing.

There is a general assumption in Ireland that the Leaving Certificate is a stressful experience. Each year when the Leaving Certificate begins just after the June bank holiday, the media focus on both the exams and the students participating becomes intense. The Irish Times (The Irish Times, n.d.) produces a
supplement each year entitled ‘The Exam Times’, which predicts and dissects the minutiae of each exam every day. Other media outlets publish articles giving tips on how to manage stress levels, such as the article in thejournal.ie (Ryan, 2018) which consulted the Psychological Society of Ireland for advice for students about to commence the exams, and another (Murray, 2018) which reported on the first day of exams as “D-Day for the nation’s secondary school students” as the headline. Similarly, many non-profit youth organisations produce Leaving Certificate related content, such as SpunOut (O’Sullivan, n.d.), which has an article written by a young person offering advice to their peers on managing their physical and mental health during the Leaving Certificate. However, with some few exceptions such as the last example above, most of these pieces are offered up by adults, many of whom may not have experienced the Leaving Certificate in a number of years and may also not have children or other relatives through whom they can understand the experience. As a result, the general perceptions regarding the Leaving Certificate may not reflect how young people generally experience them.

Stress is an important part of wellbeing for adolescents, as it has direct links with mental illness. Because stress might be something that many people experience on a day-to-day basis, it may not immediately be perceived as such a key factor in more serious issues such as mental illness. However, research shows how interlinked stress and mental health are. For example, Kuroda (2016) points out that subjective stress is involved in the increase of depression levels, because the initial depression level fosters more subjective stress which in turn further increases depression levels. This highlights the core role that stress can play in mental health processes and thus the importance of factoring stress into the
broader conversation of mental health, mental illness and wellbeing in general. It is therefore important not to focus just on diagnosable mental illness when considering wellbeing.

While it is important to examine adolescent stress in relation to the Leaving Certificate, it is also important not to examine it to the exclusion of other forms of adolescent stress. As noted previously, there is no known causal link between the Leaving Certificate, stress, and mental illness. This means that should research focus overmuch on academic stress, there is a risk that an important part of the broader picture may be overlooked. It would be remiss to work, even from a purely research perspective, from the assumption that any given stressor operates in isolation from the rest of the person’s life. Even within a highly controlled experimental environment, participants may be experiencing any number of events in the rest of their day/life that may impact upon their experience of the stressor under examination. Lepore (1996) observes that there is little known about the adaptive consequences of coping with either multiple stressors at the same time, or with different types of stressors at the same time. As a result, it is important to pay attention to academic stress as an element of wellbeing but to better understand adolescent experiences in Ireland, it is still important to allow for the possibility of other types of stress to also be involved.

Given that there is a need to further study this topic, this study will attempt to broaden the understanding of this area. As argued above, in Irish adolescents, there is a period around the age of 17-18 during which they are at very high risk for mental illness and they also must undergo an arguably high-stress period of examinations. This study examines via a literature review how the existing research may not fully explain the elements of stress, coping and adolescence
enough to enable a full understanding of the processes involved. It then explores with adolescents who are in preparation for the Leaving Certificate exams what the process of stress and coping during this period feels like for them as they live through it. If we can further understand the stress process in this cohort of adolescents, it might enable us to better work towards supporting them in appropriate ways.
Literature Review

Defining Stress and Coping

Defining a topic prior to conducting research on it is vital to grounding that topic in the evidence. Stress and coping both have multiple meanings across the literature, and as a result, the definitions and conceptualisations discussed here are those encountered in the student stress literature and come from both the researchers and the participants in that research.

Stress is defined by Denscombe (2000) as a pressure or a subjective tension state, while Aherne (2001) examines stress in terms of the meaning of stressful experiences, which he argues occurs when self adequacy as a basic need is threatened. Lazarus (1976) argues that stress is defined according to what is at stake for the person. Most recently, Drake, Sladek, and Doane (2016) have summarised the most dynamic models as positing that stress only happens when perceived environmental demands exceed or are greater than the ability to cope with them.

Fallin, Wallinga and Coleman (2001) note that overall there is no explicit model for youth stress but concludes that the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is the best available. However, the transactional model may be problematic. Aherne (2001) highlights that Lazarus’s (1976) definition of stress means that in appraising a stressor, the individual must consider what is at stake for them in acting on the stressor. This means that the perceptions of a stressor, per Aherne (2001) are determined by the needs of people, and he argues that most models (including Lazarus & Folkman’s (1984) transactional model), don’t acknowledge human needs.

With regards to coping, Boekaerts (2002) refers to it as encompassing
two strategies, either fighting with, or coming to terms with goal ambivalence. Monat and Lazarus (1985, p. 5) define coping as "efforts to master conditions of harm, threat or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available", and Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, and Osborne (2012) consider that the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) refers to personality in action under stress in discussing coping.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) again are referred to as defining coping as strategies learned; a deliberate, purposeful emotional and behavioural response to a stressor. Braun-Lewensohn (2011) define coping as an effort to make a perceived stressor more tolerable and reduce distress. Kirchner, Forns, Amador, and Muñoz (2010) refer to coping as both internal and external, voluntary and conscious actions which are used to face stressors that threaten homeostasis. Moos, Holahan, and Beutler (2003) refer to coping as being both dispositional and contextual. Patterson and McCubbin (1987) speak about coping as being an adjustment and Feld and Shusterman (2015) make use of self-reported behaviours in examining coping among their participants as they consider coping to be self-perceived stress management attempts.

There are some issues with the existing definitions of coping, however. Defining coping as an adjustment can be questioned as coping strategies have been seen to allow for adaptation, not just adjustment (Fields & Prinz, 1997) and so that definition may be overly narrow. Research has raised questions and discrepancies in how coping is analysed and defined (Amirkhan & Auyeung, 2007).

Paul (1980) states that there is a need within the research to focus on individual retention of control, responsibility, and a reduction of helpless
feelings. This indicates a need to focus less on hierarchical grouping of coping styles/tendencies and to consider how existing models might focus more on the individual relating to a stressor. The transactional model is the only model that may take this perspective, and Boekaerts (2002) draws attention to this in highlighting that the self has not been fully addressed in the research to date. In spite of the existence of a large body of research utilising the transactional model, Boekaerts (2002) also argues that the transactional model itself has not been addressed critically. This raises the idea that the model and its components, such as, for example, that coping must be a conscious effort, or that the appraisal process occurs as posited within the model.

There have also been some problematic assumptions made in the literature to date. A key one of these stems from the transactional model, where Lazarus & Folkman’s (1984) definition of coping as being effortful excludes behaviours that are not under the control of an individual. This excludes the idea of resources from the coping literature, as the presence of a resource does not equal the use of a resource, and similarly, lack of awareness of a resource does not equal the lack of availability of a resource. It has also been highlighted that until recently, only adult models of stress and coping existed, and the youth models that exist today still largely derive from those adult models (Fields & Prinz, 1997). means that current models do not acknowledge or give attention to the important differences in adult and youth stress and coping abilities. Some consideration is now being given to, for example, the tendencies of youth in their coping choices, but assumptions such as the one that coping is stable within particular age groups may overshadow findings that high individual variability is present within those same age groups (Kirchner et al., 2010).
Students themselves are heard less overall within the literature, however Putwain (2009) and Denscombe (2000) consider their opinions. Putwain (2009) was told that stress is essentially the experience of some sort of unpleasant or aversive event. His participants reported that while stress and pressure were phrases that were used interchangeably, the use of the word anxiety was on the other end of a continuum with stress and referred to being able to capture differences between general and specific experiences or events. Denscombe (2000) finds that stress can have multiple meanings, and these encompass internal feelings and external pressure 'giving' the students stress.

**Stress and Coping from a Developmental Perspective**

The point at which adolescents complete the Leaving Certificate corresponds with late adolescence and the transition from this to early adulthood. While older theories posited that development ended with adolescence (Piaget, 1964), a lifespan perspective on development is now more accepted and as a result we tend to view the transition to early adulthood as a developmental period with meaningful changes in demands across many domains, but especially across social, financial and academic domains (Drake et al., 2016).

It is broadly accepted that stress is an interactive process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) but as Hodge, McCormick and Elliott (1997) point out, there is also a need to consider the interactions between stressors - particularly at a time when as highlighted above, there are multiple demands across multiple domains being experienced by the adolescent. This is particularly important given that many changing contexts are considered to increase the risk of stress (Ebata & Moos, 1991). Adolescence is generally viewed as being stressful in Western
society, and while there has been a move away from Arnett's (1999) view of 'storm and stress', and the stress experienced is not necessarily at the level of problem behaviours for most adolescents, the view is still generally upheld (Hodge et al., 1997).

Today's society can be considered test-conscious (Hodge et al., 1997), with its tendency to favour categorisation and labelling of individuals and groups. However, for adolescents, exams are just one of multiple co-occurring stressors "of developmental changes that accompany the adolescent period" (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, p. 32). There is evidence that these co-occurring stressors can negatively affect school performance (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004). Considering this in context with the adolescent-specific combination of 'peer acceptance fear', parents, and school attitude (Hodge et al., 1997) and the critical timing of these exams in late adolescence, a picture of circular, increasing stress begins to appear.

While Sharrer and Ryan-Wenger (1995) suggest that age correlates with an increased number of life events for young people, Jewett (1997) argues that children experience less stress overall as they gain a wider coping repertoire. This may seem contradictory at first, but if we consider stress and coping from a developmental perspective, it may become clearer. Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Sharrer & Ryan-Wenger, 1995, p. 123) declare coping strategies to be "learned, deliberate, and purposeful". Adolescence may be a time when young people develop new coping responses to new stress experiences, while simultaneously learning new related skills which enable this to happen on a broader and more reflective level.

Fields and Prinz (1997) claim that cognitive, biological, social and emotional (affective and expressive) changes play important roles in developing
stress appraisal skills and coping strategy selection and utilisation. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) are more specific in detailing the skills of increased problem solving and abstract thinking abilities as relating to changes in coping style, while Weisz (1986), and Band and Weisz (1988) include developmental changes in reasoning capabilities. Lepistö, Åstedt-Kurki, Joronen, Luukkaala, and Paavilainen (2010) note that cognitive and communication skills increase as well as the emergence of an ability to change coping strategy and viewpoints are also involved in stress recognition, appraisal and coping skills development.

**Examining Existing Theory from a Developmental Perspective**

From the lists of developmental facets provided, many different newly developed or improved skills have an impact on an adolescent’s ability to cope with stress. However, it is also important to consider these specific developmental changes as well as the impact of these changes on how adolescents approach stress and coping to gain a fuller picture of the literature to date. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) theorise that there would be increased cognitive coping use and decreased avoidant escape in adolescence. This is supported in work by Fields and Prinz (1997) whereby adolescents are argued to use more approach-oriented cognitive coping than younger counterparts. It is also found (Fields & Prinz, 1997) that there is a general increase in the variety of coping strategies utilised with increased maturity, and a reduction in the preference for extreme coping strategies. Overall, there appears to be a general move towards more cognitive or emotional types of coping strategies than behavioural strategies.

The research evidence around primary versus secondary coping would support this idea of increased tendency towards cognitive style coping. Primary control coping is coping aimed at changing the stressor, whereas secondary
control coping is aimed at changing the self in relation to the stressor, according to Band and Weisz (1990), who point out that "the ratio of secondary to primary coping in response to everyday stressors may increase in age" (Band & Weisz, 1990, p. 151). This supports the notion of a move towards more cognitive coping strategies. Secondary coping may take longer than primary control to develop as not only does it require increased and more sophisticated cognitive capacity, but it also cannot be learned observationally, in the same that primary coping can be, thus making it a more difficult coping skill to master (Band, 1990; Fields & Prinz, 1997).

It is also possible that not only does cognitive maturity enable the adolescent to become more able to cope in a secondary control style, they are also more able to recognise it and other 'invisible' methods as viable coping strategy options (Band, 1990). However, Band (1990) makes a key point about the onset of secondary control coping - increased attempts to use this type of coping does not automatically result in success in using it - they argue that this is why adolescence is key in the development of coping skills, as it allows the young person to engage in a period of trial-and-error as they become adept at using these new skills.

Current research tends to examine stressors in isolation, and while that may be important to understand each individual stressor, there is an identified need to view stressors in an interconnected manner (Aherne, 2001) as they impact one another and including the effects of this impact allows for a fuller view of the person and their adaptation. Feld and Shusterman (2015, p. 40) argue that "the number of pervasive physical and mental symptoms that students in this population report should be of concern, particularly given their
widespread and frequent presence in an otherwise young, healthy and high-functioning population”. This references the fact that academic stress is not an area that has been given due consideration in the literature to date, often losing out to more pressing concerns such as those populations which are not high-functioning or present more pressing issues.

There has been much generalisation in the literature discussed regarding stress appraisal and coping tendencies or styles, and this could be problematic. Ebata and Moos (1991, p. 33) posit that "the way in which adolescents respond to stressors may be an important predictor of how successfully they adapt to the challenges of the teen years", and this highlights the importance of gaining a deep understanding of the processes involved for adolescents.

Peer relations in this demographic have been highlighted as being of increased importance previously. However, Putwain (2009, p. 398) finds that "grade attainment...became the basis on which judgement of self-worth and self-acceptance were made", not peer comparisons, and that further a sense of failure derives from measuring the performance of the self against the expected performance of the self, rather than against peer performance or judgements. This both highlights disagreements within the literature with regards to the level of impact peer relationships have in this process, and as a result further highlights the possibly overlooked more introspective nature of the stress process and the self-judgement that accompanies it.

While many youth models of stress do derive from adult models, there have recently been some adolescent specific models put forward that are worth a brief mention. The first is the three-domain model of adolescent coping by Frydenberg (1997). This is based on the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984)
but extends it. The model posits that there are three possible coping domains; problem-focused, referral to others, and non-productive coping.

The second model is the coping-competence model by Blechman, Prinz and Dumas (1995) and probably has the advantage over Frydenberg’s (1997) model of adopting a more fluid approach to the acquisition of coping abilities. Fields and Prinz (1997, p. 972) note that within this model, "when development is proceeding well, children readily acquire increasingly greater skill at prosocial coping”.

The third model is the student development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) which hypothesizes that students move through and acquire skills in the domains of competence, emotion management, autonomy through to independence, mature interpersonal relationships, identity and purpose and integrity. This model appears to mimic general developmental pathways in its approach and thus may work in tandem with other contextual developmental models.

Lastly, a consideration of the development of models in this area would not be complete without referring to Boekaerts's (2002) work in the area. She argues that theory must go beyond appraisal or resources, to include the appraisal of how worthy the stressor is of resource depletion, to an examination of the coping goals. The reason for this is that coping goals can affect action content, direction and purpose, in particular the selection of specific coping strategies. This, she argues, allows for the creation of a mindset with which the student addresses the stressor.

**Perception of Stress Controllability in Adolescence**

There are two further factors relating to an increase in cognitive-based
coping in adolescence: control and emotions. A general change in the perception of levels of control a young person has over a stressor is noted as they move through adolescence (Band & Weisz, 1990). Underdeveloped perceptual abilities can be argued to limit the ability to understand the consequences or controllability of a stressor. This implies that as perception develops, so does accuracy levels in stress perception. However, this is tempered by the potential existence of a mental representation of a given stressor whereby the adolescent believes they have access to a switch to turn stress off. This means that while they come to accept the uncontrollability of their environment, they may still believe they have more power over their self-control. Ebata and Moos (1991) found that coping strategy choice could vary by factors such as whether the stressor was caused by the adolescent themselves, as well as how controllable the stressor was perceived to be. This demonstrates the link between development, stress appraisal, and coping strategy choice.

Adolescence is also a period where not only is the controllability of a stressor important, but so are the surroundings of the adolescent. Boekaerts (2002) speaks about this in relation to the freedom an adolescent may have in relation to being able to cope in particular ways. She notes that the restricted freedom of youth may both limit the stressors an adolescent is exposed to, but also their freedom of choice of coping strategy. Young people are also argued often to have low decision authority, particularly in a school environment, and so their ability to frame their coping goals in a personally relevant way may also be limited (Boekaerts, 2002). This is supported by Ebata and Moos (1991) who ascribe variation in how much adolescents can use different coping resources, regardless of availability, to the process of development.
**Stress, Coping and Emotions**

Emotions have long been linked to stress reaction processes (e.g. Schachter & Singer, 1962), and this is still evident in the developmental literature. There is some variance within the research findings, however. Fields and Prinz (1997) found that positive self-talk and worry/rumination were equally used as emotion-based copings strategies. They also found, however, that "early adolescents tend to use more emotion-focused strategies than problem-focused strategies, while the reverse was true for later adolescents/young adults" (Fields & Prinz, 1997, p. 958). This could be due to several possible factors, such as a lessening of the afore-mentioned restrictions of youth as late adolescents become more autonomous, or increased coping efficacy (defined as a "belief in one's own ability to cope with future stressors" (Drake et al., 2016, p. 334)) potentially causing increased resilience during that period (Ebata & Moos, 1991). However, no clear explanation is available for this finding.

There does appear to be a general recognition/desire to expel or externalise emotions by adolescents (DeFrino et al., 2016), but the control they have over this may vary. Boekaerts (2002) questions the level of emotion control young people may have as they are still developing emotional regulation skills during adolescents, and she quotes some of the students in her study as having "argued that it was nearly impossible to stop head-on behavioural strategies when these strategies had been triggered by intense emotions" (Boekaerts, 2002, p. 405), showing the overspill of emotion control difficulties across the spectrum of coping strategies. There are also echoes of the trial-and-error process here when Boekaerts (2002) refers to emotion regulation of stress intensity being linked with 'coming to terms' with coping strategies, and presumably their relative success in terms of successful adaptation.
A developmental focus is seen in the increased mastery of both cognitive and emotional skills (Hodge et al., 1997), when the studies of Moos et al. (2003) and Compas, Malcarne, and Fondacaro (1988) are examined. Together these indicate that while there are generally no developmental changes in problem-focused coping for adolescents, there is some change seen in emotion-focused coping, the most stable of which is emotional discharge. Emotion regulation perception is also a factor in stress appraisal. Boekaerts (2002) notes that along with having negative feelings towards the stressor and high perceived social support, low emotional regulation may enable the adolescent to consider the stress as a developmental challenge and tolerate it rather than seeking escape- or avoidance-style coping strategies.

It could be argued that general developmental differences, and in particular, variance in emotion regulation ability could play a role. Boekaerts (2002, p. 403) defines emotion regulation as the "individual's ability to use emotions as triggers for action, yet override them when growth, mastery or social harmony is threatened". They note that this has not been studied in relation to specific coping strategies yet, and it has also been pointed out previously that emotion regulation is something that some young people may struggle with even while enacting a coping action plan. Weisz (1986) notes the general developmental differences in reasoning regarding personal control and efficacy - both factors that have been discussed as being important in the stress process, and Band and Weisz (1990), harking back to the earlier developmental theory of Piaget (1964) talk about the possible differences between those who have reached the formal operational stage and those who have not in terms of their ability to form adult versus childlike abstractions about themselves. By
implication, there could also be differences in ability to formulate adult abstractions around controllability, coping goals, and ability to cope.

**The Importance of Researching Youth Stress and Coping**

The literature has been criticised by Compas (1987) as having a mostly trait or generalised approach. The difficulty with this focus is seen when one considers the argument made by Hamburg (1974) that the adolescent challenge is one of simultaneous developmental and environmental change, and while as previously mentioned this is not to the 'storm and stress' levels previously hypothesised (Arnett, 1999), there is high individual variability in developmental adaptation for adolescents. The transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) implies an individual approach in its discussion of the appraisal and re-appraisal processes and this is supported by Hodge et al. (1997) when they point to the variance in stress reactions, particularly for adolescents, as being largely explained by perceived danger. With development considered to be essentially a process of continually changing coping strategies (Fields & Prinz, 1997) which require almost constant restructuring of coping strategies (Kirchner et al., 2010), the argument for understanding a more nuanced process of coping with stress is understandable.

Not only is the research contradictory with regards to stressor frequency, with Hodge et al. (1997) finding no age difference (an opposite finding to that of Dise-Lewis (1988)) but the general consistency of adolescent coping has been queried (Kirchner et al., 2010). This is shown in Herman-Stahl, Stemmler, and Petersen (1995) finding adolescents to be flexible and dynamic in coping, Hampel and Petermann (2005) finding little adolescent coping stability or consistency and Kirchner et al. (2010) finding an age effect for coping but not a clear
developmental pattern. One could wonder at the usefulness of the continual growth of research on generalised coping styles or tendencies within this population. Instead, the suggestion by Fields and Prinz (1997) that youth stress might best be studied in a situational context, supported by the finding that adolescent coping is situation dependent and stressor-influenced (Lepistö et al., 2010) might be more productive. Taking account of these contexts will allow further understanding of what coping behaviours are protective in adolescence (Drake et al., 2016), how it mediates experience and contributes to personality development (Hodge et al., 1997), and the process by which stable characteristics may buffer later adolescents from the negative impact of stressors (Hodge et al., 1997).

**Academic Stress in Adolescence**

The test-conscious society that adolescents grow up in (Hodge et al., 1997) means that each adolescent has the experience of high-stakes exams in commonality with their peers. However, while there is a body of research around peer support during stress, few studies examine being surrounded by peers who are experiencing the same stress levels and type (Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, & Shaffer, 2006). Those that do exist point towards potential issues in the use of peers for support, indicating that maladaptive coping consolidates with peers who think alike (Boekaerts, 2002). This is an area that warrants some consideration as research indicates that in adolescence, there are developmental changes in the use of social support and that peers tend to overtake parents in terms of who an adolescent is more likely to turn to for support (Morrison, Laughlin, San Miguel, Smith, & Widaman, 1997).

The use of social supports can both be a source of aid and a source of
further stress. Putwain (2009) found that sources of stress for adolescents included the self, teachers, parents, peer comparison and 'comparable achievement' with their peers. Conversely, Ryska (1993) found that use of support networks related to decreased levels of overall stress. It has been indicated that generally, adolescents want to have someone to share their feelings or talk with (Lepistö et al., 2010), so social supports appear to play an important role in the coping process, but the choice to seek social support is tempered by various conditions that must be met. DeFrino et al. (2016, p. 124) state that teens choose to disclose sadness based on "an internal coping continuum... [based on] pivotal elements of trust and judgment that either lead teens to disclose or not disclose those feelings" and the same could be said about their decision to disclose feelings of stress. The same study also notes that adolescents do not want to be a burden to others or make them sad (DeFrino et al., 2016) and this makes sense if the adolescent is surrounded by peers who are overwhelmed with the same experiences and therefore potentially the same stress levels.

These are not the only coping costs with regards to social supports that the young person must consider. Adolescents are reluctant to disclose feelings to a parent who is likely to have a highly emotional reaction (DeFrino et al., 2016). Boekaerts (2002, p. 403) defines emotional regulation as "an individual's ability to use emotions as triggers for action, yet override them when growth, mastery, or social harmony is threatened". This highlights the value of social harmony. Considering that adolescents must survive the school day surrounded by their peers and teachers, and then be able to prepare for exams after school, often in the home surrounded by family, the desire for social harmony may become a
balancing act between seeking social support and deciding to work through stress in isolation. There are some key factors which need to be in place for an adolescent to choose seeking social support in coping with stress. These include the adults around them taking their developmental needs seriously, which may empower the adolescent to better deal with developmental stressors (Aherne, 2001). They also need to find the social support helpful, which may only occur if they feel understood and in control of their personal space (Lepistö et al., 2010), as overall, stress is a priority for adolescents in relation to wellbeing and health (Denscombe, 2000).

The mechanisms by which social support is helpful in the coping process is not yet well understood. What is known is that there is a link between social support and better adjustment. Bal, Crombez, Van Oost, and Debourdeaudhuij (2003) suggest this may be because social support reduces feelings of isolation, or it may allow the teen to achieve that desired venting of feelings. As Ackerman, Newton, McPherson, Jones, and Dykman (1998) points out, this may also cause an almost re-living of the stress which may re-traumatise the adolescent.

Bal et al. (2003) find that high perceived social support results in increased behavioural problems. The authors are unsure as to the reason for this, but it points towards the need for considering the nuance of social support as a coping strategy, in similar ways as avoidance has been noted to not always be a negative coping act (Ebata & Moos, 1991). As a result, social support may not always be a positive choice in terms of adaptation and adjustment.

**The Life Trajectory Impact of End-of-School Exams**

Much of the discussion up until now has been centred around a broad
consideration of the types of stress one could classify 'Leaving Certificate stress' and how stress and coping can be considered from a developmental perspective. These two strands of discussion can be pulled together under a consideration of the possible developmental impacts of the Leaving Certificate. Research has highlighted the perception of "examinations as constituting a crucial moment in determining the future life trajectory of a student" (Putwain, 2009, p. 391).

Amid all the adolescent change, development and transition, the Leaving Certificate constitutes a potential turning point or fork in the road of the students' life trajectory. This is supported by Denscombe (2000) who reports GCSE exams as having an impact on future success outcomes. In particular, Brown, O'Keeffe, Sanders, and Baker (1986) note that one of the main issues highlighted when older adolescents are asked about their concerns is the future. These worries are not unfounded. Denscombe (2000) discusses these concerns from the perspective of Giddens's (1991) theory which considers the social conditions of the 'later modernity' period currently being experienced. A key feature of this current period is an increased uncertainty, in terms of the possible future of each person, and as a result, in the self. It could be argued that the early benchmark of the GCSE and its impact as a 'fateful moment' (Denscombe, 2000) could be viewed as a possible chance to feel able to exert control over the direction of that future trajectory.

With specific regard to academic stress, there is a smaller body of research available in this area. It has been claimed that student stress is similar to the stress that is studied in the general stress literature (Aherne, 2001), but given the developmental differences previously highlighted, as well as the difficulty in classifying Leaving Certificate stress as one stress type, this may be
an over-generalisation. Hodge et al. (1997) note that while test anxiety as a general topic is widely studied, there has been little focus on end-of-school exams. This is an important distinction because while test anxiety is defined as the emotional, physiological and behavioural consequences of a negative evaluation on an upcoming test (Zeidner, 1998) end-of-school exams may encompass more than that which is covered by the term ‘test anxiety’.

It is assumed that if a model were to be used from the pre-existing theoretical literature, the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) would be the best choice (Aherne, 2001). At the same time, multiple studies highlight the requirement for more work in the area, concerning how students represent stressors mentally, and how this affects coping strategy choice (Boekaerts, 2002), as well as the fact that "detail is lacking in the literature on the ways stress-related problems manifest among students...and the specific coping strategies students report" (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, p. 33). This also adds to the argument that stress may be best studied in the wider context of the students’ lives.

While stress for adolescents is acknowledged to be multi-source, research has pointed towards exams being a feature of this (Denscombe, 2000). This is supported by Putwain (2009) who found that student stress is linked to wider educational issues, most notably teacher pressure, supportive exam preparation and school policies - these can all be linked to exam related issues. When specifically asked what factors contribute most to stress in school, students tend to list exams, study, the amount they must learn, and the need to do well (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004), and grades are often touted at the most important element of school (Ang & Huan, 2006). As a result, “academic work is increasingly being recognised as a major source of stress” (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, p.31) and
overall stress has been linked with the importance of school success. Given that for some students, academic success may also be the only, or one of a limited number of methods for upward mobility in life, the significance of school success, and thus exam success may be increased.

The impact of exam and school related stress cannot be understated. As Von der Embse, Barterian, and Segool (2013, p. 13) argue, "as the use of large-scale standardised test outcomes to make high-stake decisions about individual students and school systems continues to grow, so too does the pressure surrounding the testing environment". This is supported by findings that school life and exams are in the top four main sources of change or insecurity identified as being greater in adolescence than other timepoints throughout the lifespan (Putwain, 2009).

There are multiple physical and psychological correlates of academic stress (Feld & Shusterman, 2015) but one of note is that in a Korean population, adolescent suicide is predicted by academic stress (Juon, Nam, & Ensminger, 1994). This indicates that academic stress cannot be assumed to match the general stress literature and deserves microscopic and nuanced attention. While findings from Korean research may not carry over to an Irish population, there is research in Ireland that highlights some worrying trends. For example, Smyth (2015, p. 54) finds that "second year students are much more negative about their capacity to cope with schoolwork than first years, reflecting the greater demand placed on them regarding schoolwork and homework". The trend towards feeling stressed and unable to cope with that stress is therefore identified up to four years prior to the Leaving Certificate and appears to be moving in an upwards direction.
Academic striving is noted to have both positive and negative outcomes, (Ang & Huan, 2006) and while Shek (1995, as cited in Ang & Huan, 2006) argues that it is important to recognise the negative ones, it is also important to recognise the impact as well as the outcomes, in terms of development and wellbeing as much as academic outcome. Therefore while the relationship between academic life and stress may be indisputable given the general research agreement on that point, and this relationship may lead to school-related problems (Fallin et al., 2001). Generalised statements of the nature that (Kirchner et al., 2010) make about academic stress (such as the point that school achievement requires problem-focused coping) do not really add to an understanding of how young people navigate the experience of academic and exam-based stress. There are multiple issues that have come to light in terms of studying academic stress according to the literature. Considerations of social conditions aside, the Leaving Certificate does bring about a new workload, and for the first time, this workload matters because the result matters and is very real for the first time (Band & Weisz, 1990; Denscombe, 2000). Adolescents are evaluated and labelled according to a measure of achievement, and as a result, these exams constitute a new stress in an already stressful young life (Denscombe, 2000). It is accepted that stress vulnerability increases in transitions, so late adolescents with their multiple transitions are quite vulnerable to stress at this time. There must be a balancing of current wellbeing with 'well-becoming' as discussed by Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frones, and Korbin (2014), however within the stress literature Denscombe (2000, p. 372) is one of few studies which considers exams as "a contributing factor to mental health which has been overlooked".
Stern and Zevon (1990) have argued that adolescents use more problem-focused coping strategies in dealing with academic stress, along with some consistent emotion-focused strategies, but it must be questioned if generalised statements are either accurate or helpful. While it may be that students select coping strategies along some generalised continuum such as short-term wellbeing goals versus long-term intentions to resolve problems/conflicts (Boekaerts, 2002), this is still noted to create different meaning states, and given that Boekaerts (2002, p. 401) also argues that “the way students frame the coping goal would affect their choice of coping strategy”. This introduces the importance of being cognisant of individual differences. This is supported by Kirchner et al. (2010) who found significant differences in the ways that students coped with different concerns.

Overall salience of wellbeing goals factor into coping strategy selection and these goals may vary both from individual to individual and across individuals over time, particularly with regards to academic stress where perceptions of controllability may shift over time. Overall, Fields and Prinz's (1997) advice that given the inconsistency in the coping strategies used by adolescents, a process approach that takes account of both situational and temporal changes is most appropriate. This speaks to the need to move beyond generalised groupings and classifications.

**Challenges of Adolescent Academic Stress Research**

One of the foremost issues is the difficulty in identifying the presence of stress in adolescents. Adolescent senior student stress might not be apparent to adults (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004), and this may be because students often downplay their stress (Denscombe, 2000). This is supported by Denscombe
(2000) who finds that external behaviours enacted by adolescents may mask their feelings of helplessness or inefficiency. Lepistö et al. (2010, p. 1232) find that adolescents tend to report that "they were satisfied with life, which makes it difficult to identify their need for help". The argument for individual differences is seen in this difficulty too, as stress perception and experience can be very individual, and the factors involved may not be simple or obvious. This could be because individual differences affect the meaning each adolescent gives to a stressor (Boekaerts, 2002), or the possibility that "individuals who rely on mental representations with conflicting end states feel ambivalent and experience many goal incongruent emotions" (Boekaerts, 2002, p. 402). In other words, what one adolescent views as a challenging stressor, another may view as a threatening one, and they may also feel both empowered and disempowered at the same time, despite the appraisal made.

Another element that may play a role in identifying stress in adolescents is how helpful they feel disclosing that stress may be. Buckley, Holt, and Whelan (2007) found that students do not feel that teachers take their stress seriously, and as a result any help offered by them may not be effective. This may have two possible effects - that students may be less likely to reveal their stress, or that it may not be taken account of in the correct way.

Even if stress can be identified, there are many between-student differences, many of which have already been highlighted. Even within the student, between time points the inner stress experience may always slightly differ as the circumstances are rarely identical (Kirchner et al., 2010). Likewise, what can appear to be a major stress reaction in terms of an intense emotional outbreak may be invoked as much by a brief interruption to a concrete plan...
than an overall inability to cope (Boekaerts, 2002). The individual also needs to accurately account for resources or the ability to borrow resources. Taken from a transactional theory perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this means the adolescent needs to be consciously aware of the resources available to them as well as being able to accurately appraise the stressor. From a developmental perspective, that would require well-developed emotional and cognitive skills, which have been argued to have large individual variability.

The literature to date has provided some insight into various aspects of the stress and coping process, and how that may or may not hold true specifically for adolescents undergoing preparation for end-of-school exams. However, this literature also highlights some common issues. Much research on student stress has been carried out on a university student population, and on occasion the findings from these studies have been generalised to the second-level student population. However, this is a problem as it is not possible to directly compare university students to second level students, as those who attend university are likely to comprise a higher-achieving subset (Von der Embse et al., 2013) of the overall second-level population and thus the findings are not wholly comparable. This argument is furthered by the distinct developmental differences between the two populations, both in terms of their biological/neurophysiological differences and the differences in the life stages both populations are situated in.

In terms of the research that has been conducted to date, there is still much lacking when we look at how the research had progressed and developed from a methodology and research focus point of view. Ang and Huan (2006) note that to capture youth academic stress, there are only two measures available for
the middle to high school age profile, and they focus on general academic stress. Sharrer and Ryan-Wenger (1995) point out the lack of focus on what motivates young people to utilise emotion versus problem-focused coping. There appears to be an assumption that some form of motivation exists but little solid understanding. Despite a demonstrated need for research on adolescent academic stress and exam stress to follow a developmental approach, this is not apparent in the literature (Band & Weisz, 1990). This is underlined by the fact that the first studies on adolescent coping only appeared within the past thirty years or so (Frydenberg, 1997), making this a relatively new area of research at the broader level of the topic. Similarly, Fields and Prinz (1997, p. 968) lament the "limited availability of empirical work in the area...on coping as it predicts adjustment along the developmental continuum".

**The Self, Identity and Academic Stress**

Stress can have a variety of effects on the sense of self that develops during adolescence. Hodge et al. (1997) point out that stress management is affected by self-perception. Denscombe (2000, p. 368) supports this, saying that "levels of stress reflect expectations relative to ability". This means that if a student believes they can achieve at a certain level, they may expect to achieve at that level, and therefore may feel stress to continually produce work that reaches the standard of that level. This has far-reaching effects such as when we look at Feld and Shusterman's (2015) finding that stress relates to performance, self-perception and overall happiness and satisfaction within an academic environment, a picture of inter-related multi-impact factors begins to emerge. Stress and how an adolescent manages it can also have far-reaching temporal effects as it can affect the development of coping efficacy. Drake et al. (2016)
suggest that coping efficacy can help stress adaptation, so if a strong sense of coping efficacy is not developed in adolescence, this may set the individual up for a lifelong pattern of feeling unable to cope with future stressors (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000) and not successfully adapting to stressful situations. As a result, while it is impossible not to encounter some stress throughout adolescence, an extensive amount of stress can cause damage in both an immediate and developmental sense.

Boekaerts (2002) digs deeper into the cognitions that result from being confronted with a stressor as a student and refers to the need to understand how students mentally represent the stressor in terms of emotion perception and interpretation, cognitions around changeability and controllability, the perception of how available social support is and the individual's beliefs regarding the effectiveness of implementing a strategy. Taking the definition of stress as being the result of self adequacy as human need being threatened (Aherne, 2001), the question of what stress does to one’s sense of self comes to the fore. There is general support in the literature for a general dichotomy of either facing a stressor and attempting to act upon it, or of acting upon or managing the self in the face of a stressor (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Given that end-of-school exams tend to occur in late adolescence, the argument Denscombe (2000) makes about how GCSEs and their consequences must be viewed in the context of the effects they can have on identity development is salient. Giddens (1991) also argues that today's society is individualistic and self-determination, and therefore autonomy, is necessary. This means that to survive, identity and sense of self must survive threats or attacks from stress experiences.

Stress can bring about questions of the self - this is seen in Lazarus (1976)
asking what is at stake for someone under stress. Aherne (2001) answers this question by explaining that for students, a sense of adequacy is at stake and this comes under threat from key identity formation tasks. They argue (Aherne, 2001) that the questions for adolescent students could be re-framed as 'who am I?' and 'am I adequate?' and it is the second of these two questions that is the source of stress. Combs, Richards, and Richards (1976) argue that everyone is trying to improve their sense of self because if one has a strong/positive sense of self, that enhances the ability to cope with life more successfully. This seems rather straightforward but there are conflicts that can interfere with this process. Boekaerts (2002) highlights two examples: having short term wellbeing goals that conflict with long term growth goals - for example studying for an end-of-school exam versus wanting to enjoy the immediate pleasures of youth; and having goal ambivalence - for example wanting to study for end-of-school exams because getting into college is part of an overall career ambition, and also not wanting to study for exams because the idea of going to college is frightening.

Fallin et al. (2001) note that a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of coping ability in the present can also be affected by low self-esteem. This means that there is a tendency for a self-feeding circle to arise where stress is affecting the sense of self and vice-versa continually. However, while low confidence levels can affect an ability to feel capable of coping with stress, there is also evidence that the opposite is possible - that feeling academically confident can be protective during difficult life circumstances (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). What becomes clear is that an overbalance in one direction or the other may be detrimental at such a key developmental time. The transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), through the appraisal process, puts the self at the centre of
stress, and that is possibly why it is often touted as the next best thing to an adolescent-specific model of stress. Aherne (2001) says that any developmental model of stress must have the self at the centre of wellbeing. ‘The need for self-maintenance to be adequate for wellbeing (Combs et al., 1976) means that the focus in research should be on the personal ownership of stress (Paul, 1980). This argument supports taking an individualised view of stress theory in research.

The discussion Boekaerts (2002) generates around coping goals also supports an individualised view of stress theory. She hypothesises that those who frame goals around desirable end states are positive monitors in that they apply a positive frame of mind to those goals. It is difficult to reconcile Boekaerts’ (2002) idea of students as positive monitors with Ang and Huan’s (2006) claim that generally Western adolescents are low self-monitors regardless of valence. It is similarly difficult to envision adolescents overcoming both goal ambivalence and goals conflict to frame coping goals around end-of-school exams in a wholly positive way. Difficulties aside, Boekaerts (2002) says that those who are positive monitors create a source of energy from this, and while it is not explicitly stated, the implication could be that this energy will enable adaptive coping usage and resulting positive adaptation to the stressor. The points previously made however, do still stand, and have not yet been accounted for in the literature.

To bring the discussion back to the specific stressor at hand, we need to consider the relationship between stress and the self specifically around end-of-school exams. Putwain (2009) finds that some students define themselves by their academic competence and success. Given the pressure that must place upon exam performance, particularly exams that students feel matter so much, it
makes sense when Aherne (2001) says that this self-definition via academic ability is linked with stress, and further when Kyriacou (2003) says that failure in education can pose a psychological danger to elements such as self-esteem. Bearing in mind Giddens's (1991) previous theorising, GCSEs can be considered an early benchmark of self (Denscombe, 2000) and as a result the outcome may be perceived by the student as impacting success prospects and by extension self-worth. Again, this highlights how that could therefore be linked to rising stress levels for this population.

With end-of-school exams, young people face being objectively evaluated and labelled (Denscombe, 2000) and they may associate this label with their personal worth. As a result, achievement must be included in research on adolescent development (Aherne, 2001), particularly when the stress of striving for academic success can negatively affect mental health (Ang & Huan, 2006).

An argument has been made throughout this piece for a need to focus more in the individualistic nature of the stress experience, and in understanding individual differences in the experience of stress and the subsequent differences in the coping pathway and future adjustment of each adolescent. It is possible that differences in perception or focus could be involved here. Putwain (2009) explains how the students' perception of their ability determined if a lower than expected grade was motivating, and how the participants of the study framed stress as being the effects or results of the relation between perceived subject ability and the resultant performance expectation. Aherne (2001) theorises in a similar way, saying that if a student is mastery-oriented, they will not search for causal explanations for the
failure, and can avoid feeling negative failure-related emotions and can channel adoptive strategy generation. Braun- Lewensohn, Sagy and Roth (2011) also argue that the variance in stress reactions is largely explained by perceived danger. Taken together these findings could point towards perceptual differences both in appraisal and in meaning-generation around particular stressors.

Another variable that could be involved in understanding differences here could be taken from Hobfoll’s (1989) Sense of Coherence. Hodge et al. (1997, p. 185) find that "self-confidence, academic...self concepts and perceived ability to cope were also found...to be associated with increased distress". Many of these elements could be grouped under the general umbrella of an individual’s sense of coherence as Braun- Lewensohn et al. (2011) explain it - how people see the world and how it affects them. Braun-Lewensohn et al. (2011) argues that this may moderate and/or mediate adolescent stress experiences.

The Current Study

This literature review has been critical of much of the body of work around stress and coping, from prevalent theoretical models to the factors that have been investigated and the aims of recent research. Our understanding of the stress process has advanced greatly as a result of this extensive body of work in an undeniable way, but when contrasted with the earlier discussion of the struggles faced by students in Ireland who are attempting to prepare for and complete the Leaving Certificate examinations, it is incumbent upon researchers to identify why despite this level of understanding and evidence, young people are still struggling.
It is tempting to examine further what models may fit, or to quantify which coping strategies are most prevalent, however, there are multiple ways to develop an understanding of student stress and coping processes. Taking an individual, qualitative approach could help to provide clarity and depth of understanding as to how some of these factors, such as the developmental changes facing second levels students, could be interplaying with their feelings of stress and their abilities to cope. It could be that such an exploration allows for integration with pre-existing work but also serves to point in the direction of future research. It may also enable the research to connect in a meaningful way with the experiences of this population that will deepen an understanding of the stress experience for adolescents, rather than further broadening it.

To that end, the aims of this research are to explore what it means for an adolescent to recognise, experience, and feel stress, how they attempt to cope with that stress, and how they feel about how well that works for them. While the research focus is on the preparation for taking the Leaving Certificate exams, the data will include mention of other areas to both contextualise the Leaving Certificate experience and to allow room for the participants to voice the possible interplay between Leaving Certificate stress and other life stress that may be present for them.
Methodology

Research Aims and Questions

The primary purpose of this study is to better understand what adolescents mean when they talk about the concepts of stress and coping, as well as what causes them stress, and how it feels for them to be stressed and to try and cope with that stress. The focus of the study is on middle to late adolescence as a key aim is to link participants' understanding of stress with the assumed major stressor of the Leaving Certificate while also taking account of other potential stressors in participants' lives.

Definitions

This study was undertaken using a constructivist, inductive approach, as advocated by Charmaz (2006) and as a result there are no definitions provided for the concepts of stress and coping. Using this epistemology, it was considered important that the participants define these concepts for themselves in their own words.

However, the terms middle adolescence and late adolescence have been operationalised as follows: middle adolescence is the period between 14 to 16 years of age (World Health Organisation (WHO), n.d.). Late adolescence is the period between 17-19 years of age (WHO, n.d.). A DEIS school means that the school is a participant school in the 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools' pathway, which are situated in communities “at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion” (Department of Education and Skills (DES), n.d.).

Research Design

This is a qualitative study using focus groups comprising of young people in mid to late adolescence across three different schools in Dublin. The focus
A group method was chosen as it allows for a semi-structured approach and open dialogue between participants as they discuss stress and coping in their lives. A brain-storming session was used to open each focus group as a way of encouraging dialogue and thinking on the topics. Open questions regarding stress coping were discussed by each group and then transcribed.

Analysis of the transcriptions was conducted using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and informed by the principles and techniques of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). This was considered important as it was a primary aim of the research to get at the meaning and understanding that the participants had of the concepts of stress and coping within their lived experience of preparing for the Leaving Certificate. Themes were identified through in-depth coding and comparison across focus groups and participants to identify recurring elements within the transcripts.

Memoing was conducted by the researcher throughout the research to minimise the difficulty of ‘laying aside’ previous theoretical knowledge and lived experience. This ensured minimal researcher bias throughout the study. Similarly, the literature review was conducted alongside data collection and analysis as recommended by Charmaz (2006). This allowed the researcher to be sensitised to the salient elements of the existing literature without bringing it to bear in excess amounts on the current study.

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 16 boys and 21 girls, from three secondary schools in the greater Dublin area. The first school was a fee-paying all-girls school. The second school was a mixed gender DEIS school, and the third school was a DEIS all-boys school. There were two focus groups held in each
The first focus group had eight participants and was all-female. The second group had three female participants. The third group had one boy and six girls, and the fourth had four girls and two boys. The last two focus groups were all-male and the first one had six participants whereas the second had seven participants. All participants were students enrolled in the Leaving Certificate Cycle (fourth to sixth year) within the school. Each student only participated with students from the same school as they were from. The ages of participants ranged from 15 to 18 years of age, with the average age being 17 years of age.

**Recruitment**

Recruitment took place in multiple ways over a sustained period. The researcher first began contacting schools throughout the country in October 2015. Approximately 150 schools were contacted throughout the total recruitment period. This was initially conducted by emailing either the principal or guidance counsellor for each school outlining the study and enquiring whether the school might take part in the study. These emails were then followed up with a second email if no response was received. This method of recruitment however did not return any participating schools.

A letter of recommendation was obtained (Appendix A) from Prof. Mark Morgan, Cregan Professor of Education & Psychology in Dublin City University and Visiting Professor in Trinity College Dublin, to attach to recruitment material, and the researcher began posting letters to schools with this attached and following up with emails and phone calls. Again, this did not produce any participating schools. The researcher was put in touch with the principal of two schools and the guidance counsellor of the third school through fellow researchers who had also conducted research in the educational setting, and thus
the three participating schools were secured.

A meeting was had with each of the contact people in each school, where the study was discussed in more depth, and copies of the information sheets and consent forms were provided for them to examine. In the first school, a second meeting was set up whereby the researcher was brought into the sixth-year assembly meeting. Students were asked by the year head to self-select for the study, and those who did so were given information sheets and consent forms to take away and read and discuss with their parents. In the second school, the year group was very small, so the principal took enough information sheets and consent forms for the full year and gave them out himself.

In the third school, the students’ council was selected by the guidance counsellor for recruitment. The researcher was invited to sit in on a student council meeting and, as part of the meeting, explained the research and gave information sheets and consent forms to those who requested them. Dates and times for data collection were then organised with the relevant staff member once all consent forms had been returned (signed or unsigned) to them. The data was collected between October 2016 and May 2018.

**Ethical Considerations and Approval**

As is required for all research within the School of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin, ethics approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee. Approval was granted in October 2015 on condition of schools agreeing to participate which, as outlined above, was obtained (Appendices B & C).

**Informed consent.**

While some participants were aged over 18 years of age, most students were younger than 18. As a result, informed consent was sought from both
parents (Appendix D) and the participants themselves (Appendix E), and the participant was only accepted onto the study if both consent forms were returned. Before the consent forms were given to participants, the study was fully explained, and an in-depth information sheet (Appendix F) was also presented. This contained contact information for the researcher, in case there were any queries. Questions were encouraged both at this point and when the researcher met the participants to collect the data.

**Confidentiality.**

Participants were recorded during the focus groups but are not identifiable in the audio files or in the resultant transcripts that followed. The researcher was the only person in the room for three of the six focus groups, ensuring information was not shared beyond those involved in the research. In two focus groups, there was a research assistant present, taking notes on non-verbal actions etc. In a third, the guidance counsellor was in the room for the last few minutes of the session as her office was the location of the focus group. Each participant was assured of their anonymity and the confidential treatment of the data.

**Child protection.**

As per both general ethical guidelines and the Children First Irish national guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2017) participants were informed that the confidentiality of the information discussed was not limitless. Each focus group was informed prior to starting that should anyone refer to someone being in danger, or should the researcher feel that anyone may be in danger, of any kind, then she would be legally obliged to report that information. The relevant person was identified in each school by the researcher.
prior to data collection, and each focus group was informed who the information
would thus be reported to. There was space and time provided at the beginning
of the focus groups to ask questions or discuss this in any way if participants
wished.

**Potential distress.**

While it was not expected that participants should experience much, if
any, distress during or after taking part in the research, it was still a possibility
that was considered. Given the nature of the topics under discussion, it was felt
that if a participant was feeling particularly stressed or had underlying mental
health or other life or social issues going on that they could on reflection become
distressed. As a result, contact information for the support services of Childline
and the Samaritans (two national support services) were included on the debrief
sheets for each participant.

**Qualitative Approach**

The research plan was based on a Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke,
2013) approach, drawing on principles and techniques of Constructivist
Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology allows for a constructivist
epistemology, where reality is created by the observer, and so there is no
singular true reality to be examined (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). Many adult
models of stress, such as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by
Lazarus and Folkman (1984) are assumed to apply equally well to adolescents as
to adults. However, this study argues that there is enough evidence to warrant
investigation from adolescents themselves. The most appropriate way to do this
is qualitatively, as it has been highlighted previously that quantitative measures
that exist to capture stress and coping for this population are scarce and
constructed in other countries with potentially different cultural influences.

A qualitative approach allows for adolescents’ voices to be heard and through this allows access to the realities that participants construct based on what they can access, understand and report from within their experiences. An inductive approach also allows the study to set aside previous theoretical models and so avoids the risk of forcing any theoretical view upon the data during analysis. As a result, what is gained through adopting this qualitative approach is considered more valuable for this construct and this population.

The primary principles of open enquiry, reflexive memoing, line-by-line gerund coding and inductive data collection for which Grounded Theory advocates are still of benefit within a Thematic Analysis study, as these principles primarily aimed at a reduction in bias which would be a positive step towards maintaining validity and reliability within the study as it continued.

**Methods**

**Focus groups.**

According to Kitzinger (1995) focus groups are akin to a group interview, and they aim to capitalise on data generation in the interaction between participants. She highlights that focus groups are “particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think, but how they think and why they think that way” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). Morgan (1996) highlights that two key features of focus groups are that the interaction in the group is the source of the data, and also that the researcher has an active role in creating the group discussion for the purposes of collecting data – this last element reflects back on the nature of constructivism, and how the researcher cannot be entirely removed from the
research process in the ‘tabula rasa’ way that Glaser alluded to (Clarke, 2005).

The co-constructive nature of focus groups also sits well within the constructivism epistemology. Together, the members of each focus group construct a meaning for each of the concepts discussed. This allows for a sharing of ideas which can be agreed upon and fleshed out as the participants add their own experiences and thoughts to the discussion.

Focus groups were also chosen with the type of participants involved in this study in mind. The researcher was conscious of being an outsider to the situation, and that, as an adult, there was a risk of being considered akin to an authoritative teacher. If that was the case and an individual interview method had been used instead, there was a risk of the participants not feeling comfortable in discussing certain topics. In creating a group dynamic where the participants were among peers with shared experiences, it was felt that there would be a higher likelihood of participants feeling more comfortable and therefore being more likely to engage and share their thoughts in a true and deeper way, and in agreeing with or differing from their peers, they would be given opportunities to reflect and comment in the moment. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the focus group discussions (Appendix G).

While efforts were made to keep the focus group sizes similar, they ranged from three to ten in terms of the number of participants that comprised each group. This was owing largely to the logistics of putting together the groups being handed over to gatekeepers within each school, and due to absences of students due to illness or extracurricular activities on the day of the focus group. There is some disagreement in the literature as to the optimal number of people per focus group. Fern (1982) suggested that a group of eight produced more ideas than a
group of four, However Kitzinger (1995) suggested that a number between four and eight was more optimal. Most of the focus groups were within that range, with one being smaller, and one being larger. The average number of participants per groups was five.

**Brainstorming.**

Each focus group began with an approximate five-minute brainstorming session. Two large pieces of paper were laid out on the table, along with some coloured markers. In the centre of one of the sheets of paper was the word ‘stress’, while in the centre of the other was the word ‘coping’. The participants were asked to discuss among themselves and write down anything that they could think of in association with the two words. They were assured that there were no right or wrong answers, that the same things could be written on both pieces of paper, and that everyone did not have to agree with something for it to be written down.

The primary purpose of this action was to stimulate discussion among the participants, as it was unclear how well they knew each other prior to the study. It also aimed to create a relaxed atmosphere where the researcher was not viewed as an authority figure and the session was not viewed as a class-style activity, as the focus groups were conducted during the school day in the school building. The third aim of this activity was to start participants thinking about the coming discussion and hopefully contribute toward an engaging discussion with their peers around the two concepts.

**Analysis**

Analysis of the data was, as mentioned previously, conducted using Thematic Analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2013), although it retained some elements of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) such as, for
example, line-by-line gerund coding, and the use of reflexive memos. In this
instance, line-by-line gerund coding was understood by the researcher as
“naming each word, line, or segment of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113) and
utilised gerunds as advised by Charmaz (2006) to allow the research both stick
closely to the data and also detect processes.

All focus group discussions were audio recorded using a Dictaphone. The
audio files were transcribed partly by the researcher and some were outsourced
to a transcription service. In both cases the audio files were transcribed
verbatim. The transcriptions that were outsourced were checked for accuracy by
the researcher. Each individual focus group transcription was coded using
Charmaz’s (2006) line-by-line gerund coding, and this formed the basis of the
coding framework.

Once all the transcripts were fully coded, a second round of coding was
undertaken to enable comparison and identification of recurring codes both
within individual focus groups and across different focus groups. Themes were
identified and grouped according to their reference to stress or coping, and
within those groups they were further grouped according to their applicability to
conceptualisation of the topic, or their discussion around causes of the topic.
Within these topics, themes were identified, and key quotes were selected.

Verifying credibility

At the outset, an initial content analysis summary of the data was
conducted, and this was discussed in tandem with the data itself with a
supervisor with regards to possible themes. Due to the circular nature of data
collection and analysis that is utilised in Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006),
informal member-checking formed a natural part of the data collection process,
whereby tentative initial themes developed from previous focus groups were queried in the focus groups that followed. This enabled the researcher to both verify consensus in the data and to identify possibly important areas of divergence between the groups. Lastly, as mentioned before, memoing was used to allow reflection on potential biases on the part of the researcher and to parse out themes in the data. An example of a memo written as part of this study is included in Appendix H.

**My role as a qualitative researcher**

Prior to beginning this research, I had no prior experience in qualitative research my previous work had been solely with quantitative data. With guidance from my supervisors who both have research experience in qualitative research, I attended various modules, workshops and seminars to increase my skill level. In taking the decision to change methodology, I felt confident in my skill level to identify that the continued use of Constructivist Grounded Theory was not appropriate, and having considered various other qualitative methodologies, I decided in conjunction with my supervisors that given the stage that the study was at during that time, that Thematic Analysis would be the most beneficial methodology to continue with as I entered the analysis phase. As a novice qualitative researcher, I particularly found the use of reflexive memoing to be helpful as it allowed me to examine potential biases and deductions in a more distant way and provided a method of checking that I understood how I was attempting to employ the methodology and move through the research. As an adolescent, I completed the Leaving Certificate twice in aiming for a course that required excellent results, and therefore have deep lived experience of this topic.

I wrote reflective memos after each piece of literature I read, each focus
group I conducted, each stage of coding I completed and after reach portion of writing that I did. Memoing enabled me to develop an awareness of my own biases. This meant that when I was conducting focus groups I could stop myself from asking questions that might be leading towards a theoretical concept, or towards a comparison to my own experience as well as being aware of what my own biases were and how they were similar or different to the data when analysing the transcripts. Memos increased awareness of potential researcher bias for me and enabled me to think more analytically.

**Limitations**

There were multiple limitations to conducting this study. It made use of focus groups only, which may have limited the depth of data collected. The sample was quite limited in terms of obtaining data only from adolescents rather than including other people such as teachers, in sample spread regarding the use of three schools from one county in Ireland, and in size with 37 participants.

While qualitative research is not conducted with the intent to generalise finding, the restricted nature of this data reduces that ability somewhat further. Reflection on the results must take into consideration that the experiences detailed in this study may only apply to these schools within this context. However, despite these limitations, the findings have merit in furthering a qualitative understanding of some of the ways mid to late adolescents conceptualise and experience stress and conceptualise and enact coping.
### Results

Table 1:

*Breakdown of themes by topic and subtopic.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Subtopic</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Conceptualising Stress</td>
<td>Stress as a feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Origins of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Causes of Stress</td>
<td>Other people</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School stress</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Leaving Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General things in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Carrying on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>Conceptualising Coping</td>
<td>Moving Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acting on Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reducing Coping</td>
<td>Things others could do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Solitary coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social/peer relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**General Introduction**

The results are grouped and analysed according to whether they refer to stress or coping. Within those two topic groups, the findings are further grouped according to conceptualising the topic. Within the ‘stress’ topic group the causes of stress are also brought together as a single subgroup, and within the ‘coping’ subgroup, stress reductions are brought together as a single subgroup. Themes are discussed within each subgroup as presented in Table 1.

**Stress**

**Conceptualising Stress.**

Some participants had difficulty conceptualising stress. In one of the mixed gender groups a participant mused about how she often used the word without considering if that’s how she really felt or if it was the right word. One of the all-male groups decided to look up the dictionary definition to see how it compared to their conceptualisations – they felt it was accurate enough. For those who were able to conceptualise a meaning for the idea of stress, it was predominantly negative. One student in an all-girl focus group referred to it as being positive sometimes because it motivated her to study and focus.

Overall the meaning of stress for the participants was conceptualised as something mostly negative. Only one student referred to it as being positive in terms of motivating her to study and focus. Regarding how stress feels, the overall picture participants painted was one of having power or incentive to act either reduced or taken away.

**Theme 1: Stress as a feeling.**

All the focus groups described stress in terms of feelings. These feelings can be grouped into two sub-themes: emotions and physical feelings. The
emotions that repeatedly came up across all focus groups involved panicking about not being in control of a situation:

“Something out of your control, you can’t change, or you have like, not much power over it” all male group participant.

This was linked by some participants to a fear of the future, to being afraid something bad is going to happen, or that they will mess something up.

There were multiple physical feelings referred to by participants across all the focus groups, but this was more prevalent in the all-male focus groups than the all-female or mixed gender focus groups. The types of feelings that were described by all the groups were similar, however, and they related to feeling tired, headaches, having ‘a ball’ in the stomach, a weight on their chest or a general feeling of drowning:

“You feel like you’re drowning or something” mixed gender group participant.

The participants explained that these feelings make it difficult to focus or think clearly. They also referred to not wanting to do anything when they are feeling this way. Sometimes these feelings were discussed as being related to the Leaving Certificate, but sometimes there was no specific situation to which the participants could link these feelings:

“It’s like a train filled with everything that stresses you out coming straight for you and you’re like, tied up on the track and you can’t move, it’s just heading your way, there’s nothing you can do about it” all-male focus group participant.
The main experience represented by the participants was one represented in physical and emotional terms, but it was also clear that these elements of stress were so salient for them that they couldn’t move beyond these types of descriptions when they discussed both everyday stressors and more intense experiences such as The Leaving Certificate.

**Theme 2: Origins of stress.**

The participants across all the focus groups talked about stress in terms of where or how it originates. They recognised that some stress is internally generated, some stress comes from external sources, and that sometimes these can interact together to impact one another in circular ways whereby stress increases:

“Like, family pressure or something to do something and you don’t even know if you’re gonna do it” *all-male focus group participant.*

Most of the internal origins of stress related to the previous theme of feelings panicked or overwhelmed, but some mentioned making stress for yourself by not doing work when it needs to be done and putting themselves under pressure as a result:

“I find people don't work like the time frame up, sort of, and sometimes they even hold it kind of towards the end and then there’s mad stress. A big panic over it” *all male focus group participant.*

There was much discussion among all the focus groups about the ways they felt stress was either caused or increased by external elements. These
elements were multi-source and will be discussed in more depth in the analysis of the causes of stress below.

The idea of internally and externally-originated stress interaction seems to stem from the participants being aware that they could internalise the pressure they feel being placed upon them from external sources, or because the external stress mapped onto an already existing internal stress and amplified it.

**Causes of stress:**

While this study was centred around the concept of Leaving Certificate stress, the focus groups discussions were deliberately conducted in a semi-structured way to enable participants to relate different areas of their lives to both the ideas of stress and coping if they felt it was relevant. As a result, it became apparent that for these participants, stress had multiple causes and these causes at times interacted with one another.

**Theme 1: The self.**

This theme runs parallel to the internal origins of stress theme outlined above. Most of the internal origins of stress related to feeling panicked or overwhelmed. This appeared to be a bidirectional relationship, whereby stress induced panic and overwhelm, and vice-versa. All the focus groups were clear that they felt the need to do well in school, regardless of how soon in their future the Leaving Certificate was, or how much any plans they had for the period immediately following the Leaving Certificate were dependent on their performance in the exams. This pressure to do well came from wanting to keep their options regarding the future open, from wanting to meet others’ expectations (regardless of how realistic they felt those expectations were), from wanting to meet expectations they set for themselves:
“And not achieving what I wanted to achieve. I’m scared of that as well” all female group participant.

“And my dad’s always like, "It’s what separates the driver from the doctor." And I’m like, "Well maybe that’s right...". all female group participant.

“I’m going to college. That’s all I want to do. I want to make my mom and dad proud that I actually got into college” mixed gender group participant.

It also came from an unexplained, more generalised expectation that seemed to come from an assumption that their whole lives had been leading up to this point and so it took on an independent pressure of its own. The participants felt this internal stress because their performance in the Leaving Certificate felt only partly in their control. While they knew they could not do well without putting in effort and studying, several participants also mentioned being worried about uncontrollable factors:

“...something could happen that night, or you could, something could happen That week before and you’re not a hundred percent and just because you’re not a hundred percent, you’re whole, like, them results that you get are telling you what you are and what you’re not” – mixed gender focus group participant.

There was some conversation around the struggle to be happy within themselves and to accept themselves. One participant in a mixed-gender group spoke about not knowing who they are and being unhappy with things like their
weight or their abilities and living with these as a source of stress. One all male
group had an in-depth discussion about how they feel stressed in relation to
weight and looks. Some felt that they had to work to ignore societal pressure
about looking or dressing certain ways:

“Or your choice of clothes, or, my hair style or whatever or just
things that you want to do that people can judge you on, and that
makes you feel stressed. Like, I’m going to get judged if I wear these,
this hat. Or am I going to get judged if I wear these types of shoes or
whatever” all male group participant.

**Theme 2: Other people.**

The variable that was mentioned earliest in most of the focus groups
relating to other people as sources of stress was the idea of the expectation of
other people. It was unclear as to whether these expectations were always made
explicit to the adolescent or whether they were implied through actions or
assumed to be present by the adolescent. It was emphasised that teacher
expectations and pressures were explicit and that these expectations were present
from early in the Leaving Certificate cycle and that they were given regular
reminders of these expectations:

“There’s the odd teacher that says like aw you better get ready,
because the leaving cert is right around the corner, you know,
this is it, this is it” all-male focus group participant.

By and large these warnings and reminders were not viewed as helpful, and
instead tended to incite or increase feeling of stress and panic.
Some groups spoke about teachers being catalysts for how they experienced school. They felt that if teachers were nice to you, or were just not hostile to you, it made other things about school easier to deal with. Some participants spoke about teachers handing some control to the students:

“...my English teacher who’s usually nice she would say to us like oh just whatever you can like just hand it up then I’m only gonna correct it to this point so like it’s fair on her as well... So, if you wanna do the work, it's up to you. So that's kinda nice.” All female group participant.

These students described feeling less pressured because it left them open to focusing their energy on areas that they felt they were struggling with. Some participants talked about not understanding the way some teachers presented learning material but finding that teachers were reluctant to make any changes when requested by students. Others spoke about feeling like they weren’t learning anything at all, or not understanding why they were learning certain things.

Within some of the focus groups, whether they felt the teachers cared about them was important to them. It was generally agreed in these groups that this had a big impact on how the teachers tended to treat you, although as one of the all-male groups noted:

“You treat teachers nicely and they treat you nicely back. So, like it doesn’t seem as bad then” all-male group participant.

Parents were another source of external stress, but the process described here different between some groups and as a result was a little more complex than other sources of stress. In one of the schools, most of the participants’
parents had not continued their education beyond second level. These students described feeling the same level of stress as those in the other schools, but unlike the other groups they conveyed a sense of frustration as well as stress in relation to their parents:

“my mam and dad didn't do their leaving cert, they left after their Junior Cert and got jobs, so did the majority of your mas and das did as well. They didn't have a Leaving Cert, they didn't need one. And I don't see why we need to have one this year” mixed gender group participant.

They explained that while they understood that their parents were likely coming from a place of wanting their children to have better opportunities and lives than they had experienced, they also felt that their parents could not really understand their child's experience and feelings by not having experienced it themselves. These participants did describe not wanting to let their parents down in a way that the other focus groups seemed to imply but could not verbalise. One all-girl group declared an appreciation for the pressure they felt from their parents.

Many participants across all the focus groups referred to being unsure if they were either too stressed or not stressed enough (not specifically related to the Leaving Certificate, but more generally speaking), with one adolescent even seeking the researcher's opinion during one focus group. These two groups mentioned however that they found the pressure to be a helpful yardstick measure of how stressed they should be feeling. It is not clear if participants differentiated between the ideas of stress and pressure in general throughout
There was much discussion around family responsibility. Many participants felt a general pressure to live up to expectations of the image they felt their parents held of them. This generally related to doing better than they currently were at some level. One of the groups spoke about feeling like they needed to give back to their parents:

“Like you're trying to rely on me to get this great job that will probably support you financially. Which is the hope” mixed gender group participant.

There was also awareness for some that their families were not well-off, and that parents wanted their children to have better lives. These pressures appeared to be difficult to deal with as many of the students who spoke on these topics also referred to not being able to keep doing things that other people wanted them to do.

Some students were very aware that their action could sometimes cause their parents stress, which could add to the participants’ own stress:

“Like, them, like worrying about me being stressed makes me more stressed, because I’m like, 'Oh my god, like, I’m fine'. Like, I don't want you to, like, be all, like, I hate the thought of someone like being worried about me all the time. I’m like, 'No, I’m fine.' And then I’m like it just making me more stressed out.” all female group participant.

However, other participants spoke about their parents appearing to care, but feeling like it wasn’t real:

“Like it’s not that they care, it's just that to say to their friends, that their kid did that” mixed gender group participant.
Some participants also mentioned being compared to older siblings, and because their parents did this, they noted that they found themselves doing it sometimes.

There was some discussion within the all-male focus groups around feeling they were being put into situations that they weren’t comfortable with, but on further exploration their discomfort seemed to be related more to not feeling ready for situations that adults in their lives were expecting them to step into. These were mostly situations where there were expectations of adulthood being placed upon them, or where they felt they had to make big decisions or manage what they felt to be big things.

“Now you're thinking oh god, now I have to make a decision” all female group participant.

“Making decisions...Anything major. Yeah, college. School. Leaving your house. Leaving your parents, moving away. Getting a job. Paying taxes. All that kind of stuff” all male group participant.

There was a general discussion in most of the groups about how other people treat them as a source of stress, but it did not refer to specific actions or people; instead this referred to people judging them in general no matter what they do, adults generally having a lot of expectations about them, friends generally having expectations about them, and the process of socialising being a stressful experience sometimes.

**Theme 3: School stress.**

There was a lot of frustration expressed within some of the groups around their general school experience. Almost all the groups agreed at some
point throughout the discussion that what they were learning did not feel of benefit or use to them going forward into adulthood:

“Like if you’ve a better chance of getting your foot in a job if you say I’ve catering skills or I know I've good interview skills like these skills or that skills. Well I know King Lear. Well done, you know King Lear? I don’t want you to know King Lear, I want you to know this.” Mixed gender group participant

There was a general feeling that school was wasting their time. There was also a general feeling of powerlessness in relation to school – students felt on the one hand they were being expected to be adults with their own thoughts and ability to act, but on the other hand felt like they were still being treated as young children:

“They're all, like, you know, if something happens they'll just send for your parents, you know. But, again, it’s all on you, you know, your future, your decision, you're getting into college, getting a good grade” all female group participant.

Some participants lamented that this left them feeling like they couldn’t grow into themselves at school. One focus group related their frustrations with the school system to their wider lives, asking what their legacy would be:
“if I was sitting in all that and I get slapped with a car tomorrow, aw she done
great things with her life, she sat in and studied.” Mixed gender group
participant.

Even if, as mentioned previously, some teachers could be singled out as
caring about students, the overall impression from all the focus groups was that
the school and the larger education system didn’t really care (and therefore it
was considered a broken system by many of them), and as a result they felt quite
disempowered, and like it didn’t really matter how much stress they felt (or how
unfair it was), it was just something they had to get on with:

“Like we know the leaving cert is corrupt, we just know we have to do it.”
Mixed gender group participant.

Some groups pointed to changes that had been made within the education
system with disparaging comments about how little the changes had helped, and
multiple students lamented how they felt held back due to lack of subject choice,
or support for difficulties they faced:

“Basically, for me, I like cooking and I probably would do a culinary course
in college, but we don’t do home ec. here, so it’s kind of a bit unfair to not
have that option in the Leaving Cert, for what you have to do” all male
group participant.

These factors were discussed with general resignation and defeat overall. Many
of the focus groups discussed what they perceived to be the benefits of other
education systems or programs (including the Leaving Certificate Applied,
British and A-levels) and argued that those systems better catered to student needs and abilities.

**Theme 4: The Leaving Certificate.**

Regardless of what other causes of stress were discussed by the participants, they were almost always linked back to an interference in their ability to prepare for the Leaving Certificate, either because they took time away, because they diverted emotional energy away, or because they added to the existing pressure around the Leaving Certificate. This appeared to be largely spontaneous. The researcher was conscious of Leaving Certificate stress being particularly salient given the focus groups were conducted in the school environment during their senior cycle, and given the context of the study in general, and made efforts to broaden out the questions throughout the focus groups. One student gave an example of her family not understanding her stress:

“...like they’re like saying “oh yeah, the Leaving’s grand, why are you stressing” And they like try like to belittle you, and you’re like, stop”

*mixed gender participant.*

There were some specific stressors directly related to the Leaving Certificate that were mentioned throughout the focus groups such as meeting deadlines for project work, subject decisions and other requirements specific to the Leaving Certificate, and these were discussed in terms of how there always seemed to be another deadline coming at them.

Some students discussed fears around particular subjects such as maths, or about particular questions that might come up:
“So, it's like we wouldn't even know what it is in English to say it in Irish. Like in higher level Irish you've to write like a three or four page essay about politics, well, you don't even know what that is in English. I don't know anything about Brexit. And I have to write a four-page essay on it next week” mixed gender group participant.

Most of the students voiced that studying was stressful, and they explained that this was because there was so much to cover (“it's like six years packed into one exam” all female group participant), and they weren't sure how to study or develop study habits. There was also discussion in many of the groups about how they felt they had to work too much, and it meant missing out on other things:

“And we're here still majority of the day, and then you go home, and you're supposed to, like, eat healthy, get at least eight or nine hours of sleep and then do at least five hours of homework and you're like, "That was more than twenty-four hours in a day, I can't do that!" all female group participant.

Some participants spoke about not understanding new changes that were going on within the Leaving Certificate program, particularly with regards to new grade structures, or changes in requirements for certain subjects. Others felt that they were being given exam guidance that they disagreed with:

“...we were given like an answer structure where, say, you have to agree with a statement. I was like what if you don't agree and he's like just say
you agree with it. It's just easier. And I'm like..." *mixed gender group participant.*

The concept of the unknown examiner, who would be marking their papers but who does not know them or their situations and was noted in one group to be only human and therefore not incapable of making mistakes, was also identified as a source of stress.

Generally speaking, a lack of control was pervasive for participants in many different areas of their lives. Sometimes this seemed arbitrary, for example because their parents set rules that seemed to just make life more difficult for them, and sometimes it seemed more systemic, such as when school limitations prevented them from acting to reduce their own stress. Therefore, this is a theme that interacts with and is seen across other themes overall.

**Theme 5: Growing up.**

This theme overlapped with many of the other themes, as most of the participants linked the stressors they were experiencing with the place they currently stood in their lifespan. An important element of this for many participants was a growing realisation that there were many things about their lives and the world in general that they had been naïve and/or ignorant of but were now becoming more aware of. This was discussed in one focus group in relation to current events and the political climate, and in another group around the economy:

"It’s kinda, like, we don't know anything about the world" *mixed gender group participant.*
The stress surrounding growing up was linked by some focus groups to their frustration around their school experience. Some groups discussed realising that they had not been learning from the world around them. This added to their argument around the lack of value they found in what they were being taught at school, and a feeling they had been taught to accept everything at face value:

“There are people in schools who don’t do too bad in exams, that don’t question things, that do take them at face value and just think that like, butterflies, like who runs the world like” mixed gender group participant.

One focus group talked about how they were realising that the thing going on in the world might affect them. One student also related this growing awareness back to their feelings about the Leaving Certificate:

“So, if you don’t have that money...It’s all about luck like” mixed gender group participant.

This sense of defeat was echoed in other groups where there was discussion about losing the sense of what they had wanted to do and losing faith in life from being stuck.

Many of the participants spoke about the situation they felt they were in developmentally, whereby they were not quite a child and not quite an adult, but they were somehow expected to be both at the same time. For example, one focus group spoke about situations such as losing something and not being able to afford to replace it on their own. They felt if they were an adult, they could possibly resolve this issue by having the means and control to replace the object.
However, as a child, they did not have those resources, and asking an adult for assistance might result in repercussions.

There was some discussion among the all-male groups to the expectation that they should be in a romantic relationship by now. Many of them were not, and while this did not appear to be something they were concerned about, they were aware of this being an expectation they felt from others. One of the all-female groups referred to this in relation to that in-between developmental stage, where she could have a boyfriend but at the same time there was parental interference in the relationship:

“...whenever I'm with him, my Mom gives out that I spend too much time” all female group participant.

The future was a focal point of a lot of participants’ stress, both in the short term and the long term. The idea that the Leaving Certificate exams could decide the rest of your life featured prominently. When this was explored with participants, some participants felt this to be true, but others were not so sure and pointed out examples in their own lives of people who were successful without a good Leaving Certificate:

“My dad started out, went straight up and now he's a manager and he didn’t do his Leaving Cert” mixed gender group participant.

Students conveyed feelings of panic in relation to future planning. They described feelings pressured to make certain decisions, but some participants mentioned not being sure about many things, such as whether they even wanted to go to college or not:
“Where to study, what to study. If I should study” all female group participant.

There was some musing in most of the focus groups over what the ‘goal’ was. There was a general agreement that they all wanted to do ‘well’ in the exams, but what constituted ‘well’ was less clear. One all-female focus groups discussed how some teachers spoke about getting organised, but they had difficulty in translating that advice into actions they were supposed to take:

“Yeah like, you kind of are told that you’re gonna like, form study habits and then you never really think about it. And then you kind of get to it and you’re like oh I need to study and you’re like what do I, what is my study habit” all female group participant.

There was much discussion about how multiple things could go wrong during the Leaving Certificate exams themselves, from having an unsteady table to having had a family row the night before the exams, and as a result, there was a general worry about having done enough studying, having studied the wrong thing, or forgetting everything, and that combined with the fear that no amount of study possibly being enough to guarantee a good result. This was in addition to stress about not knowing what was going to come up in exam questions. The notion of ‘ruining your life’ was prominent here. There was a general feeling from all participants that while they weren’t sure what their best was, they still wanted to give their best, to both meet expectations and have no regrets, and this applied regardless of whether participants were planning on applying to university, or whether they were still unsure of their future plans.
It is noteworthy when talking about the Leaving Certificate, and as demonstrated above, there are large and small things that caused participants stress, as well as very real and some more hypothetical things that caused them stress. This did not appear to be something that the participants were conscious of, particularly when discussing exam-related stress, and all these things were equally stressful and combined to become a general overwhelming feeling.

There was a lot of uncertainty surrounding the immediate future following completion of the Leaving Certificate. For some the idea of going to college was scary, because college was merely another stressor in a line of stressful things, because once you completed college then you would have to figure out what was next after that whereas some mentioned specific fears:

“I can’t imagine going in to like a lecture hall with like 500 people. I’d be like, daunted” mixed gender group participant.

There were also some longer-term worries that related to not knowing what a certain job or career entails even if you are interested in it:

“They just say okay I’m gonna do this to get that CAO to go to that job, but they don’t actually know what that job even is, or like that career even entails” mixed gender group participant.

Thoughts were discussed about moving out of their childhood home, living independently, paying taxes and generally being adult that participants said made them feel stressed when they thought about them.

There was an undercurrent that ran through all the groups conversations of the notion that a lot of decisions were in the very near future, and participants
seemed to feel under pressure to make the ‘right’ decision.

**Theme 6: General things in life.**

Many of the facets of this theme came about after the groups had considered a more specific stressor, but came to a realisation that a broader, related topic was also a source of stress.

There was a general reference to feeling overloaded or overwhelmed in life that participants kept coming back to. While this was different in terms of what the causes and feeling of being overwhelmed for individual participants, and so this relates more to a subjective sense of overwhelm, many of them did have a lot going on in their lives. Most participants felt that they had too many things to do each day, and not enough time to do them all. These things mostly encompassed school and homework, studying, family responsibilities, social obligations, self-care and sleep. For others, the balancing of exam preparation, future planning and the tug between wanting to be an adult and wanting to be an adolescent was described in ways akin to mental overload:

“I’m like, minus eight hours a week” *all female group participant.*

Decisions were considered stressful but most of the focus groups. While there was discussion at length about specific decisions in their immediate futures, they also felt that decision making in general was stressful, and the gravitas of some decisions added to that stress:
“...I wasn't allowed to drink alcohol, I wasn't allowed to vote, I wasn't allowed to do this, that and the other and then, within one day I'm legally allowed to do all of it and then all of a sudden, I'm an adult now, and I'm able to make my own decisions...and then like, "Okay, just because it's a number it doesn't mean I'm automatically more knowledgeable."” *All female group participant.*

Lacking control was a big factor in participants feeling stressed. They spoke at length about how they were just beginning to realise how little of their lives and circumstances were under their control, and control was something with which they engaged in an ongoing struggle. They sometimes spoke about being frustrated about having a lack of control, but the all-male focus groups kept coming back to the idea of just having to accept a lack of control and moving on:

“Like exams. They're coming to you and like you can't change that.” *All male group participant.*

For these groups, it felt as though they had an awareness that they could not force some situations to be more under their control, in a way that the other groups did not display. This was something that was mentioned at different parts of the discussions by all groups, but when other topics were brought up, such as exams, they linked back to accepting a lack of control explicitly themselves, making this both an interactive and a standalone factor in participants’ experience of stress.

There was general expression of stress around the potential to fail. This was not just related to the Leaving Certificate, but more at life in general. This linked into general thoughts about the future and mentions of life in general
being stressful, as well as figuring out what their goals might be in life:

“I’m petrified that I’ll fail, I’m petrified I’ll fail” mixed gender group participant.

There were also multiple discussions about little things in life causing strong feelings of stress. These discussions centred around day-to-day tasks that needed to be done, for example, chores, and trivial heat-of-the-moment things, where many of the participants described having a large emotional reaction to something that on reflection did not warrant a strong reaction, but still incited one in the moment:

“And it goes back to the heat of the moment type of thing. Like if you over exaggerate it in your head and when you do it, it’s like very small. You’re like, you just wasted a bunch of time just sweating it for nothing”. all male group participant.

Some of the general stressors that participants discussed appeared to contradict one another at times. For example, there was frequent discussion about having work that needed to be done and working to a good enough standard. On the one hand the participants did not want to do the work at all, but on the other hand, if they were going to do it, they wanted to do it well.

“you're kind of like right well I know that I need to put this amount of work in in order to be able to do it” all male group participant.

Coping

Conceptualising Coping.

In discussing coping with participants, questions were framed around things that made them feel better, things that reduced stress and things they did to
cope, to avoid assuming that participants had a pre-existing understanding of the concept of coping.

**Theme 1: Carrying on.**

The idea of carrying on was linked by participants to an awareness that stress and the things that cause stress often cannot be eradicated. Participants discussed getting on with things regardless of how unenticing or difficult things were, and an acceptance that even though that might not be fun or easy, sometimes it was required:

“If you’ve to do something, and you know you’ve to do something, then you just do it” *all male group participant.*

Some of the groups talked about feeling like they were not getting anywhere and having to keep going, as the only other option would be giving up, and this never came up in any of the discussions:

“Coping is like even though you’re not getting anywhere and you still gotta keep going with it, hoping to get somewhere” *all male group participant.*

Some spoke about carrying on with an understanding that whatever they were stressed by, there would be an end at some point and sometime in the future they could consider themselves to be past it, and as a result, carrying on would get them through the stressful time:

“I have like my calendar all labelled out. And I know it’s just get to here and then you’re free” *all female group participant.*

This also relates to other elements of the discussion whereby participants felt
that even if they were not currently getting somewhere, they held a sense of hope that they eventually would get somewhere if they could just hang on long enough. This created a sense of enduring stress and trying to focus on the transience of stressors.

**Theme 2: Moving away.**

This theme was part of the discussion around coping in every focus group. Participants described feeling unable to continue with a task due to feeling overwhelmed by the stress associated with it, so they would decide to take a temporary break from it. Ceasing the stressful task was not enough to reduce stress most times, and participants were clear that they required a different, often enjoyable task, to fill their brains and effectively drown out stress-related thoughts. This was explicitly a temporary respite from the stressful task rather than giving up on it, and the aim was usually to return to the original activity after a short period feeling refreshed and better able to focus on and succeed at the task:

“So, with reading, right... when I come back, I have relief. I’ve seen a better place or a worse place that the feeling of stress just gets released from my body so that when I want to get back and just work it all out. It’s in my brain” *all male group participant.*

It was notable that coping by moving away for a short respite usually involved a solitary action, but participants also discussed moving away for larger breaks, such as an evening or a day, by doing more social things such as going out with friends. This was conveyed by participants as more of a general unwinding and choosing to do something fun for a period that could otherwise have been
spent studying or some similar activity. Some of the female groups reported using this stepping away to emotionally vent or engage in self-care actions, but if this was the case they did not usually return as quickly to the task causing the stress in the same way as those who undertook other coping actions when they moved away:

“Like I like to take a break and just like, have a tea with my mam or something like in between. Like I’ll just come down from studying and be like I can’t...do anymore” all female group participant.

**Theme 3: Acting on the stress.**

Many participants took a very active view of coping. Their view was that coping was something that you did, either to feel better or to change things in some way. There was some discussion about trying to escape stressful situations but most of the conversations centred around either relaxing or doing something.

Relaxing in this context was often mentioned in association with stepping back from the stressor as analysed above. The actions taken to provide a temporary respite from an overwhelming task provided a way to shake themselves off so that they could return to their study or other stress-related task and complete it successfully. This was centred around the idea of giving their minds something else to do for a while to allow feelings to calm and focus to return:

“...if we have coping mechanisms we kind of get a certain view of it and then we can tackle it more calmer” all male group participant.

How participants deal with their stress is closely linked with how they
understand coping as a concept.

**Dealing with/Reducing Stress.**

**Theme 1: Things others could do.**

This direction in the coping conversation developed directly from reflection by participants that much of their stress is caused by other people, so it almost appeared natural to them that those people should do something to reduce stress also. The ‘others’ referred to were mostly teachers, or the school system on a larger scale. Parents were only briefly mentioned, and the overall view was that if they gave participants a bit more freedom that would suffice in reducing their stress:

"'You're seventeen, you shouldn't be staying out late." "Come on, I'm eighteen, stop and let me leave for a week and I've no obligations to tell you where I am"" all female group participant.

There were many ways that participants felt schools could ease their stress levels. Many participants felt that if they had more choice in the subjects they could study, or the subjects they were studying could have more real-life relevance or were aimed at life skills development, then school would not cause them as much stress.

Some suggestions were made based on individual difficulties being catered for better within the school environment and participants felt that these would make it easier for them to avoid getting stressed in the first place:

"'I'd prefer to type, like typing can be real quick, but like writing just takes me so long" mixed gender group participant."
Many of the conversations were very animated when suggesting ways that others could help ease their stress, and when discussing teachers there was broad agreement across participants that if they felt that all teachers really cared rather than one or two (who they described in detail for comparison), if they felt that teachers understood them, if they felt they were allowed to have their own opinions about things in class and if they felt that teachers treated them a bit more like adults by giving students the power to make their own decisions over homework submission and other things, they argued that it would make a big difference to their stress levels:

“like my English teacher who’s usually nice she would say to us like oh just whatever you can like just hand it up then I’m only gonna correct it to this point.... cause you know yourself and you're like, I'm actually bad in that area of English so I need to do that and see how it’s corrected and where I can improve” all female group participant.

Participants described wanting to have people within the school environment to talk to. Some groups talked about having a psychotherapist or other professional in the school who was available for students to seek out, while others talked about having teachers to whom they knew they could go with problems. It was important that in seeking the support of these people they would be listened to, respected and heard. They also wanted teachers to speak more in the classroom about things that mattered to them, either by relating subject material to the world outside of school, or about other things, they wanted to have these conversations in a classroom setting:
“Maybe they should be asking these in religion classes” all male group participant.

The conversation often circled back around to what the school environment could do to foster less stress or help reduce existing stress in several ways. Most of the groups discussed the feeling of not having enough time and displayed an awareness that much of their time was taken up by school. They made several suggestions for protected time within school hours to allow for chatting with friends, having more relaxing things as part of the school day such as mindfulness, and schools providing help with planning and creating study plans, as well as having more space (temporal and physical) for creativity within the school environment. One focus group suggested having a later school finishing time to allow for a clearer line between school and the other elements of life, as they felt school was overflowing and taking over their lives. Another focus group pointed out that as they were in a disadvantaged area, many of their parents could not afford to pay for grinds classes, and that the school should help by providing on-site grinds to ensure everyone got equal help:

“Schools! Schools could give grinds, but maybe you don’t know you’re as good at such a subject because you never had the opportunity to have them grinds. You could be just as good as her at the subject but you just don’t have the opportunity” mixed gender group participant.

While these suggestions were based on solution-based thinking around

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1 A ‘grinds class’ is a term in Ireland for additional classes that can be taken outside of regular school, in their own time and at their own cost’. These are a form of more intensive tuition in a subject and are often taken by students if they are struggling to gain good grades in a subject.
specific stressors participants had faced, or following conversations with peers who attended other schools, the overall suggestion was that if adolescents felt more in control, and felt they had more freedom within their education, they would feel more wanted at school, and more able to cope with other stressors that could occur. Throughout these conversations, participants were clear that they were not relying on other people to make stressors go away, and that this was one of many avenues for reducing stress in their lives.

**Theme 2: Solitary Coping.**

Across all the focus groups without exception, many stress reduction strategies were solitary ones. These fell into several subthemes: emotions reactions, action-based distraction, re-focusing, changing thoughts, and resting.

Emotional reactions were mentioned more frequently in the all-female groups, and from the females in the mixed gender groups, however the males also referred to sometimes throwing things or screaming to release stress. The most common emotional reaction mentioned was crying:

“Crying me eyes out, I’m not even joking” mixed gender group participant.

Action-based distraction was commonly discussed in relation to stepping away from the stressor for that temporary reprieve. This often involved partaking in some type of creative activity such as music, art or reading. Doing something involved sport, such as going for a run or a walk (often in conjunction with listening to music) was frequently mentioned, and it was emphasised that participants preferred to do these things mostly by themselves. Within the all-male focus groups playing video games was also a common action, but it was generally agreed that often the type of action did not matter, if the participant
engaged in some non-stressful activity:

“Or just doing any sort of activity really, that doesn't have to do with what you're getting stressed out by...” *All male group participant.*

Refocusing was largely a strategy used in relation to homework or studying and participants talked about accompanying this at times by reminding themselves that there would be a reward such as a break if they could get a certain amount of work done in the interim. Some participants spoke about having a goal to aim for or knowing what they wanted to achieve as helping them focus. The all-male groups were strong in their opinion that sometimes there was a need to take control, focus on the task, plan and just get things done. They acknowledge the difficulty of this, but also accepted it was sometimes necessary:

“If you want to stay up late and do your homework, you can stay up late and do your homework. It’s all down to you, if you don’t want to do your homework, you don’t have to do it. You do, you make your time to do it” *all male group participant.*

When participants spoke about changing their thoughts, these conversations encompassed two different types of changes. The first of these was when participants would purposely think about something other than what was causing them stress on a broad and vague level. Participants talked about thinking about anything other than the stressful thing:

“I think having some side thoughts...Rather than just sitting in your bed all day, like just thinking about it” *mixed gender group participant.*

Those that spoke about this framed it as their mind needing to be filled, and it
could either be filled with stressful thoughts, or something else, and changing from stressful thoughts to something else took a conscious effort.

The second type of thought change centred around purposeful and positive future-oriented thoughts. Within the all-female groups there was much discussion around reminding themselves of the good things that would come when the Leaving Certificate was over:

“I'm thinking that after the leaving cert, I'll have more skill and then it's then it's just, college, and then it's like holidays so that kind of...” *all female group participant.*

There was also a sense of trying to change their own perception, such as viewing things from a different angle and understanding that they might not be seeing or understanding things clearly:

“I feel like it's like the Beast from the Beauty and the Beast kind of metaphor” *all male group participant.*

Some groups mentioned that they sometimes tried to push their stress thoughts aside and ignore them, but on reflection they decided that this rarely worked and often made things worse in the long run so that was a bad way to deal with stress.

**Theme 3: Resting.**

Overall the impression from participants was that they had a lot of things constantly ongoing and that sometimes they just needed everything to stop for a while, because they could not keep going and were feeling overwhelmed. The idea of just leaving things and walking away was mentioned frequently, and was
often associated with taking time off or sleeping:

“No, I mean in general like if you are really having a bad day, and you’re like "I actually cannot go to school””  *mixed gender group participant.*

Other methods of resting included relaxing at home and taking a day off from studying.

**Theme 4: Social/peer relations.**

When the groups discussed stress reduction in an interpersonal way, it mostly focused on peer relationships and how having friends or doing things with their friends helps reduce feelings of stress. Peer conversations however were generally noted to only be about what was causing someone stress if the peer was the cause of the stress, in which case participants wanted to ‘have it out’ with them and resolve the issue, or only if the peer was a very close and trusted friend, then they might vent to them:

“Like to your bestest friends, almost, you know what I mean? Like, people that you can trust, like that have told you things in the past as well”  *all male group participant.*

Most participants talked about the fact that they would rarely use the words stress, but that they might use other similar words such as ‘worried’ instead. This seemed to be because they haven’t ever stopped to think about the words they use around these topics, and when talking it about in general, multiple words are used interchangeably. There does not appear to be any conscious reflect on stress in a way that is conscious to them.

There was comfort found by participants, in a sense of comradery, where
they agreed across all focus groups that it was enough to know that others in their peer group were going through the same things, and for some that almost negated any need to explicitly discuss stressful topics. If a group engaged in any kind of conversation around stress it was often through jokes to prevent things becoming too serious in a group setting. When probed, those who mentioned this explained that it was generally accepted that everyone in the group knew that you were being serious about being stressed but that you were keeping it light in that social situation.

Outside of the school environment, all groups referred to feeling better if they went out with friends, usually to the cinema or to get food together. Again, they emphasised that the thing that made this situation reduce their stress was that stress was not discussed during these times:

“...because it removes you from your home life and your school life. It removes you from, uh, a scenario... different types of scenarios that you are so used to. and you go to the cinema then you have... you can decide to go out for food. You can talk about the movie and something you've just experienced, and not something that you experience all the time” all male group participant.

While many of the causes of stress had been attributed to family issues, there was little discussion of those issues, as mentioned previously, in relation to stress reduction. Some students did mention however, that their parents eased their stress by sharing a cup of tea with them when they took a study break and helped take their mind off things, or by letting them study instead of doing chores:
“Um, my dad wants to do time management for everything, so he just... if I have to do work he will let me off like washing dishes or anything like that” all male group participant.

The family role in stress reduction appeared to be in more of a supportive position that in actively reducing stress.

Summary

There was a general sense across all the focus groups that they understood that while stress is not pleasant and while it is not avoidable, there are some things that can be done to make the journey through stressful times a little easier, and that was what coping meant to them. There was little reference to avoiding stressful things or the idea of stress going away entirely, even when they were musing how they were not sure exactly what stress was. This was intertwined with frustration at things being compounded by what they viewed as unnecessary stress, such as teachers piling on reminders, and people not being straight with them, as well as a new realisation for some that life may not always be fair, understandable or controllable. This frustration was added to by their sense of being ‘in-between’ childhood and adulthood and having to figure out which side of the boundary between the two they were standing in relation to each stressor they faced.
Discussion

Main Findings

This study aimed to understand what it means for adolescents to experience stress and to cope with stress while preparing to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination, the main end-of-school exam within the Irish education system. The study also aimed to explore how adolescents conceptualise the meaning of both stress and coping, and to understand what caused them to feel stress and how they enacted coping with regards to that stress.

The study found that students had some difficulty in describing stress. There was a general understanding of what it felt like to be stressed, but there was some blurring of the terms panic, stress, overwhelm, and worry when it came to explain what stress meant for them. However, the themes that were identified in relation to conceptualising stress centred around it being a feeling that had multiple origins.

There was similar difficulty in conceptualising coping, although it was strongly related to the idea of being an action that helped to make stress easier to deal with. The themes identified here related to stress being something that participants moved away from or acted upon, or something they kept moving through life in spite of.

The main themes that were identified for causes of stress for participants were the self, other people, school issues, the Leaving Certificate, growing up and life in general. Participants discussed stress reduction under the themes of things other people could do, things they could do by themselves, resting and social/peer relations.
**Previous Research and Current Findings**

**Defining stress.**

The participants of this study discussed the meaning of the term stress in relation to the feelings it evoked for them, and these feelings could be caused by external or internal forces. This partly fits with Denscombe's (2000) definition of stress as a subjective tension state, although the meaning produced by the current study goes further in clarifying the origins. Both Aherne (2001) and Lazarus (1976) consider the threat of loss from stress. This is comparable to the participants' discussions in the present study of stepping away from an activity when stress becomes too much, as there is an implication that if they do not step away, some kind of loss will follow such as loss of emotional control, loss of focus, or loss of ability to complete the activity.

Drake et al. (2016) argues that perceived environmental demands must exceed the ability to cope with them for stress to occur. This is not something that was found in this study. Rather, there is a baseline of constant stress for participants, and this occasionally increases to the point where specific coping strategies must be enacted. Therefore, it may be possible that stress can occur even when environmental demands are within a normative range. This is supported by the concept of 'daily hassles' which have been suggested to be strong predictors of distress despite their minimal stature in comparison to major life stress (Lu, 1994). It may be that for some participants a low but constant level of stress is so endemic in their lives that it is a norm for them and this could have important implications when additional, larger stressors such as end-of-school exams occur.

The Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is argued to be the
most applicable theory in the absence of a specific youth stress model (Fallin et al., 2001). The participants of this study appear to appraise stressors, but in a different way to the process posited by this model. From the stress reduction strategies they utilise, there is less consideration around what type of stressor they are facing. Instead the focus is on whether they can act upon it, or whether they must try to muster through despite it.

Therefore, controllability of the stressor appears to be the key consideration for these participants. This occurs regardless of whether the stressor could be viewed as harmful, threatening or causing loss, and many participants discussed stressors in ways that could suggest they consider most stressors to potentially fall into all three categories simultaneously. It is only after attempting to cope with it that there can be reflection on which type of outcome the stressor caused.

Other models may also fail to fully explain adolescent stress. For example, it is interesting that participants appear - at times - to consider their needs in the moment of confronting a stressor as Aherne (2001) suggests, but not necessarily in relation to the stressor. In the present study participants appraised the stressor in relation to the coping actions required to be able to keep moving forward despite it. This was particularly apparent for stressors that could not be confronted head-on but required some kind of survival-mode plan to be made by participants. The current study does not fit Hobfoll’s (1989) Conservation of Resources theory either, as participants refer to using up resources until they are low and then stepping away to replenish them, or else hoping their resources hold out until the stressor subsides. The participants of the current study implied that all their individual resources were tied up in surviving the day-to-day journey of their lives as it was overshadowed by multiple larger stressors.
While in different circumstances they may have conserved some resources in preparation for future stressors, this was not considered possible here.

**Defining coping.**

Similar to Boekaerts's (2002) study, participants in this study also referred to coping as encompassing two strategies, however those strategies differed - in the case of this study the options were to live with the stressor or deal with the stressor. The coping utilised by participants in this study was not an attempt to master the stressor in the absence of a routine or automatic response in keeping with the definition of coping by Monat and Lazarus (1985). There was also nothing to indicate that the personality of participants was under stress in the way that Saklofske et al. (2012) posit. Indeed, if anything, it appeared that individual differences in coping strategy choice in this study was personality in action (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where the exact nature of the coping strategy was determined by differences between individuals.

The requirement of an action to be deliberate or conscious as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Kirchner et al. (2010) was also not found in this study. Some participants spoke of having unintended emotional reactions such as crying, and one participant only realised some of her actions were coping strategies on listening to others in the focus group discuss using the same strategy to cope. The notion of coping as a learned response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is also questioned in this study - participants talk about having found ways that cope to suit them, but this appears to be something that they have curated themselves, rather than having learned it. A 'good' coping action was judged based on whether the individual felt better after doing it, rather than whether it was healthy or something others also did. This study did find that coping actions
could be internal (resting or carrying on) or external (acting on the stressor) as defined by Kirchner et al. (2010).

The coping utilised in this study was contextual; participants utilised different coping strategies across a range of 'styles' or typologies, and choice of strategy was situation dependent, which is in line with Moos et al. (2003) who describe coping as both dispositional and contextual.

It was argued previously that coping strategies do not allow for consideration of adaptation as much as it allows for adjustment (Fields & Prinz, 1997), but the participants of this study enacted adaptive behaviours when faced with uncontrollable stressors. These behaviours allowed them to carry on with life despite those stressors.

This study cannot attribute coping 'styles' to participants, nor can it create a hierarchy of coping strategies, as the coping mechanisms used by the participants are fluid, dynamic and both context and individual-specific.

Consideration of the effect that coping may have on a stressor appears to determine whether an active coping strategy or a 'stepping away' strategy would be the most effective and adaptive use of the limited resources participants feel they possess. This may not have been something that was found in other research because quantitative research can tend to overlook the meaning of what is adaptive of effective to adolescents. This strengthens the argument for continued qualitative research in this area, as findings such as this are important to avoid assuming that the aim of coping is to merely get rid of feelings of stress; such an assumption can interfere with understanding the real effects of coping choices for individuals.

The findings of this study echo the argument made by Paul (1980)
regarding the need to focus on individual control and responsibility. These were key issues within this study. Participants consider controllability as a deciding factor in coping strategy choice, and they frequently spoke of sometimes having to accept the stress and take responsibility for getting through it. Helplessness, however was not a feature of the current study. The autonomy with which participants faced their stressors, whereby some said they preferred to cope alone even when they had knowledge of sources of help, was prevalent throughout. It is unclear if this autonomy was an attempt at taking a stand at being an adult and feeling like they should oversee their own wellbeing, but this furthers the argument for the need of a developmentally-sensitive, adolescent-specific model of stress.

It has already been established that there is a contradiction between the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) with regards to the existence of resources in coping. While participants in the present study implied that all their individual resources were under strain, many were aware of and chose not to utilise external resources such as adult or peer support. This implies that resources are an element of coping, but it also opens the discussion as to whether some resources have more value than others, and whether resource perception is affected by other factors. For example, trust was a factor for some in their decision not to confide in peers, and lack of understanding was a factor for others in not utilising parental support. It may also be the case that in times of heightened stress, adolescents must ration their attentional focus, and thus it may be mostly directed inward, towards the self. As a result, it may not occur to them to look externally (e.g. to parents) for support. Doing so would require further resource expenditure at a time when
perceived resources are stretched to capacity, and it may not be possible in such a situation to realise that seeking external support may increase overall resource capacity.

Only a few studies, including this one, create a central space for adolescent voices within research that aims to understand the period of adolescence more. Similar to the participants in Putwain’s (2009) study, participants in the present study used the term 'stress' interchangeably with others such as panic by participants, however, there was less clarity from the current study as to how the use of different terms might signify different levels or types of stress. This may in part be because the participants in this study also found that they use the term stress to describe situations where they are not necessarily stressed (such as when they are frustrated), or they may communicate their stress to one another without using the term stress at all, either via more general conversations or via non-verbal means. Both studies echo Denscombe’s (2000) findings that stress can have multiple meanings.

A developmental perspective.

The topics that were covered in the focus groups of this study confirm that the participants are on the brink of many developmentally salient changes, including academic and social changes (Drake et al., 2016). The findings of the study highlight this with frequent references to feeling overwhelmed, the future being a source of apprehension and uncertainty, and the changeover from secondary school to a range of next steps. It is clear from the findings that many stressors interacted and combined in a cumulative way for participants. The way that these stressors interacted is where the impact of multiple stressors can be seen most clearly. For example, the need to study for long periods at home,
combined with family responsibility pressures and the resultant reduction in free
time for social activities indicate how school, family and social stressors can
combine to result in an isolated, pressure-filled situation where the adolescent
may feel overwhelmed but unable to change the situation. Therefore, it can be
argued that examining stressors and their effects in combination can allow
researchers to include the resultant new stress they create and thus gain an
overall picture of the full stress burden endured by adolescents. These findings
highlight the point made by Denscombe (2000) that it is the personal and social
circumstances in which exams occur, as much as the exams themselves, which are
sources of stress for adolescents.

None of the participants referred to problem behaviours (for example,
self-harm, skipping school, or isolation), such as in the context of this study.
While that does not negate their existence, it is interesting to note their absence,
particularly when we consider that Hodge et al. (1997) argued that a lack of
problem behaviour should not be taken to mean that there is an absence of stress
in an adolescent’s life. The participants of this study were clearly stressed by a
variety of causes and should the presence of problem behaviour be required to
classify a person as stressed, then these adolescents and their needs may be
overlooked.

While discussions around the Leaving Certificate were prominent in most
of the focus groups, it was noticeable that in the participants’ lives, it was other
people who made the Leaving Certificate salient for them. Teachers and parents
discussed the upcoming exams unprompted on many occasions, and while the
participants were aware of the exams, it was, as Feld and Shusterman (2015)
found, just one among many developmental changes and stressors. Yet parents
and teachers did not appear to discuss other issues to the same degree. This adds weight to Hodge et al.’s (1997) description of society as test-conscious. However, unlike Kouzma and Kennedy’s (2004) finding that co-occurring stressors can negatively affect school performance, the opposite seemed to be the case in the current study; that efforts to perform well at school negatively affected other areas, creating further stress such as with peer relations and thoughts about the future. However, the picture of circular, increasing stress remains regardless of the initial cause of the stress.

While the participants of this study were experiencing an increase in the number of life events and stressful events (Sharrer & Ryan-Wenger, 1995), and while they may have had a wide coping repertoire to draw from as Jewett (1997) suggested they should, many of the situations they were facing were new. As a result, they appeared unsure of their coping efficacy when they looked into the future. They appeared confident in dealing with stressors they had dealt with before such as workload, but regarding future-related stressors that they knew they would soon face, the participants seemed aware that they were entering uncharted territory.

These findings may support suggestions that developmental changes affect how adolescents approach stressful situations (Band & Weisz, 1988; Fields & Prinz, 1997; Weisz, 1986). A newly developing awareness of how the world works tempered participants’ attempts to gain control over unchangeable situations. It could be argued that their ability to think in abstract ways enables them to understand the futility of using maladaptive avoidance coping strategies, and to pre-empt future stressful situations by considering coping options prior to the event’s occurrence. They also generally understood that
stepping away from a stressor to reduce stress did not mean they were unable to deal with a stressor and thus they felt able to step away and return later. This may signal a strong sense of emotional regulation combined with advanced reasoning capabilities, such as one might expect to see in late adolescence (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). It is not apparent if these are newly developed abilities for the participants of this study, but it points to the argument for further work to be conducted in this area to further elucidate this.

**Developmental differences.**

The current study found high use of active and cognitive coping strategies and little use of avoidant coping strategies. While Piaget and Inhelder (1969) suggest this is broadly in line with developmental changes in coping use, it is impossible to tell from the findings of this study whether these are newly developed skills or whether these are long-standing skills that have not changed with the progression of adolescence. However, there was an age range of 16 to 18 years of age within this study which suggests that these coping strategy types are potentially present across late adolescence. It is worth noting that due to the self-report nature of data collection in the present study, data could only be gathered on the coping strategies that participants were aware that they were using. While this is in line with the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it cannot be assumed that parents or teachers would not have possibly pointed out some use of avoidant coping from their more objective/external perspective, had they been consulted. Assuming that all adolescents are aware of all coping actions they enact is a large leap regarding their self-awareness capacities, and one that the literature has yet to justify. Findings by Fields and Prinz (1997) suggest that there is an increase in
the variety of coping strategies employed through adolescence and this is echoed here with participants utilising strategies that match the context of the coping need. However, it is again unclear if this has always been the case or if this is a recently developed ability.

Both primary control coping and secondary control coping strategies (Band & Weisz, 1990) were employed by the participants of this study, but this was stressor dependent rather than reflecting ability, and related to the perceived controllability of the stressor. While it is unclear whether this is a developmental change, as data for this study was collected over a single time point, the requirement of advanced self-awareness and accurate perception of external events would presumably be required to make appropriate judgements about the controllability of a stressor. While more investigation would be required to confirm this, there is a possible link between developmental level and the tendency of participants in this study to rely almost equally on primary and secondary control coping methods, which Band and Weisz (1990) predict for this age group.

The use of cognitive coping strategies indicates an ability to recognise and utilise ‘invisible’ (i.e. cognitive, unobservable) and therefore difficult to learn coping strategies (Band, 1990). The findings of the current study show that all participants made use of multiple coping strategies. However, there was some mention of how ignoring stressors was a bad idea because ignored stressors just came back in a bigger way at some point in the future. This implies a possible trial-and-error experience with some coping strategies that were found to be unsuccessful in the past and thus are not utilised any longer.

An important point to note in relation to this is how participants spoke
about the future. While trial-and-error experimentation may have been applied to previous coping actions, participants spoke with apprehension about making similar errors when considering future stressors such as the exams themselves and college. It may be the case that adolescents are aware that they engage in this type of experimentation around coping but are also aware that this is not always a successful method of adapting to stressors, particularly ones where errors can have far-reaching consequences. While it may be the case that older adolescents have a broader range of coping strategies to draw from, a lack of knowledge of or efficacy in how to apply those skills to new stressors may be problematic and may affect coping efficacy at approaching new situations.

This research should add weight to Feld and Shusterman's (2015) urging that normative, high-functioning adolescents require concern due to worrying levels of stress symptoms, as much as low functioning adolescents, or adolescents who display problem behaviours. While none of the participants of this research reported concerning behaviours or thoughts, they still conveyed high levels of stress and some struggle in coping with that stress, and almost all envisioned this increasing as end-of-school exams and other issues that they were worried about came closer. While including seemingly non-problematic adolescents in interventions may have been the suggestion of Feld and Shusterman’s (2015) warning, the current findings suggest there may be merit in working towards prevention of issues around wellbeing with late adolescents, particularly given suggestions such as the link between stress and academic performance (Saklofske et al., 2012). Hodge et al. (1997) note that the stress experienced around the time of end-of-school exams is usually transient. However, when that stress is also suggested to be linked with judgements of self-worth and self-
acceptance (Putwain, 2009; which could have consequences reaching far into adulthood) the need to work not just from an intervening perspective, but a preventative perspective becomes clearer.

**Social support.**

There are mixed findings in the literature as to the role that peers play in the stress and coping process (Hodge et al., 1997; Putwain, 2009). The current study found that while peers played some role in both causing stress and in helping to reduce it, the impact of peers played a lesser role than other factors such as school stress or coping by playing music or reading. It may be that peers are important in late adolescence for different reasons, and the importance has been misattributed to stress and coping, but the current study cannot support the role of peers as being as important to the stress and coping process as has previously been suggested (Hodge et al., 1997). It must be remembered that the present study collected data via focus groups, and therefore all discussions took place in the presence of peers. This may have rendered them less salient than if data had been collected via individual interviews, so future studies may be able to speak to this factor differently. Interestingly, the findings from work by DeFrino et al. (2016) that disclosure of feelings of sadness both required an element of trust and a lack of high emotional response map more strongly onto the current findings. The phases of dealing with sadness from being alone, keeping it in, trying to let go, expressing feelings to sometimes telling someone that are described by the same study (DeFrino et al., 2016) are also comparable to the current findings. Therefore, it could be suggested that the ‘telling someone’ phase has been over-emphasised due to the general importance of peers in adolescent life (Bukatko, 2008).
These points do not diminish the presence of peer support in coping with stress for adolescents however. Ryska (1993) and Lepistö et al. (2010) both noted that use of support networks are both helpful and something that adolescents seek out. The participants of the current study did seek social interaction (and indeed felt stressed when this was reduced by other stressors) and felt better after having engaged in social interaction. Therefore, it may be less about social support and more about social engagement, whereby adolescents spend time with their peers or families, and do not necessarily discuss stressors. Thus, the act of having time with peers where the stressor is not the focus of the adolescents’ attention may still provide stress relief. This is noteworthy because it may mitigate coping costs of re-living the stressor in the disclosure of it to a support network, and therefore help to retain social harmony. Social interaction may also provide a source of venting of emotional energy, as the participants of the current study emphasised that they felt better after hanging out with friends even when stressors were not discussed. While participants may not have been keen to actively discuss their stress with their peers, they did refer to feeling better when there was an unspoken awareness and agreement between peers that both were feeling stressed. This may be because the shared awareness provides a feeling of comradery that goes towards a reduction of feelings of isolation which Bal et al, (2003) linked to social support.

The participants of the current study were quick to place responsibility for much of their stress on feeling pulled back and forth between being treated like an adult and being treated like a child. This is noteworthy given that Aherne (2001) argued that taking the developmental needs of adolescents seriously would enable them to deal with stress more efficiently - this was reflected clearly
in the current study.

**Exams and the future.**

The perception of the current study’s participants maps onto the perception of those in Putwain’s (2009) study in considering end-of-school exams as being crucial in relation to their future life trajectories. However, further stress emanated from a lack of knowledge about the potential trajectories and ambivalent/unknown feelings about the options available. However, while this was a perspective that was held by the participants, it was tempered by some knowledge of those who had avoided their future being overly directed by end-of-school exams. Brown, et al.'s (1986) findings that future concerns are prevalent as stressors for older adolescents is supported by the current study, with growing up being one of the main themes identified from the data. Giddens’ s (1991) suggestion of uncertainty as a feature of the current social climate is reflected in participants’ worry about the potential of the future to turn out a variety of different ways and a lack of certainty about how current actions may influence those outcomes.

Within the stress literature there is much discussion about different stress types or categories. Aherne's (2001) comparison of student stress and general stress is an example of this. However, for adolescents, this distinction may not be helpful or important, as participants in this study painted a picture of all their different stresses adding up to a large pile of life stress. How they reacted to a stressor was not determined by the category of stress it was, but more practical considerations such as context and ability to effect change to the stressor. Therefore, we may question the usefulness of studying specific stressors, stress categories or stress types, as it has been pointed out previously that it is difficult
to fit some stressors such as the Leaving Certificate into a single category. Given the evidence from this study that stressors neither occur in isolation, nor should be examined in isolation, continuing to research stress in this way may broaden the body of literature but provide little further understanding in the area.

**Schools as sources of stress**

Putwain (2009) linked student stress to wider educational issues and the participants in the current study also linked their stress to wider educational issues, however the factors identified in this were different to those of Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) and Ang and Huan (2006). The factors identified in those studies were more personal - grade achievement, exams, study and other related issues. In the current study, the factors related to broader policy and school environment issues - relevance of learning material, teaching methods and freedom within the classroom. While Feld and Shusterman (2015) related academic work to increased stress, in the current study's findings, academic work in combination with wider school stress attributed to increased stress along with non-educational stressors also.

While the extremes of coping (such as suicide) as found by Juon at al. (1994) was not identified within the current study's findings, the finding from Smyth (2015) may have some relevance. Smyth (2015) noted a trend of decreased coping efficacy as workload demand increased, and participants were apprehensive about their ability to cope with college just as they were apprehensive about their ability to cope with the workload they were experiencing. Further work would be required to investigate this, but there may be a parallel trend of increased workload and reduced coping efficacy.

While there are references to wellbeing made throughout the data
collected in this study, it does not appear to be a priority over school survival and achievement. This furthers the argument that impact of academic striving must be recognised regarding both academic outcome, and wellbeing outcomes, as argued by Ang and Huan (2006).

**Coping with academic stress**

Most of the findings in previous research are not present in the current findings. The most salient theme of coping was carrying on, which is neither the problem-focused nor emotion-focused coping Stern and Zevon (1990) posited that adolescents would use to deal with academic stress. Coping goals (Boekaerts, 2002) were present in the data but they related more to a continuum of addressing the stressor or carrying on despite it, rather than long or short-term wellbeing or resolution goals.

It may seem that in carrying on participants were maintaining their wellbeing in the face of an unchangeable stressor, but this was not the case. Instead participants tolerated a reduction in wellbeing in the knowledge and/or hope that it would be temporary in nature. However, Boekaerts's (2002) assertion that coping goals would influence coping strategy selection does apply to the current findings, but via stressor context and controllability rather than via specific goal outcomes. While Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) required a grouping of individual coping actions under thematic headings, the current study finds evidence for (and therefore supports) Kirchner et al.'s 2010 findings that there are multiple differences in the coping strategies students make use of.

Fields and Prinz (1997) call the coping strategies used by adolescents inconsistent. This may be an indication of a highly-developed coping ability,
whereby a wide variety of coping strategies are employed as needed in different contexts to different stressors. This was the finding from the current study; while coping strategy was changeable, this was not on an ad-hoc basis, and reflected complex and pertinent considerations regarding each stressor.

**Stress Research with Adolescents**

(Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004) make the valid point that stress in older adolescents may not be apparent to adults, and the current study supports the idea that they may not be forthcoming in disclosing stress unprompted. However, early on in each focus group, despite little engagement and despite the researcher being a stranger to all participants prior to the beginning of the research, it was very apparent that all participants were feeling stressed. If given the space and opportunity, and if encouraged to give voice to their stress, adolescent stress may become apparent quite quickly.

This highlights the importance of giving voice to adolescents themselves in studying topics of relevance to them. These students may downplay their stress as suggested by Denscombe (2000), but this may be for reasons previously discussed regarding not wanting to bring their stress into their social situation, or perhaps wanting to utilise autonomy in their coping strategies. When directly asked, there was no evidence of adolescents in this study downplaying their stress. If this is the case outside of research, and it is known that stress is present, then it is incumbent on supportive entities such as parents and teachers to provide guidance and/or support in allowing these adolescents to find ways to deal with stress without forcing them to disclose it, as evidence suggests (DeFrino et al., 2016; Lepistö et al., 2010) that there is reason for not disclosing or downplaying the presence of stress.
The results of the current study reflect those of Buckley et al. (2007) in suggesting that help offered by teachers to students may not be effective, but the reasons offered by both studies differ. Whereas Buckley et al. (2007) found that the students felt their stress was not taken seriously by the teachers, the students in the current study found that the help offered (for example the provision of essays to learn off by rote) were simply unhelpful, and where teachers may have been attempting to aid students, they were instead considered to be adding to existing stress by the students.

Boekaerts (2002) referred to the occurrence of an intense emotional outbreak being a signifier of an interruption to a coping plan rather than an inability to cope. The findings of the present study indicate that some adolescents may have a significant emotional outbreak in relation to a small stressor that on reflection by the adolescent may not have warranted such a strong reaction. This could be indicative of the total overwhelm the adolescent feels rather than a reaction specifically to that small stressor, but further work would be required to confirm this. Either way, it highlights the necessity of not drawing inferences directly from the appearance of the situation and to instead probe deeper to elucidate other possible causes of an outbreak in adolescents than what may appear to be the obvious answer.

This study may go some way to shaping an answer to Sharrer and Ryan-Wenger (1995) criticism regarding the lack of enquiry regarding coping choice motivation - in this study, adolescents were motivated largely by judgements of stressor controllability and necessity.

Within this study, participants did not dwell much on their sense of self. While Hodge et al. (1997) relate stress management and self-perception, in the
present study there was a stronger link between stress and the perception of others (in relation to the expectations of parents and teachers to reach certain achievement standards), and stress management and the stressor itself. There was clarity across all focus groups that there were some stressors that could not be changed, but even in discussing the need to ‘hang on’ through unchangeable stressors there was no consideration of the self - it was just something that had to be done, and it was referred to in that impersonal way: it had to be done, not 'I had to do it'.

Concerns about exam performance were not related to general ability by the participants of this study. These concerns related to chance occurrences such as being unwell, or bad luck such as their mind going blank in the exam. There was no mention of not feeling able for exams, or not being the kind of person who does well in exams. This is noteworthy given the findings of Denscombe (2000) and Feld and Shusterman (2015) which both point towards self-perception, identity, stress experience and coping. It could be that Drake et al.'s (2016) suggestion of the influence of coping efficacy may play a role here.

Participants in the current study appeared more apprehensive about facing new situations than they did about the end-of-school exams. It is important to note that all participants had undertaken mock exams prior to taking part in this research, and so they had experienced a practice run of what was to come. This may possibly have had an impact on their coping efficacy around the exams themselves. If that is the case, then this may explain the lack of association between their identity and their perception of ability. It also may add strength to the argument made previously that coping efficacy may be reduced for these participants in relation to future stressors when future stressors are
considered new experiences.

However, the lack of reflection on the self or identity by these participants could be attributed to their late stage in adolescence and the possibility that they have reached the moratorium stage of Marcia’s (1980) Identity Status Theory. Either way, it brings into question the strong association in the literature between these variables and points to the need for deeper investigation into the various factors that could interplay with stress and coping.

One thing that should be noted however, is the need to maintain the image of the successful academic to meet external expectations. While there was some discussion around not wanting to have regrets following the Leaving Certificate exams, most of the conversations around performance centred on not wanting to let others down, and it is important to consider if this could appear to be self-perception when in reality it is the projection of a self idealised by other people in the adolescent’s life. As a result, instead of exam results being a benchmark of the self as suggested by Denscombe (2000), it is merely a benchmark of achievement, which matches social expectations that the adolescent does not want to disappoint. Overall, reflections on the outcome of the Leaving Certificate were centred on what they would enable or restrict access to in the adolescents’ lives in the future rather than a consideration of who it made them as a person. This may be an important indicator of a cultural component of academic achievement. Ang and Huan (2006) reflect on the shame brought about by the failure of Asian adolescents to meet academic achievement expectations. This is the opposite to that which is expressed by this Irish sample.

**Individual Differences**

Putwain (2009) links individual differences in ability perception to the motivating nature of a low grade, however in the current study a low grade was
more likely to be linked to a need to work harder or spend more time studying than ability. Similarly, Braun-Lewensohn et al. (2011) link individual differences in stress reactions to perceived danger, but in the current findings, this was more likely to be due to differences in how overloaded the individual was.

**Reflexive Analysis**

Charmaz's (2006) blending of constructivism in Grounded Theory was helpful as a guide for me in an area where there are few non-problematic thematic models to apply. With regards to the area of stress and coping I felt it was important to take a constructivist epistemological stance given that existing stress theories focus on elements such as “subjective tension” (Denscombe, 2000) and “meaning of experiences” (Aherne, 2001), yet none of this subjectivity appears to be fully addressed to date. Using Thematic Analysis allowed me to then identify and draw together commonalities within these subjective views.

The participants of this study were opinionated and insightful. This was a relief to me as the researcher as I had been a little concerned as to how open participants would be willing to be in the context of a group of their peers when discussing what may have been sensitive topics. However, the use of the focus group created instead an atmosphere of idea sharing and contrasting, and this openness and the natural depth to which participants reflected on the points that they made provided me with rich data from which I was able to develop well-supported themes.

While this study, by its qualitative nature, is small in participant numbers, the themes produced indicate that it would be difficult to map the experiences of these adolescents on to any of the existing theories. Many of the themes have either a strong educational or developmental facet to them, which is not
considered in the prevalent stress theories. To me as a researcher, this highlighted the need for temporal and situational context to be considered as important influences in both the stress process and in the development of stress theory going forward. Prior to data collection, the literature had suggested that adolescent stress had not yet found its place within the existing body of knowledge, but there was little evidence pointing to how this might be amended. For me, the use of the voice of adolescent student was key to understanding this better. While the limitations outlined below acknowledge that this study by no means provides the solution to this theoretical issue, it may provide some direction as to what paths warrant further exploration, and encouragement to others to continue this exploration if we are to learn how best to support young adults.

Limitations

This study has multiple sample limitations. The participants were drawn from three schools in the Dublin south city region. There were no schools from elsewhere in Dublin or other locations in Ireland which limits the ability to generalise these results nationwide, or even county-wide. Two of the three schools from which participants were recruited were DEIS schools, and one was a fee-paying private school which limits the generalisation of the results across school types, in particular to public non-DEIS schools, and prevents a full consideration of the differences between school types.

However, generalisation is not the aim of qualitative research, so while the present study cannot speak to the experiences of all Irish students in all school types, this does not detract from the importance of the current study and its findings. Instead it serves as a signal of the direction future research might take if
the aim is to create a deeper, rather than broader, understanding of adolescent student stress.

The focus groups were all conducted on school grounds during the school day, and each lasted a single class period. This may have made the focus groups feel more like another school class and there is a possibility that this may have affected the thought processes of the participants and may have caused the discussions to be more school-focused, although the researcher took steps to ensure the conversation topics moved between school and other environments in each focus group.

While each focus group lasted the duration of a single class period, the duration of a class period varied slightly between schools and thus there were some differences in the length of focus groups, in particular when the time taken to gather participants and get to the room assigned for data collection is factored in.

The selection of participants for recruitment also varied across schools. In one school the entire sixth year and fifth year population was given consent forms and information booklets by the principal, as this school was quite small. In another school students were given a short talk regarding the study by the researcher at their year assembly and asked to self-select, and in the third school the student council were all presented by the guidance counsellor for recruitment. The second school mentioned above may have had reduced self-selection of participants as they had to self-select to receive the information pack from the researcher in front of the rest of their year group, and so factors of shyness and/or social desirability may have been a factor. The participants of the third school mentioned above may have been part of a cohort of students who were well engaged with the school and had a strong sense of civic duty through
their involvement with the student council and were also used to group discussions in a way that the other groups may not have been.

Given that all participants involved in the study were undertaking the senior cycle of second level education and were therefore at least at the early stages of beginning to prepare for the Leaving Certificate, it was expected that issues that related stress and coping to the Leaving Certificate and related topics would be salient within this group. However, this salience combined with the location of the data collection may have caused an over-emphasis on school and Leaving Certificate-related thoughts.

There were also no comparative views utilised in this study, such as by gathering information from teachers or parents. This could have been important as Fields and Prinz (1997) note that differences in mother and child reports in coping strategies used by the child could be due to difference in salience.

There was no mention of any kind of concerning behaviours such as drinking, smoking, or other illegal or dangerous behaviours. While it may be the case that none of the participants in this study engage in those types of behaviours, it could also be the case that the participants censored their responses as a result of wanting to provide socially desirable answers, or answers that would not get them into potential trouble. The researcher was present in the school with the permission and support of the staff of the school and as a result may have appeared as another authority figure within the school environment.

As previously mentioned, the use of focus groups may have limited some of the data collected. Some participant may have felt more comfortable disclosing problems behaviours, unhealthy coping strategies, or in giving more detail about their peers’ effects on their stress and coping if data had been collected via
individual means such as interviews.

At times in some group discussions, participants became very animated and detailed about a tangential topic to the focus of the research. As a result of the inductive approach taken in the study, the researcher found it difficult to return to topic without straying too far from the semi-structured nature of the interview schedule. As a result, in the time limitations in engaging with each group, this meant that some areas were not explored in as much depth as the researcher desired. This added to the limitations of analysis, where in-depth analysis of certain links and statements could not be expanded. For a novice qualitative researcher these issues are perhaps to be expected, and in some instances may be part of qualitative research as a whole. However, changes such as having multiple meetings with participants may help future research to mitigate some of these issues.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research can take steps to address many of the limitations of this research. Including a wider participant sample which takes account of multiple locations across Ireland and all school types will allow a more in-depth examination of the way those factors may affect the way that adolescents move through the stress and coping process. Future research could also utilise multiple methods to enable a deeper exploration of participants' views. For example, making use of interviews as well as focus groups would provide opportunity for participants to explore the topics discussed in the focus groups in a much deeper and personal way without having to do so in front of their peers. Similarly, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods may allow for a fuller understanding of stress and coping to evolve, rather than utilising them
individually as has been the tendency in the literature generally.

Homogeneity of data collection would be encouraged in future studies. While the nature of research is such that environmental restrictions often cannot be avoided, steps towards ensuring focus groups are more similar in size and duration would prevent possible saturation of analysis by one focus group over others. Similarly, looking to either vary or change the location of data collection entirely could help to mitigate the over-salience of school-related reflections that the current study leaves itself open to by having conducted all data collection within a school environment.

Many of the participants in this study spoke of both being apprehensive about the future, and of using future plans to ameliorate stress. It would be interesting if future studies were to follow up with participants after the Leaving Certificate is complete to see if there is a difference in their reports at that time. Similarly, it would be informative to follow participants from an earlier point in time through the full senior cycle to track changes in both stress levels and conceptualisations of stress, as well as coping strategies.

Future research could also delve into the links between stressors and the individual nature of how adolescents may cope with these. It has been argued throughout this study that combinative stress is important, and the findings demonstrate the how this combinative stress affects each person may differ.

Understanding how and why that happens may be helpful to those working to support adolescents through times where one stressor (i.e. the Leaving Certificate) may seem to supersede other stressors on first glance, when in reality it is merely adding to the overall stress burden.

There were multiple reasons why the current study is a qualitative one,
and one of those reasons is the dearth of quantitative adolescent academic stress measures.

While gaining a qualitative understanding of the stress and coping process is vital and allows us to listen to the voice of those experiencing it, obtaining quantitative data is also helpful, particularly if action is to be taken to address the stress levels of adolescents as they prepare for the Leaving Certificate. Therefore, work must be done to formulate quantitative, developmentally appropriate and relevant academic stress measures for adolescents. Many existing measures utilise the hierarchies and typologies that are both problem-strewn and adult-derived. Many of them are not relevant either topically or culturally to adolescents undertaking end-of-school exams. Therefore there is a lack of contextually and developmentally appropriate measures of stress for adolescents. If those measures existed, future researchers could then explore whether there are prevention/intervention actions or programmes which could reduce stress levels, or educate adolescents on how to effectively manage stress. This is key given that participants in this study implied that others’ actions in reducing the amount of stress they create for adolescents would be of benefit to them in helping to reduce their overall stress levels. It is noteworthy that most participants in this study expressed a preference for dealing with stress via solitary methods, given the research evidence for increased peer support seeking in this population. Future studies could examine if this is a broader trend and if so, the causes for this should be explored.

Relevance

This study and its findings have relevance across multiple areas. In the area of research, it demonstrates not only a need for future research, but a need
to consider if applying pre-existing theories of stress and coping without critical analyses of the relevance of that theory is appropriate across the lifespan. Despite multiple mentions in the literature of a lack of a youth-specific model of stress, and despite the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) being considered as the 'closest' thing to a youth stress model (Fallin et al., 2001), little has been done to develop such a model, despite there being a demonstrated need for an applicable model to aid understanding in this area.

This study is not broad enough to make specific policy recommendations, but it does point towards a need to consider how the Irish education system is affecting adolescents and to encourage us to question whether it best serves student needs, or if it may instead be part of the problem. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCAA) is currently undertaking a review of the Leaving Certificate curriculum (O’Brien, 2019), and while there are broader questions regarding feasibility and what can be expected of a public education system, market/economy and student needs must both be given due consideration in making changes into the future.

There have been steps taken within the education system to introduce some wellbeing elements into the curriculum, and in broader society - much work has been done by both government agencies and non-governmental organisations to increase awareness around self-identifying when to ask for help and destigmatising mental health issues and wellbeing struggles. However, if adolescents prefer to cope on their own, as the participants of this study indicate is their preference, then there may be a need for these efforts to take a different direction into the future.

Stress and coping are related to mental health issues as discussed
previously. If we better understand how adolescents experience stress and attempt to cope with it, we can better protect them from mental health difficulties and ensure that they are better equipped if they do encounter mental health difficulties. Understanding the contexts in which mental health difficulties occur, as well as related issues such as struggling to cope with multiple stressors, can better inform mental health treatment and policy for adolescents.

**Conclusion**

This study begins to paint a picture of the types of stressors experienced by a normative adolescent population in Ireland as they undertake preparations for the Leaving Certificate exams. It challenges some previously existing theorising and broadens our understanding of how the Leaving Certificate and other life stressors interact to leave adolescents often feeling overwhelmed. This portrays Irish late adolescents as being cognisant of adaptive coping methods even when they struggle at times to fully conceptualise stress and coping for themselves, and those coping methods often encompass self-care or wellbeing related actions. This study also highlights the need for more specific, deeper work in this area to further understand the needs and experiences of adolescents preparing for end-of-school exams.
References


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https://www.mhcirl.ie/File/2017_AR_Incl_OIMS.pdf


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http://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.02.003


Re: Sarah Hughes
To School Principals

November 2016

I have known Sarah since I began working as Co-director of the study 'Growing up in Ireland, in Trinity College. She is extremely able and has a major contribution to make to the understanding of young people's social and emotional development.

I am pleased to say that she has embarked on the Doctoral Programme in Trinity College (where I am now a visiting Professor) and from my knowledge of her work, her thesis will be of major value in this important area since she is focusing on the stress and anxiety experienced by young people.

In order for her to carry out her research, Sarah needs the cooperation of schools. I can say with conviction that she will treat your collaboration with the respect and discretion that is appropriate and that the results of her work will be of major benefit to all concerned.

I strongly recommend cooperation with her data gathering in your school

If you need any further clarification from me please contact me at:

mark.morgan@dcu.ie

Signed

Mark Morgan, Ph.D
(Cregan Professor of Education and Psychology) Visiting Professor, Trinity College, Dublin)
Dear Sarah,

The Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application entitled “Adolescents’ Stress and Coping During Leaving Certificate” and I am pleased to inform you that it was approved subject to the following amendments:

1. Supply signed statutory declaration form
2. Supply letters of permission from all host schools.
3. Teacher Information Sheet: In the section “What if something goes wrong while I’m taking part” it states “…there will be a list of places to seek support of that’s what you or your child want to do”. This seems to have been copied and pasted from the Parents’ Information Sheet and is not appropriate where teachers’ children will not be involved in the research. This is the same with the Parents Information Sheet; the concept of retaining data for use in future research is not mentioned in any of the information sheets, but is mentioned in the consent forms. This should be mentioned in the information sheets, especially if the consent process happens immediately before the research is conducted. The point here is that this is important information and people deserve time to give it due consideration.
4. Information sheets generally. Provide contact telephone numbers for both supervisors.
5. Section 6B of the Application form not completed. No age range of participants stated.
6. The procedure for obtaining informed parental consent is not sufficiently clear. Does the applicant intend to use the Parent Information Booklet for both parents who are themselves participating in the research and for those whose children alone are participating?
7. More detail is required in relation to the procedures. Currently it is difficult to determine whether there are ethical difficulties with the procedures as they are not comprehensively outlined. The nature of the focus group, how it will be facilitated and the kinds of questions and probes that may be used/permitted should be outlined. This same issue applies to the focus groups, which appear here to lack any definite structure; it is not clear whether parents and teachers will be in the same group, how many people will be in these groups, etc.

8. Please provide a definition of ‘inappropriate images’.

9. Provide more information in relation to reliability and validity.

10. Supply detail about how participants will be recruited.

11. Further care in the writing of the booklets – e.g., ‘this is the research that I am doing as part of the PhD that I’m doing with Trinity College in Psychology.’ Also review using words like ‘chatting’ as this might misrepresent or simplify what you are doing in interviews.

12. Specify the approximate length of interviews and focus groups.

13. There is a disparity between title of research on information sheets and on participant consent forms. This should be corrected.

14. I think that the list of contact organisations might be amended to include information about the specific focus of the bodies involved (with suicide, depression, etc.).

THE COMMITTEE WILL NOT REVIEW ANY AMENDMENTS THAT ARE NOT CLEARLY HIGHLIGHTED/BOLDED/UNDERLINED AND WILL AUTOMATICALLY REJECT ON THIS BASIS. Also, please ensure that the letter states clearly the month in which the application was made, i.e., October 2015.

DO NOT RESUBMIT THE ENTIRE APPLICATION; ONLY THE SPECIFIED AMENDMENTS/RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE FORM ARE REQUIRED.

Once satisfactory paper copies of these amendments have been received by Luisa Byrne, to the locked boxes under the staff photo wall in the School, you will be notified in writing that your application has been granted full ethics approval. This letter will be left in the post-box beside the Ethics submission boxes for collection by you.

*Please note that only one copy of the amended material is needed.
Yours
sincerely,
Prof. Richard
Carson Chair

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee
F.A.O. Sarah Hughes

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

8th December 2015

Dear Sarah,

The School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application entitled “Adolescents’ Stress and Coping During Leaving Certificate” and I am pleased to inform you that it was approved.

Please note that you will be required to submit a completed Project Annual Report Form on each anniversary of this approval, until such time as the research is complete and the thesis is submitted. The form is available for download from the Ethics section of the School website.

Adverse events associated with the conduct of this research must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Richard Carson
Chair,
School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
Arás an Phiarsaigh
Trinity College
Dublin 2
# Parent Consent Form

**Study title:**
Under Pressure? Investigating Adolescents’ Experiences of Stress and Coping During Preparation for Leaving Certificate Examinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have read and understood the Information Leaflet about this research project. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.</th>
<th>Yes ☐ No ☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that my child doesn’t have to take part in this study and that s/he can opt out at any time. I understand that s/he doesn’t have to give a reason for opting out.</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been assured that information about my child will be kept private and confidential, unless in cases where the information is about something that is illegal or that refers to somebody being in danger or at risk of being in danger (e.g. the researcher would be legally obliged to disclose instances of child abuse)</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and will be given this completed consent form for my records.</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Storage and future use of information:**

| I give my permission for information collected about my child to be stored or electronically processed for the purpose of scientific research and to be used in related studies or other studies in the future but only if the research is approved by a Research Ethics Committee. | Yes ☐ No ☐ |
| I understand that my child will also be given a consent form to sign. I understand that even if they complete their form, if I have not fully completed and returned this form, and my child is under 18 years of age, they will not be permitted to take part in this study. | Yes ☐ No ☐ |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Name (Block Capitals)</th>
<th>Parent Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
To be completed by the Principal Investigator.

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above parent the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|
Name (Block Capitals) | Qualifications | Signature | Date
**Participant Consent Form**

### Study title:
Under Pressure? Investigating Adolescents’ Experiences of Stress and Coping During Preparation for Leaving Certificate Examinations

<table>
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<th>I have read and understood the Information Booklet about this research project. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.</th>
<th>Yes ☐ No ☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that I don’t have to take part in this study and that I can opt out at any time. I understand that I don’t have to give a reason for opting out.</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been assured that information about me will be kept private and confidential, unless in cases where the information is about something that is illegal or that refers to somebody being in danger or at risk of being in danger (e.g. the researcher would be legally obliged to disclose instances of child abuse)</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
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<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Storage and future use of information:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I give my permission for information collected about me to be stored or electronically processed for the purpose of scientific research and to be used in related studies or other studies in the future but only if the research is approved by a Research Ethics Committee.</th>
<th>Yes ☐ No ☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that my parents will also be given a consent form to sign if I am under 18. I understand that even if I complete this form, if they have not fully completed and returned their form, and I am under 18 years of age, I will not be permitted be take part in this study.</td>
<td>Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Name (Block Capitals)</th>
<th>Participant Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
To be completed by the Principal Investigator.

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

| | | |
|----------------------------|
| Name (Block Capitals) | Qualifications | Signature | Date |

Important Information:
Remember: Read all the information on this sheet and if you like, talk it over with your family. Take time to ask questions (with the researcher or your family) and don’t feel rushed or under pressure to make a certain decision. If you decide to do the study now, you can always change your mind later; that’s ok.

Who is doing this study?
My name is Sarah Hughes, and this is my research that I’m doing with Trinity College in Psychology. Nobody is paying me to do this research.

Why is this study being done?
This study is being done to try and understand and learn more about what stress means for a young person who is studying for the Leaving Certificate and how s/he can cope with those stresses.

What are the benefits of this study?
Hopefully this study will help us to understand more about what stress and coping means for young people who are doing the Leaving Certificate and hopefully this might help in the future for various people like teachers and schools to be better able to support and help young people who do the Leaving Certificate.

What are the risks of this study?
There are no particular risks involved with taking part in this study. It will take some time to do the study. You don’t have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable or unhappy, and you don’t have to tell me why you don’t want to talk about something if you don’t want to.

Is the study confidential?
The study will be confidential – nobody will know what you said during the study unless it is about something illegal or if I feel you or someone else is in danger. I would be legally obliged to report information like that. You will be asked in the consent form to give permission for the information collected from you to be stored or electronically processed and to used in related or other studies in the future. Once all parts of the study are complete, identifying information will be removed so the data will be made anonymous. I will never use your name or other information that might identify you.

How does all this affect me? Where do I come in? Why am I being asked to take part in this study?
You have been invited to take part in this study because you are preparing for the Leaving Certificate and you attend a school that has agreed to be part of this research. There are other students in the same school and in different school who have also been asked to take part.
How will the study be carried out and what will happen if I agree to take part? What will happen for me?
If you are under 18 years of age, your parents will be asked to sign a consent form for you. This is not legally necessary if you are over 18. There can be one or two parts to this study. First there will be a focus group with other students from your school where we will talk about the themes of stress and coping and find out what you think about them. If you like, a short time after that, you can do an interview with me where we will talk about what was discussed in the focus group in a bit more detail, and more about what stress and coping means for you.

What if something goes wrong while I’m taking part?
If you feel upset while taking part in this study, there will be a list of places to seek support if that’s what you want to do. You can also stop taking part at any time just by letting me know, and that will be ok. If I feel we need to, I will get the appropriate person at the school to support you.

Will it cost me anything?
Not a cent! I will ask for some of your time, but I will try to work around your schedule, so it doesn’t get in the way of your life too much.

Where can I get more information?
No matter if you think the question is small or not important, please get in touch with me with any questions that you might have at any time throughout the study. My contact details (and those of my supervisors) are included on this sheet. Thank you very much for taking the time to read this, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,
Sarah Hughes

Contact details of the researcher:
Sarah Hughes
Trinity Research in Childhood Centre,
Trinity College Dublin, 3-4 Foster Place
Dublin 2
Email: hughess2@tcd.ie

Contact details of the research supervisors:
Dr. Lorraine Swords
Áras an Phiaisigh,
Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2
Email: swords@tcd.ie
Phone: 01 896 3638

Dr. Charlotte Wilson
Áras an Phiaisigh,
Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2
Email: cewilson@tcd.ie
Phone: 01 896 3237
Interview Schedule for Focus Groups

- What does the idea of stress mean to you? (what does it make you think of)
- What does the idea of coping mean to you? (what does it make you think of)
- What kinds of things cause you to feel stress?
- Why do you think they cause you to feel that way?
- What does feeling stressed feel like?
- What things do you think or feel or do to get rid of or reduce that stress?
- How do those things help?
- How much do you think they help?
- Do you think that all teenagers get stressed by the same things?
- What other things do you think cause teenagers to feel stressed?
- Why do you think some get stressed by some things and others by other things?
- Do you think that when teenagers say they feel stressed, they feel the same things that you described earlier?
- What other things do you think they might feel?
- Why do you think that might be?
- Do you think that you have the control to change the things that make you stressed?
- How can you control them?
- Do you think other people in particular have the control?
- How can they control them?
- Do you think they do those things?
- Why/why not?
- Do you think there are other ways you could feel better about the things that cause you stress that you don’t do now?
- What might they be?
- Why do you think you don’t use them at the moment?
- How important are the things that cause you stress in your life to you?
- How do those things affect you?
- When you try to cope, what do you think you are trying to do?
Memo, school 3 mixed participants focus group 2.

This group was a mix of boys and girls, but I was struck by how little the boys spoke – I wonder if it was because the girls in the group were really opinionated or would they have been any different in their own group? I tried to make a point of directing questions to the boys at various points, but they mostly just agreed with the girls and didn’t seem to have much they wanted to say, even when I made space for them. They seemed engaged in terms of listening to the girls though, I made sure to keep an eye in case it was a boredom thing in case I needed to switch things up a bit – and they did take part in the brainstorming and seemed to like it.

I was really struck by the emotions of some of the girls – they were fairly angry about someone things, and the cynicism was fairly heavy at points. I found it hard to keep the session from turning into a ‘the system I screwed’ rant a few times, although I did give some space to it, because they linked it to their stress a bit. For their age they seemed to have thought much more than I expected about their place in the wider world, but I wonder if that’s because the previous groups didn’t so much or if these young people were in a DEIS school, and the type of lives they might have lived.

Their pressures came from more varied places than the other schools, but they still seemed to struggle at times with what stress was. I was really interested when they started musing on what they meant when they said they were stressed among each other. I really picked up on the change in their demeanours when they talked about a teacher etc who had made a positive difference. I was also very struck by how they changed when the teacher came into the room – they were immediately more clammed up, and I wondered if they cared if he had heard anything, they were saying through the door beforehand.

I wish the other parts of the study could have been possible – I’d love to follow up on an individual basis to dig deeper into the themes that have come up between all the groups, and I’d be really interested to see how they might have interpreted the photovoice task had I been able to do it.

I was struck by how across the school so far, many of the same things come up, even though there are different experiences that get them to those things. I am struck by how different a lot of it is to my own experience, but I think even though I was so in the Leaving Cert for so long, that there has been a long time between the two means that while the exams themselves don’t seem to have changed much, the context of is the same I think but maybe experienced differently in some ways? I caught myself mostly only thinking about how things were not how I had experienced them, which is interesting, because now that I’m out of the room, I’m not sure they really were, it was kind of more how they put them across and the things that were important to them versus how they were to me. I’m still not finding myself thinking ‘oh that fits X theory’ which is interesting too – I think I’ve been waiting for that moment to happen all along, but this was my last day collecting data, and it hasn’t happened yet.