An Exploration of Gifted and Highly Able Adolescents’ Experiences with Stress and Coping

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Abstract

This narrative case study explored gifted and highly able adolescents’ experiences with stress and coping. Nine students, ages 13-18, at 2 independent schools in southern Ontario, participated. They completed the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993), and I generated individualized graphs of coping strategies. Participants talked about experiences they perceived as stressful in their academic, personal, social, and familial settings during a 60-90 minute one-on-one audiotaped interview. During the interview, each participant made observations about their own coping strategies profile. The interview was analyzed to identify stressor and coping themes. Participants completed a writing or art task to record perceptions of stress and coping. The 3 data sources were used to craft 9 individual story portraits, from which 5 main stressor themes emerged: issues of time; relationships, emotions, and communication; ethical, moral, and spiritual issues; global issues; and silences, or stressors not talked about in depth. Coping themes were: seeking relaxing activities; having positive attitudes and making wise choices; maintaining relationships with peers and family; understanding the role of faith and moral beliefs; having a supportive environment; knowing your own personality type; being aware of negative coping strategies; and keeping busy and avoiding stressful issues. The narratives are important because they present teenagers talking about their socioemotional worlds. The present findings provide empirical groundwork for curriculum development in affective education and highlight the importance of socioemotional development for future research in the area of giftedness and adolescence.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

This narrative multiple case study explores 9 gifted and highly able adolescents' stories and experiences with stress and coping strategies. Their stories are grounded within the context of each participant's academic, personal, social, and family experiences.

Chapter One presents the research problem, the background of the problem, and my rationale for choosing this topic. I outline the purpose and the objectives of the study. I provide an overview of the theoretical framework of the study, describe the importance of the study, and discuss the scope and limitations of the research. Chapter Two includes a literature review of research about adolescence, giftedness, stress, and coping in adolescence and some educational implications of intervention strategies for empowerment of gifted adolescents. Chapter Three outlines the methodology and procedures used in this study. Chapter Four presents the portraits of the 9 participants and a cross-case analysis of the findings. Chapter Five discusses key findings in terms of previous literature, outlines the theoretical and practical implications, and provides suggestions for future research.

The Problem: Why Should We Listen?

There has been a great deal of research written about adolescence and stress; however, there is a gap in the research on adolescent development. Few studies report on the personal stories of highly able and gifted adolescents and their experiences and perceptions about stress and coping. As an educator I see a need for providing a forum for
other educators to read and think about highly able and gifted teenagers' narratives about stress and coping. There is a need to promote better understanding by parents and educators of the socioemotional worlds of bright students. By sharing the stories of 9 youth as unique examples, this research brings into focus the need I see for middle school and high school educators to develop strategies within learning communities that will encourage development of the many-faceted processes of self-reflection and nurture in students the wisdom and value of listening to one's inner voice and one's unique gifts, capabilities, and talents. I hope this research also contributes towards stimulating lifelong learners, students and educators alike, to develop ethical, moral, and spiritual capabilities to cope with the stressors of our complex global community.

**Background and Rationale**

Reasons for pursuing this narrative research span an interlaced framework of my personal, professional, and academic lives. As well as being a graduate student, I am also a practicing, experienced teacher in a large Ontario middle school (grades 7–8). My experiences and observations of how students perceive and deal with stress in their lives have led me to want to investigate the topic in more depth. As a parent and as a teacher I have witnessed several extreme and even life-threatening responses to stress in teenagers. Based on my experiences, I believe that classroom teachers need to become more acutely aware of the life stories and perceptions of the youth who are in their care. I am concerned that teachers can often become involved in delivering an increasingly demanding and dense curriculum and that a child's spirit is sometimes ignored by caregivers and educators in the process. Ultimately my goal as a teacher is to enhance my
own awareness, and hopefully that of my colleagues, of the complexity of adolescents’ mental worlds. Also I aim to help students identify and develop coping strategies to maintain personal wellness emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

From a personal standpoint, I write my story reflectively, both as a mature woman looking back on my experiences in childhood and adolescence and now as a parent of three gifted adolescents. I write also as a student pursuing a graduate degree in education after spending many years teaching within the Ontario public school system. My personal and professional history both inform and colour my researcher’s lens as I explore the topic of gifted and highly able adolescents’ stories of stress and coping.

In hindsight, I suppose I wish my child and adolescent voice could have been heard. I wish I had been brave enough to give my experiences as a young gifted person a voice. If only someone had encouraged me then to speak out about what it was like to be bright, even though I believed I was not, and to be frustrated with feeling I was different. As a young adolescent I was lonely and unchallenged academically until I reached the middle of high school.

As a youngster I often wrote stories; yet, once I started high school I stopped writing my stories, and wrote just for assignments in school. I had learned how to “do school” (Pope, 2001) and to fit in. Now, many decades later, it is time to reflect on my story and use it as a motivational catalyst for my narrative about highly able and gifted youth. Stories have a great deal of power. Giving personal voice to stories makes them vibrant and alive, and often they become inspiration for change. I believe that my stories and those of my participants need to be given voice. Throughout this text I will
intersperse my story and my reflections with those of the participants.

It is my belief that in North American society, adolescents are experiencing stress and pressure to succeed in their personal and academic worlds to an unprecedented level. These pressures develop out of our North American societal values and expectations to be competitive in a global economy (Honoré, 2004), our diverse cultures striving to live in a global community, and our personal and spiritual struggles with inner growth while living in a part of the world where the ethos of acquisition of money and power reigns (Luthar, 2003). These types of pressures influence the lives of young people. As a parent I see this amongst my children and their peers. As an educator I see this in the students with whom I work.

Steiner-Adair (1986) used the term adolescent truth-tellers with reference to adolescent girls with eating disorders whose self-destructive behaviours were indicators of the impoverishment of a culture that did not value a feminine voice. I think that at the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of adolescents as societal truth-tellers can be applied to both genders. I think this can be seen most dramatically by looking at the youth at the intellectual extremes of the population: youth with learning exceptionalities. For youth who experience difficulties with learning, one of the biggest stressors is meeting the academic expectations of school. In my discussions with colleagues I have heard comments that these youth are often giving up even trying to be successful in Ontario’s new, more rigorous and compacted curriculum because they see no hope of succeeding in such a competitive academic setting. At the other end of the intellectual spectrum, the bright and gifted students are often feeling stressed to outperform their peers, to always
get the highest grades so they can be competitive for university scholarships, or they are bored with a lack of appropriate challenges. Subsequently, both these groups of young people turn to a wide array of coping strategies, both positive and negative. These students are what I refer to as the curriculum canaries, the proverbial first indicators of a subtle and sometimes hidden problem in our schools and in our culture of acquisition at all costs: the problem of adolescent stress.

I have studied one of these groups, highly able and gifted adolescents. I chose them because I thought they would be able to think and talk about these issues of stress and coping on both a personal and a more philosophical, metacognitive level (Cohen & Frydenberg, 1995). I think that both genders are facing the difficulties of growing up in a culture that does not always value the voices and opinions of those who are outside the majority of being intellectually average and who perhaps look at and experience the world in a different way compared to their peers.

Although much has been written about how adolescents perceive and cope with stress (Chartier & Lassen, 1994; Galaif, Sussman, Chouu & Willis, 2003; Lubin, 1994; Milne 2001; Zaider, Johnson, & Cockell, 2002), few researchers have presented adolescents' voices and their personal stories. I am most concerned that in spite of all the research over the past several decades, many of these young people are still struggling with stressors and turning to drastic coping strategies (De Wilde, 1994; Leenaars & Lester, 1995; Watt & Sharp, 2001). I perceived a need to fill the gap in research by presenting real narratives. There is a need for researchers and educators to develop and teach educational skills and strategies for empowering youth to become resilient human
beings. In the present study I have taken a narrative case study approach to exploring gifted and highly able adolescents’ personal stories of stress and coping with the hope that I may give voice to their experiences and perhaps uncover some empowerment strategies and avenues for future research.

Purpose Statement and Main Research Questions

The purpose of this multiple case study was to use a narrative analytical approach to explore and portray highly able and gifted adolescents’ experiences and stories about stress and coping within the context of their academic, personal, social, and family settings.

The main research questions that guided this study were: How do highly able and gifted adolescents attending two Canadian independent schools perceive, experience, and cope with stress? More specifically, what do they perceive and experience as stressors within their academic, personal, social, and familial settings? What do these adolescents say they use as coping strategies when experiencing stress? Given a creative writing or art task as an alternative way of communicating their ideas about stress and coping, how do highly able and gifted adolescents choose to express themselves? Are there common themes of stressors and coping strategies amongst the highly able and gifted adolescents who participated in the study?

Research Sites and Participant Selection

The research sites were two independent schools in two different southern Ontario urban communities. A detailed description of each site will be given in Chapter Three. The participants were selected from a population of grade 7 through grade 12 students at
both schools. I chose the participants in consultation with school staff who were
designated by their respective administrators to be the liaison persons for this study. The
process for choosing this convenience sample is further explained in Chapter Three.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

In this section I discuss my analogies for my philosophy of teaching and research.
This research was designed with the goal of helping educators better understand the
experiences of highly able and gifted adolescents by describing teenagers’ stories and
perspectives on stress and coping strategies. I have a holistic philosophy of teaching, and
a “commitment to develop the whole student, to nourish their hearts, bodies, and minds”
(Koegal, 2003, p. 11). Holistic educators focus on weaving an ethics of caring,
co-operation, connection, and choices into the learning environment while being
committed to the integrity and intellectual development of students (Koegal). When
asked, “What do you teach?” I usually reply that I teach children since I am primarily
interested in human development. The subject matter is the vehicle through which I teach
and encourage students to learn who they are as a person, uncover their strengths and
weaknesses, and to find their place in the world (Hart, 2001). I am committed to the
concept of deep teaching, where learning “goes far beyond definitions and facts. At times
it brings about a change or transformation within the student” (Wilson, 2003, p. 26).

Just as I teach using analogies and metaphors to help illuminate difficult concepts,
I have chosen a metaphor of myself as the artist to explain the philosophical and
theoretical stance I have adopted in my research. I have recently rediscovered my voice as
an artist, something that existed for me as a child and teenager, and, in the intervening
years of establishing a career and raising a family, that voice had been often set aside on a shelf. The theme of giving voice echoes through this research as I portray the narratives of the participants.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to the narrative qualitative researcher as entering the matrix in the midst of the participants' stories and “concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories that make up people’s lives, both individual and social” (p. 20). The process of my entering the matrix and exploring adolescents' perceptions and experiences with stress and coping was not unlike beginning a new painting. The elements of design and colour theory and a preconceived notion of theme combined with the elements of chance and an inability to be absolutely sure where the water will take each pigment all led me to capture a few moments in time in the life stories of gifted adolescents.

**Importance of the Study**

Many of the reasons why this study is of importance have been touched on in the background and rationale section. To reiterate, this research makes three contributions to research and teaching. First, previous literature has focussed on the effects of stress on adolescents in general and the identification of some gender differences in coping strategies (Baldwin & Harris, 1997; Goyen & Anshel, 1998; Kardum & Krapić, 2001; Watt & Sharpe, 2001; Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1999). Other work has looked at social relations of gifted students with respect to age, school program, and self-concept (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham & Crombie, 1998; Swiatek, 2000). The literature has yet to fully explore the gifted adolescents’ voices and stories. Although past research
explores problems of stress and coping within youth from a medical stance such as studies of physiological or psychological effects of stress, or from a behavioural stance studying maladaptive behaviours in adolescents, there remains a lack of narrative research on this topic. My research contributes to this gap in the literature.

Second, from a pedagogical standpoint, I think it will be useful for teachers to be able to read and hear the stories of these gifted students. In a busy, curriculum-packed, day-to-day classroom environment it is not always possible, even for very good teachers, to be fully present, teach deeply (Wilson, 2003), and genuinely hear the issues that concern their students and how these issues affect their lives. My observations, gleaned while working with colleagues in several different schools, have led me to believe that teachers’ perceptions and understandings of gifted adolescents vary greatly. Some gifted students are perceived by teachers as being easy to teach because they are independent learners; some gifted students are viewed as challenging to teach because they learn so quickly, tend to have strong opinions, and are not afraid to voice them. My experience is that most teachers tend to label and categorize gifted students. This study collected gifted and highly able students’ thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, and I hope it helps to illuminate for educators the mystique of gifted adolescents.

Third, as a researcher, educator, and lifelong learner, this study provided me a venue for exploring and developing my research skills and also an opportunity to inform my practice in the classroom. Learning how to develop and improve on my own reflective and narrative writing skills, along with revisiting my own story of personal growth, has helped me to move further along my path of discovery as a lifelong learner. Personal
events in my life while researching and writing this thesis gave many chances for reflective writing about the power of stress and challenge in my life to block progress, to cause me to dig deeper within myself for new strengths, and eventually to motivate me to complete the work.

**Scope and Limitations**

This research was a multiple case study of 9 adolescents of both genders in the age range of 13 to 18 years. The participants were selected from a pool of possible students preidentified as highly able or gifted by the teacher administrators at each school site. I surveyed the participants over approximately a 2-month period during the spring term of the academic year in two independent schools in two different Ontario cities. Timing precluded a second interview session, since both schools ended the academic year in early June.

The first limitation was that this used a convenience sample from two independent schools, the sample size was relatively small, and this was not a longitudinal study. In order to get a more complete picture of gifted adolescents’ experiences with stress it would be necessary to follow their stories over perhaps an entire year or more. Second, this study was also limited by the fact that I was teaching in a school setting in one city and conducting research at the same time in two other school settings in two other cities. The interview times were predicated on teaching schedules for me and spare periods for students, both of which had some inflexible and predetermined finite time boundaries. A second interview was not possible. Third, in a study such as this, it is always possible that some of the participants decide to drop out of the study or that parents might withdraw
their consent. During my study, one participant, who had parental consent, independently chose not to show up for the interview and thus was not included. Two other participants chose not to complete the third piece of data, the writing or art task. Another limitation was the challenge to maintain anonymity because the sample size was small and the interviews were being done in a school setting after school hours. A more detailed discussion of the study’s limitations and potential weaknesses is presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews past research on adolescence, giftedness, stress, coping, resiliency, and developing potential of gifted individuals through strategies for empowerment. The first part of this literature review presents a summary of the characteristics of adolescence and the role of stress in adolescence. It is followed by a review of three epistemological perspectives about adolescence and society within which I chose to frame this research. The second part of the literature survey reviews early research about giftedness, definitions and theories of giftedness, presents the characteristics of gifted individuals, and reviews some research about gifted individuals and sources and signs of stress. Research on feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of gifted individuals is reviewed. The third section reviews literature on definitions, theories, and models of stress and coping, categories of stressors, and some indicators of stress. Also included is a review of literature about stress and emotional health of adolescents. The fourth section reviews definitions of coping and literature about coping strategies within the transaction model. Links are made between coping, cognition, and emotions. A brief discussion of gender, stress, and coping in adolescents is given. The fifth section reviews literature on resiliency and protective factor research. The last section reviews research about developing the potential of gifted individuals through various intervention strategies for empowerment. The chapter concludes with a summary of the present study.

Characteristics of Adolescence: The Age of Individuation

Adolescence is defined as the phase of life between the ages of 13 and 19, commonly called the teenage years. The word derives from the Latin adolescere, meaning
to grow up. Traditional psychological theory has presented this period of life as one of
"storm and stress" (Freud, 1938; 1966, as cited in Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998, p. 2). This transition phase from child to young adult can be tumultuous, and numerous
cross-cultural studies of adolescence indicate that it is a difficult transition for many
youth (Kiell, 1969, as cited in Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt). Offer's research (1981, as
cited in Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt) casts doubt on the troubled times theme as a
universal experience of teenagers.

Adolescence is characterized as a peak time in a human being's life in terms of
physical strength, speed, reaction time, and memory. During adolescence the human
being develops competencies intellectually, physically, manually and on a personal and
social level (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998). Teenagers experience heightened
awareness of emotional states and are in the process of learning how to manage and
integrate their emotions. They begin to disengage from their parents and to develop
emotional independence and autonomy with respect to physical needs, personal
appearance, sexual identity, and personality characteristics. They begin to develop
increased tolerance, respect, trust, and openness in interpersonal relationships. Peers play
an increasingly significant role in their lives. An understanding of a life purpose begins to
emerge in terms of an adolescent's vocation, familial relationships, and recreational
interests. Growth and risk taking are two important hallmarks of the adolescent phase. An
adolescent's sense of integrity develops as behaviour and beliefs become more congruent.

The Role of Stress in Adolescence

Stress in adolescence can be a stimulus that either promotes mastery of skills or
overwhelms the young person to a point where health issues arise (Huba, Winegard, & Bentler, 1980). Stress can be an agent for growth and for great anguish amongst gifted adolescents (Blackburn & Erikson, 1986). Physical and emotional development means that there will be changes in an individual’s perceptions of stress throughout adolescence. Adolescents’ social and physical environments are considered to be intervening and independent variables when assessing the impact of stressful events (Colten & Gore, 1991).

Framing This Research Study on Adolescence and Stress

This section explains how I chose to frame this research on adolescent stress within some broader societal issues discussed in the literature on stress. The biopsychological frame considers the effects of humankind’s biological evolutionary past; the sociocultural frame considers the effects of materialism and affluence, and the psychocultural frame considers the notion of society’s accepted culture of speed.

Csikszentmihalyi and Schmidt’s (1998) biopsychological ideas are rooted in an evolutionary perspective on stress and resilience in adolescence that suggests today’s modern environment forces adolescents “to ignore many of the instructions contained in their genes” (p. 3). These authors suggested that there is a biological imperative preprogrammed for the stage of life called adolescence. Genetically at adolescence, compared to childhood, humans are programmed to experience more freedom of movement, take on more responsibility, explore their sexual identity, be exposed to strong adult role models, and experience more personal power and control than in childhood. Young people experience stress when there is a mismatch between what they
are culturally allowed to do and what their bodies and minds are biologically programmed to do. This idea of there being a mismatch, or a feeling of not fitting in, is one that gifted adolescents often feel, both intellectually and socially. Teenagers need to be provided with experiences that they enjoy and that make them feel competent. Teenagers engage in deviant behaviours when they are not finding activities that challenge them to grow, become competent, and feel good about themselves (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998).

The sociocultural frame for my research into stress during adolescence may be found in the work of Luthar (2003). Luthar says there has been almost no research on the lives of children from the upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Luthar suggests that upper income children are assumed, by developmental researchers, to be “no different than the middle-class majority (who have been amply studied)” (p. 1581) and that it is assumed that due to their affluent upbringing they must not experience unusually stressful lives. A parallel theme also emerges in research about giftedness, the argument being that because children are bright they must inherently be able to cope. Luthar suggests that material wealth and a culture of affluence in North America may have significant effects on the problems suburban youth are encountering. Pressure to achieve and isolation from adults are cited as salient factors that exacerbate high stress in adolescents. Luthar states, “Faced with unrelenting pressures to excel (to be average is tantamount to having failed), many children develop stress-related symptoms” (p. 1583). The drive to be the best, have the best, and compete for the best position springs from a culture of affluence at any cost.

A psychocultural frame for the societal effects of stress on emotional health is presented in a book about the Slow Movement (Honore, 2004). This journalist and author
interweaves stories and statistics about the effects of our societal obsession with speed and how culturally we are living hurried lives and are missing out on what is more important in life. The message of his book is captured in the preface with a quote from Ghandi: “There is more to life than increasing its speed.” As an educator, I see the day-to-day effects of this hurried lifestyle in the adolescents and children whom I have taught in the Canadian school system over the past 25 years. My concern for the emotional health of children and adolescents, and that of society, drives my investigation of how one group, highly able and gifted adolescents, often from privileged backgrounds, is experiencing and coping with stress.

Elkind (1981) warned against rushing children into adulthood (Honoré, 2004). Nowadays our society seems more obsessed than ever with speed, productivity, and competition to stay first in a world that has become a 24/7 global economic engine (Honoré; Menzies, 2005). Honoré discusses the doctrine of “intensification” within the East Asian educational system. This term refers to “piling on the pressure with more homework, more exams and a rigid curriculum” (p. 251). He continues, “Intensification is not confined to schooling, either. In between lessons, many children dash from one extracurricular activity to the next, leaving them no time to relax, play on their own, or let their imaginations wander” (p. 251). School systems throughout North America and Britain have emulated this East Asian model of education. Honoré extends his observations of the negative outcomes of this intensification trend by citing the increase in childhood ailments linked to stress as well as a rise in youth crime, truancy, and suicide rates in countries like Japan. Honoré goes on to state,
Though speed, busyness, and an obsession with saving time remain the hallmarks of modern life, a powerful backlash is brewing . . . . Instead of doing everything faster, many people are decelerating, and finding that Slowness helps them to live, work, think, and play better (p. 274).

Changes in schools are beginning to take place. He documents how some of the fast-paced East Asian school systems are adopting a Slow Schooling approach. “In 2002 the government [Japan] finally abolished Saturday - yes Saturday - classes” (p. 254). Similar slow approaches are being taken in schools in Britain, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand (Honoré, 2004, p.254).

These three theoretical perspectives on the theme of stress in adolescence can be summarized as the lack of fit between biological imperative and societal expectations (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998); the epidemic of materialism in western society which has been dubbed affluenza (De Graaf, Waan, & Naylor, 2001, as cited in Honoré, 2004; Luthar, 2003); and a societal obsession with speed or velocitization (Kingwell, 1998, as cited in Honoré; Menzies, 2005).

Giftedness

Different concepts of the meaning of giftedness have been presented by many researchers over the past several decades. This section discusses some of these definitions.

*Early Research About Giftedness*

During the early years of the 20th century, popular opinion held that gifted children were intellectually superior but socially, physically, and psychologically
deficient. Terman's (1925) longitudinal study refuted this opinion, and his work is historically significant. Terman was the first to study factors that influence achievement, and he attempted to find traits that characterize children with high IQs (Seagoe, 1975). Terman's five-volume work became part of the baseline upon which further giftedness research was built. Terman, while dispelling several myths about gifted children, inadvertently created the myth that gifted children are all well adjusted, sometimes referred to as a halo effect (Colangelo, 2003).

Hollingworth (1926) was "the first to contribute evidence indicating that gifted children do have social and emotional needs meriting attention" (Colangelo, 2003, p. 374) by acknowledging the potential gap between their intellectual and emotional development. She emphasized that the regular school environment did not meet the educational needs of gifted students and could lead to apathy, emotional difficulties, and peer problems. These two early researchers were the progenitors who set the stage for various approaches to research on giftedness. Even back then, opinions varied amongst researchers and in the arena of public opinion about gifted children, their capabilities, and their educational and emotional needs.

Defining and Assessing Giftedness

The conceptual link between intelligence and genius was first published in Hereditary Genius (Galton, 1869). Terman's classic work, Genetic Studies of Genius (1925), saw a shift in the terminology from genius to gifted and provided the basic identification of giftedness as measured by individualized intelligence tests (Assouline, 2003, p. 125). Today, there are many theories and definitions for giftedness.
Unidimensional definitions of giftedness focus on achievement, emphasizing primarily cognitive development and performance scores on IQ tests. The IQ threshold for identification of intellectual giftedness is considered to be a score of 130 and above. About 3% of the population score in this range. It is commonly accepted in many boards of education that psychometric tests, such as the Stanford-Binet intelligence test and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), are used as tools for identification of gifted children. These tests assume that intelligence is a trait of an isolated individual which can be measured alone using pencil-and-paper methods.

Difficulties with defining and assessing giftedness have existed for a long time. Schultz and Delisle (2003) suggested that giftedness is a process that involves complex interactions within an individual. "Giftedness is a condition causing individuals, at a very young age and thereafter, to question their being . . . . Giftedness is a state of being requiring broad examination of self and soul" (p. 490).

Other definitions of giftedness take a more developmental approach and focus on the inner experiences, social awareness, and potential of a child, sometimes called the cocognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, 2003; Sternberg, 2003, in Colangelo & Davis, 2003).

A more encompassing definition of giftedness is based on the concept of multiple intelligences and a matrix of gifted traits (Gardner, 1983, 1999). The question then is not how smart are you but how are you smart? Gardner defines intelligence as a biophysical potential that is a product of genetic heritage, cognitive powers, and personality. One’s capacities, inclinations, values, goals, genetic and neurological makeup, cognitive
powers, traits, and temperament are all elements of the matrix. Gardner's definition of
giftedness is that it is a sign of early or precocious biophysical potential in the domains of
a culture (Winner, 1996). Giftedness can occur in any of Gardner's categories of
intelligence such as linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic,
natural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner believes that all humans are endowed
with these intelligences and that we all differ from one another in their configuration at
any moment in our personal history. Giftedness then means one is "at promise" in any
domain. Using Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences would require a major
adjustment in methods of assessing giftedness, because a traditional psychometric test
score just wouldn't be a sufficient measure. Other qualities, such as creativity and
imagination, would be important factors as well. Creativity is often a strong characteristic
of bright children. It is possible that the combination of high intelligence, creativity, and
extreme sensitivity could lead to vulnerability to stressors during adolescence.

For the purposes of my research study, giftedness has been defined using a blend
of several definitions. It is a state of asynchronous development in which a child shows
extremely advanced cognitive abilities and unusually heightened sensitivity and
awareness to interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. Intellectually gifted people are
characterized by an exceptional ability to reason; think abstractly; learn quickly;
comprehend and solve complex problems; synthesize and analyze ideas; and develop
original, broad, and deep insights (Tannenbaum, 2003). Since this research study
involved participants who were gifted and highly able students within the Ontario school
system, I needed a mode of identification that was accepted and understood by educators
in the system. Thus, in addition to Gardner’s and Tannenbaum’s definitions, I also used the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2001, 2004) definition of intellectual giftedness as a reference point. It states giftedness is “an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001;2004).

*Characteristics of Gifted Individuals*

Gifted people exhibit strengths and weaknesses just as any individual does; however, certain characteristics are more prominent in gifted individuals than in the general population. Gifted individuals are usually very knowledgeable, verbal, deep thinking, energetic, fiercely independent, curious, creative, motivated, highly critical, and very sensitive. Research indicates that these last two characteristics can be more prominent in adolescent gifted girls than in boys (Matthews, 2000). Gifted girls also tend to be eager to please, are competent in social relationships, mature, and sensitive to the needs of others. They also tend to be perfectionists (Matthews; Whitmore 1980). Excessive self-criticism is a major source of stress for gifted people because they want to excel, they believe they should excel, and so the mental “shoulds” end up producing unrealistic expectations. Whitmore believes perfectionism to be the most overlooked and influential personality trait of gifted children. It has a double-edged nature. It is potentially a force for remarkable achievement, and also it is potentially destructive. It can lead to one’s worth being defined by performance and cause a lack of self-compassion. It can cause gifted individuals to be driven and totally absorbed in their
work, and it contributes to the self-defeating cycle of never reaching the goals set because
the self-imposed bar is always being raised.

*Gender and Sources and Signs of Stress for Gifted Individuals*

Bolognini and Plancherel (1995) stated that when gifted girls perceive events or
situations as threatening or demanding adjustments that are beyond their ability to cope,
they experience psychological stress. Gjerde (1995) found that girls of average to
moderately high intelligence are more vulnerable to chronic depressive symptoms than
girls of average to low intelligence. Brown and Gilligan (1992) identified differences in
gender role development as a possible explanation as to why adolescence is a vulnerable
age for females. Other researchers have identified links between gender role stereotypes
and depression (Gore & Tudor, 1973; McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990;
Radloff, 1975, 1978, as cited in Gjerde). Both male and female children who are
cognitively mature have been shown to be more sensitive than the average child to their
environments, interpersonal interactions, intrapsychic experiences, and distress (Gjerde).
This increased sensitivity may result in greater susceptibility to stressors (Gjerde). Parker
and Adkins’s (1995) summary of earlier research reported links between perfectionism in
girls and depression, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, obsessive-compulsive personality
disorders, migraines, psychosomatic disorders, panic disorder, and a tendency toward
suicide.

Declining interest in achievement, lack of confidence, competition, fear of
showing weaknesses, fear of success, low academic self-esteem, network stress,
conflicting role choices, and relationships have been cited in research as possible sources
of stress. Groth’s study on declining achievement (1969) found gifted females have a strong sense of self-esteem or interest in achievement until age 14 and then a weakening of self-esteem as the need for love and affection takes over, while males tend to retain interest in achievement until the age of retirement. The Realization of Potential Study (Card, Steele, & Abeles, 1980) found that the early socialization of girls to relate their failures to ability and of boys to relate failures to just bad luck led to girls losing confidence in their achievement ability while boys gained confidence. Gifted students are often focused on achievement, and lack of confidence was one factor I was listening for as I heard my participants talk about stress.

The role of competition (the Horner Effect) was studied by Horner (1972), who found that women’s scores on a variety of tests were consistently much lower when they competed directly against men than against women. Thorbecke and Grotevant (1982) found a negative correlation between competitiveness and commitment to friendships among adolescent females and a positive correlation for males and suggested that girls are more likely to respond with concern to the stress of others than boys. I was curious whether gender competition would be talked about as a stressor in my study.

Kerr (1985, 1994) reported that gifted girls show increased sensitivity at an earlier age than their average peers, that gifted girls have greater ability than average girls to hide their stress and reactions to it, they have a stronger need to please others, and their fear of success increases as they approach a state of being successful. The Cinderella Complex (Dowling, 1981) for girls links both the fear of success and the need and desire to be cared for. Other researchers have identified this complex in the workplace (Astin & Myint
1971). I wondered whether any participants in my study would identify fear of success as a stressor.

The Impostor Syndrome (Chance & Imes, 1978) refers to low academic self-esteem and is evident in females who consistently underestimate their abilities and take few academic risks. These women and girls are often very diligent, but they feel that someone is going to discover they are faking it, and they avoid displays of confidence. Gilligan (1982) also wrote about loss of self-esteem and confidence in women.

Internal barriers to female achievement (Kerr, 1985) include inferiority feelings and psychological challenges that obstruct gifted females more than average women. The Horner Effect or the Fear of Success Syndrome, the Cinderella Complex, and the Impostor Syndrome all can lead to self-defeating attitudes toward being a successful, independent, brilliant risk-taker. These internal barriers, in concert with an accommodating personality type, can spell disaster for positive inner growth. Being adept at coping can become a distinct disadvantage for many females because this ability can mask their struggles. Gifted girls learn this skill at a very young age.

Kessler and McLeod (1984) looked at whether youth were affected by network events, or stress in the lives of others, also referred to as network stress. They speculated that females might be more subject to the deleterious effects of such stressors than males. Gilligan (1982) also suggested girls are at higher risk for experiencing distress in others than boys. Compas and Wagner (1991) found that academia was the only area where the number of interpersonal stressors was not different for males and females. Burke and Weir (1978) found that females reported experiencing more stress than boys or were more
willing to admit it, females reported more negative network events, and they were more sensitive to the needs of others (Compas, Slavin, Wagner, & Vannatta, 1986, cited in Colten and Gore, 1991; Siddique & D'Arcy, 1984).

Rodenstein and Glickhauf-Hughes (1979) identified some females to be caught in a conflict that they referred to as the false choice between career and family. The second factor that Card et al. (1980) identified was the difficulty for women in traditional roles as mothers and as caregivers to elderly parents to devote time to achievement roles. Kerr (1985) suggested that there are two categories of barriers for gifted females: external or societal ones and internal, personal ones. External barriers included training that was subtly geared to a lower status for girls, discrimination in schools and in the workplace, and lack of resources. Though the women's movement certainly raised awareness and changed the teaching of rigid sex roles through better child-rearing practices, Kerr stated that marriage and raising a family still had a much greater impact on gifted women's career development than on gifted men's. The culture of romance can be a factor affecting gifted females' perceptions of self (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, cited in Kerr 1994). It is possible that older female gifted adolescents in my study might perceive the family-career choice as a stressful future choice for them. Relationships can present great hardships for adolescent girls (Bush & Simmons, 1987; Colten & Gore, 1991; Simmons, Burgeson, Carleton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Social support and self-esteem can be undermined by the stresses of new roles at this phase in their lives. Petersen (cited in Belle, 1989) found a correlation between depressive symptoms in girls and instability in their sense of self-mastery. Bush and Simmons echoed the finding that stress is greater in girls than boys.
Girls are more dependent on their friends for self-image and self-esteem than boys are. Friendships are characterized by tensions, conflicts, and rejections. Asmussen and Larson (1991) suggested that negative thoughts about the enlarged world of more intimate relationships are related to symptoms of depression.

In *Smart Girls Two*, Kerr (1994) reviewed past studies about giftedness and females. Kerr said, referring to findings from decades earlier, that females in the 1990s continue to struggle with a waning belief in their own abilities and with finding their purpose. She stated that there are still intense social pressures to channel energy into relationships with men, sexual discrimination and harassment still take place in the workplace, and there is room for improvement in the academic world for the encouragement of women's intellectual pursuits. These pressures can apply to females of all ages, including adolescent girls. I was curious to see whether the gifted girls in my study perceived these issues as relevant to their lives.

Kerr and Nicpon (2003, as cited in Colangelo & Davis, 2003) acknowledged that gender roles have changed, as have the ways we mentor and educate gifted children. Evidence shows that the gender gap is closing in math and sciences at elementary and high school levels. More women are active in traditionally male domains. However, more females are involved in substance abuse, violence, and self-destructive behaviours. The media image of the physically perfect woman still holds influence. Ninety percent of people with disordered eating are female, and eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003). Women in the 21st century still face many internal and external barriers. For gifted women, who are often perfectionists, the
self-imposed bar is forever being raised. I think that gifted female adolescents are not blind to these societal and cultural realities. I anticipated the girls in my study would speak to these issues that I believe are indicative of the challenges society still faces with respect to gender roles. Until gender equality is achieved and maintained, girls will deal with the ambiguity by paying the price of losing their true selves. I hoped in my study to find that the boys were aware of the need for gender equality.

Giftedness and gender issues research published during the 1960s through the 1990s was focussed more on females than males. Perhaps the women’s movement influenced this trend. I saw a gap in the literature due to the lack of research about adolescent males and stress. This prompted me to include both genders in my study.

*Feelings, Attitudes, and Perceptions of Gifted Students*

Kline and Short (1991) presented findings concerning ways to improve emotional resilience in gifted adolescent girls. In gifted students, the potential for worrying, disappointment, and hurt feelings increases due to their ability to think abstractly, heightened sensitivity, deeper concerns, and higher standards and expectations. There is more inner friction between the ideal and the real, the expected and the actual, the internal and the external worlds of gifted adolescents (Asmussen & Larson, 1991). There is a need to develop strategies and programs to help develop emotional resiliency in adolescents.

There are conflicting research findings in the area of psychosocial adjustment of gifted children. Common stress-inducing issues include boredom, competition, expectations of being perfect, confusions about abilities, being overloaded with work, loneliness, ridicule, the use of camouflage or disidentifiers (i.e., asking silly questions so
as to not appear smart), a heightened sensitivity and intensity of feelings and reactions, developmental immaturity, underachievement, female fear of success, and multipotentiality, or gifts in more than one of the multiple intelligences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Frey, 1985; Genshaft & Broyles, 1991). Typical coping strategies used by gifted youth include going off to be alone, cognitively looking for a solution, trying to use relaxation techniques, and, for females, talking to a friend (Woodward & Kalyan-Masih, 1990). Cohen and Frydenberg (1995) reported a slightly different set of coping strategies in their research. The most commonly used strategies they reported are working hard, seeking relaxing diversions, focussing on solving the problems, and engaging in physical recreation. The least used strategies are reducing tension, seeking professional help, seeking spiritual support, and taking social action. Gifted girls tend to focus on solving the problem, and relaxation is not high on their agenda. They do not openly declare their inability to cope. This could signal either denial or that they are truly coping.

Schneider et al. (1998) looked at social relations of gifted students at grades 5, 8, and 10 and found no significant differences amongst the students in attitudes towards school but noted that gifted students may be more critical of educational programs and how well they meet their academic needs. School issues will probably appear as stressors for my participants.

Williams and McGillicuddy-DeLisi (1999) found that older adolescents used a greater variety of coping strategies than younger teens. They found “adolescents in all age groups varied their strategies in relations to the type of stressor, but there were no
significant gender differences” (p. 537). Their study did not focus on gifted adolescents; however, I was curious whether I would find similar gender or age trends in types of coping strategies used.

Chan (2002) looked at relationships amongst IQ, perceptions of giftedness, and self-concept in junior secondary school students in Hong Kong. Chan found that the way students perceived their giftedness affected their self-worth and self-concept relative to social acceptance and friendship issues. The implications of interventions to enhance self-esteem of gifted students by restructuring their perceptions of their giftedness were discussed.

Stress

The term stress has many meanings within different research frameworks. The experience of stress reveals itself in the body, mind, and spirit of the individual. Stress has been defined as “a demand on physical or mental energy; a condition or adverse circumstance that disturbs, or is likely to disturb, the normal physiological or psychological functioning of an individual; distress caused by this” (Barber, 1998, p. 1437). Although the term stress came into popular usage in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it has been used in scientific literature since the 1930s and in nursing literature since the 1950s (Lyon, 2000).

Stress Research Models

Early stress research took one of two approaches. The life stress researchers took a physiological approach and focussed on nonnormative stressful life events. The developmentalists focussed on normative changes that all youth experience as a cohort
and individually. The hormonal hypothesis guided many developmentalist studies but did not consider individual variables or social context (Petersen, Kennedy, & Sullivan, 1991). Variability in the onset of puberty can turn nonnormative events into normative ones (Colten & Gore, 1991). There has been a convergence of these two research traditions with more studies that consider the interrelationships between developmental and nondevelopmental stressors experienced by adolescents (Rutter, 1979; Simmons et al. 1987).

The stress-response model. This model was developed by the life stress researchers. Interest in stress by health researchers arose out of anecdotal stories from patients and some empirical studies that indicated health and stress were related concepts (Lyon, 2000). The stress-response model was developed by Selye (1956, 1976). Selye approached the issue from a physician’s viewpoint, looking at how the body reacted physiologically to stress. Selye focussed on the physiological patterns of response, which he called the general adaptation syndrome (GAS). He proposed that the GAS was a defensive response of the body that did not depend on the nature of the stressor. The main problem with this model was that cognitive variables, such as perception, were not seen to play a role in moderating the GAS. This model could not account for psychological stress. Subsequent research by others showed that people could have different physiological responses to the same types of stressors, such as anxiety and fear, depending on their coping mechanisms (Lyon). Selye’s theory did not consider the uniqueness of individual perceptions and experiences with stress. Selye’s definition of stress was criticized for being vague and confusing. It was later revised to state that stress
is a state manifested by a specific syndrome which consists of all the nonspecifically induced changes within a biological system (Selye, 1956, 1976).

The stress-as-stimulus model. During the 1960s, interest developed in studying the links between psychological experiences and stress by looking at how people experience changes in life circumstances. Masuda and Holmes (1967, cited in Lyon, 2000) said that life changes were considered to be stressors and it was presumed that too many life changes could increase a person’s chances of becoming ill. The stress-as-stimulus model assumed that life changes were normative for everyone, that the person was a passive recipient of stress, that everyone adjusted to these changes in a similar way, and that change was always stressful, regardless of the desirability of the event (Lyon). It also assumed that there was a common toleration threshold beyond which illness would occur. Rahe’s later work (1978, cited in Lyon) considered that personal interpretation of an event was significant. Throughout the 1970s, there were numerous studies on the ability of major life events to predict illness. Later research suggested that daily hassles have more impact on health than major life events (Lyon).

Lyon’s (2000) review of other developments in stress research during the previous few decades reported on the concept of psychological hardiness as an important moderator between stress and the development of illness. This concept had been proposed in the late 1970s. Hardiness meant a person showed a strong commitment to self, a vigorous attitude to their environment, a sense of meaningfulness, and had a strong internal locus of control. Other researchers linked hardiness to well-being, work performance, and development of fewer somatic illnesses.
Horsburgh (2000) reported how Antonovsky (1979, cited in Horsburgh) refined and altered the concept of hardiness with the theory of salutogenesis, the study of why people stay healthy when exposed to pathogens—microbiological, chemical, physical, psychological, social, or cultural. This concept proposed that three things could affect how a person dealt with stress: the degree to which a stressful situation is predictable and explicable; the degree to which sufficient resources are available to meet the demands the stress is imposing on the person; and the degree to which the situation is meaningful to the person. The individual under stress then can assess whether the demands of the stress are worth the investment of energy in order to cope (Lyon, 2000). The stress-as-stimulus model dominated research during the 1970s and early 1980s.

The stress-as-transaction model. In 1966, Lazarus published research that integrated previous research findings on stress and its effect on health, proposing that stress existed as a result of a transaction between a person and the environment. Cognition, emotions, and coping strategies were all components of the transaction. Lazarus’s work was important for cognitive psychologists because what happens during the appraisal process determines emotions and coping behaviours (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lyon, 2000, p. 11). Primary appraisal occurs when a person makes a judgement as to whether the demands of a situation outweigh the resources available to cope with the situation. If the demands are too great, the person decides if there is potential for harm, loss, or threat; whether actual harm has already occurred; and whether there is potential for gain, challenge, or benefit. Secondary appraisal involves determining which coping mechanisms are available to deal with a threat. Reappraisal involves a cognitive process
of reassessing the stressor, its implications, and whether the threat is now a challenge, benign, or irrelevant (Lyon). Several factors affect this appraisal process: (a) the number and complexity of threats; (b) a person’s values, goals, and commitments; (c) the availability of coping resources; (d) the novelty of the situation; (e) the person’s level of self-esteem; (f) the social support network available; (g) the level of individual coping skills; (h) situational constraints; (i) the degree of uncertainty or ambiguity; (j) the proximity of the threat in time and space; and (k) the intensity and duration of the threat (Lyon). Ryan-Wenger, Sharrer, and Wynd (2000) synthesized key findings about stress, coping, and health in people between the ages of 3 and 18 and referred to the stress-as-transaction model as follows:

There are no specific models or theories to explain the entire process of children’s stress and coping; the transactional model developed for adults (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), however, is the theory most commonly applied to research in children. This dynamic transactional stress-coping process fits well within an ecological and growth and development model, which is critical when studying children . . . . The concepts of growth and development are critical to any model that explains children’s behaviour because of the tremendous changes in cognitive, physical, social, and psychological status that occur during childhood. (Berk, 1977, in Ryan-Wenger et al. p. 267).

For the purposes of the present research, Lazarus’s theory of stress as a transaction between a person and the environment was adopted.

Daily hassles, normative stressors, and life events. References in current medical,
educational, and psychological research literature indicate that stressors fall into three categories: daily hassles or minor stressors, normative stressors, and life events or major stressors.

Daily hassles are everyday occurrences that have the potential to irritate and bother an individual. The effects of daily hassles can be cumulative.

There are also normal developmental stressors that occur at various ages (Joseph, 1994). Adolescents experience normative changes such as hormonal changes, growth changes, peer pressure, heightened sexuality, dependence-independence issues, relationship issues, increased responsibility for self in school, social responsibility, career and college choices, transition to work, part-time jobs, gender role issues, dating issues, and self-evaluations and acceptance of strengths and weaknesses (Arnold, 1991, as cited in Joseph, p. 73).

Asmussen and Larson (1991) and Smetana, Yau, Restrepo, & Braeges, (1991) identified how role transitions change youths' views of themselves and of the world. Cognitive development and social transitions can expand the adolescent world of relationships. Attaining personal autonomy is high on a teenager's agenda, and a strong relationship exists between interpersonal stressors and problems of psychological distress (Compas & Wagner, 1991). With the exceptions of illness, parental problems, and sibling problems, many so-called life events are secondary stressors of developmental transitions. Youth are also susceptible to network stress or the transmission of stress through peer groups. Compas and Wagner researched the relevance of developmental clusters of stressors or multiple stress arenas and the patterns of correlations that exist between stressors,
symptoms of distress, and different age groups. They found that in junior high school only negative family events predicted distress, whereas in high school distress was predicted by peer-related events. In college, distress arose chiefly from academic-related events.

Major life stressors are considered by most researchers to be events such as death, severe illness, family trauma, divorce, and relocation. These types of stressors demand much greater reserves of energy and resilience in order to cope (Joseph, 1994). The adolescents in my study may have experienced such traumas directly themselves or indirectly through friends who are experiencing major life stressors. A lot of research has documented the nature, severity, and persistence of an individual’s negative responses to family-based stressors such as parental conflict and divorce (Compas & Wagner, 1991; Emery, 1982; Wertleib, 1991). Elias (1991) and Gottleib (1991) stated that the biological, cognitive, and school changes experienced by adolescents are really important markers of change, but many complex processes surrounding interpersonal relationships moderate the effects of these changes. Subgroups of adolescents that present as higher risk groups include those who are experiencing poverty, violence, homelessness, extreme lack of parental support, and overwhelming negative peer pressure. These youth face an atypical number of life changes and adversities.

Common stress triggers. Everyone has their own zone of tolerance (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981), and what triggers stress for one person might not in someone else. There are some common stress triggers that can have an effect on how one perceives and copes with daily hassles and normal developmental stressors. These apply to people of
any age, but in children and adolescents the impact is often more rapidly seen. Sleep deprivation is a major stress trigger. Adolescents require more sleep than adults because their bodies are growing so rapidly. If the physical body cannot repair itself and rejuvenate energy, it is difficult to cope with everyday stressors. A second stress trigger is poor nutrition. The body’s biochemical and hormonal balance is finely tuned and easily put out of balance (Smith, 1976, cited in Joseph, 1994). Allergens can affect tolerance levels for stress in some people (Rapp, 1991, cited in Joseph, 1994); however, research findings linking allergens and stress are varied and controversial. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD; Wurtman & Wurtman, 1989, cited in Joseph) has also been cited as a stress trigger for some people. Medical conditions and illnesses require the body to use energy in the healing process and can compromise ability to deal with additional stressors.

Chronic conditions like diabetes, learning disabilities, depression, or hyperactivity (also called attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD) can become stress triggers. This is especially the case when the person’s chronic condition fits poorly with environmental demands . . . . Mismatches between temperament and environment or between ability level and expectations are sources of distress.

(Joseph, 1994, p. 68)

This feeling of a mismatch is especially evident in an educational setting for children who are at either end of the exceptionality spectrum, such as those who have learning disabilities and those who are intellectually gifted. Joseph also cited erroneous assumptions and self-defeating attitudes as potential sources of stress. Such attitudes and
assumptions are “the filters we use to evaluate ourselves, others and situations” (Joseph, 1994, p. 70).

Adolescents’ and children’s perceived self-worth and self-blame can be factors that induce stress (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981). Self-concerns with meeting personal goals, with self-esteem, with changing values and social standards, with personal competence and ability, and with personal traits and physical characteristics have all been cited in the literature as factors that can induce stress (Humphrey & Humphrey). Harter (1999, p. 87) has shown that “self-representations undergo major normative, age-related change” during early, middle, and late adolescence.

Certain home conditions have been cited as having a negative influence on personality and mental health (Rutter, 1977, cited in Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981). Six home-centred factors can have debilitating effects on children’s levels of resiliency: marital discord, low socioeconomic status, large family size or overcrowding, paternal criminology, maternal psychiatric disorders, and removal of a child from the home by local authorities (Benard, 1987, as cited in McGinty, 1999). Rutter (1984, as cited in McGinty) found most disadvantaged children do not experience all of these debilitating factors, and of those who do, one quarter are resilient. Werner (1989, as cited in McGinty) studied children of alcoholic parents and found that certain behavioural characteristics in children elicited positive parental attention and subsequently helped children to cope. Family stressors emerged as stressors in my study.

School anxieties can also induce stress. Anxiety is considered a learned reaction. It interferes with most kinds of thinking and learning and is a nearly universal experience.
in countries that are extremely test conscious. School-related stressors were cited by the adolescents in my study. The main teacher and parental behaviour that induces stress in students has been identified as putting an overemphasis on competition. It has been suggested that teachers’ stress levels and students’ stress levels affect each other in a cyclical fashion (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981). Harter (1999) cautioned against blaming classroom teaching practices in isolation of the fact that “children and adolescents bring very powerful socialization histories from outside the classroom to their own school experiences . . . . Family influences, peer interactions, and exposure to the media all impact the attitudes that children display in the school setting” (p. 243). Some of my participants said that parents and teachers were both sources of stress and sources of help for coping. The participants also referred to media influences and schooling issues as sources of stress.

Frydenberg (1999) summarized risk factors for young people within a wider context. Frydenberg stated that definitions of stress and coping are created by the culture. According to Frydenberg, stressors are construed on the basis of beliefs, values, and personal long-term and short-term goals. Gender perceptions are also determined by culture, and Frydenberg suggested that most of the stress and coping research to date has been framed mainly by western cultural definitions. More encompassing risk factors that need to be considered when studying stress and coping include temperament; biological dispositions; chronic illness; disabilities; family disadvantages such as poverty, divorce, and parental mental health; war; and social disadvantages. Some of these topics emerged when the participants discussed things about which they worried.
The answer to the question why study stress in gifted adolescents may be found by looking at research into the ways stress has been found to influence health, how it affects educational and social interactions, and how it has an impact on human productivity in the world of business.

*Psychological indicators of stress.* Each person reacts psychologically to stress in a unique way. Lazarus has identified certain emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, and guilt as universally held psychological indicators of responses to stress. He refers to them as the stress emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Depression is a composite of several stress emotions and also an indicator of stress. Some of the psychological indicators of stress are increased irritability, hostility, impatience, negativism, moodiness, tantrums, rigid thinking, withdrawal, loss of interest in activities, and nervous mannerisms (Joseph, 1994). From an educational and social perspective, these characteristics are not conducive to facilitation of learning or to positive social interactions amongst people.

*Physical indicators of stress.* The phrase “feeling stressed out” is used in everyday speech to mean one is experiencing physical sensations such as headaches, shortness of breath, dizziness or light-headedness, muscle tension, nausea, fatigue, gnawing in the gut, heart palpitations, loss of appetite, hunger, and sleep problems (Lyon, 2000). Increased pulse rate, cold and clammy hands, hyperventilation, dilated pupils, frequent urination and diarrhoea, nervous tics, teeth grinding, and disordered eating have been noted as physical signs of distress, particularly in young people (Joseph, 1994). Physical symptoms influence behaviours in people of all ages.
Behavioural indicators of stress. The behavioural manifestations of stress can include excessive crying, smoking, drinking alcohol, talking quickly, and trembling. Disordered eating can be both a physical and a behavioural indicator of stress. Defensive behaviours may become evident, with an increase in oppositional behaviours being one example. Dysfunctional behaviours such as mental blocks or regressive, infantile behaviours can indicate stress. Overt behaviours such as repetitive body movements, inappropriate use of language, or impulsive behaviours may be shown. Behavioural manifestations of stress directly affect performance (Joseph, 1994).

Performance indicators of stress. Performance may be affected by impairment of the ability to concentrate, solve problems, make decisions, or complete tasks (Goleman & Gurin, 1993; Ornstein & Sobel, 1988; Pelletier, 1992, 1995, cited in Lyon, 2000). This has implications for how people are able to learn and retain information as well as for productivity in the world of business and the arts. Statistics show that “30% - 60% of all physician office visits are for illness experiences that are nondisease based with stress as the common contributor” (Cummins & Vadenbos, 1981; Sobel, 1995, as cited in Lyon). Statistics from the US Clearing House for Mental Health Information in 1982 reported a loss of $17 billion US in production capacity primarily due to stress-related problems. By the late 1980s this estimate had grown to $60 billion US (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987, as cited in Lyon). By 1994 the loss in productivity due to stress-related absenteeism, retraining, and stress-related health costs soared to $150 billion US (deCarteret, 1994, as cited in Lyon).
Stress and Emotional Health of Adolescents

Adolescents experience life at the cusp between childhood and adulthood. Their emotional reactions to stress sometimes are more similar to a younger child’s and sometimes are more like those of an adult. This is due, in part, to the rapidity of physical and emotional changes that take place during adolescence and the fact that they do not always have the same options for dealing with daily hassles, normative changes, and life events as children or adults (Holland, 1980, as cited in Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981). In a sense they are caught in the middle zone; however, it is not necessarily a tumultuous time of life (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998). Stress and coping research has identified some factors that have the potential to induce stress in children and adolescents. It is instructive however to first consider some statistical evidence that stress is a problem.

Based on information obtained from the Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH; Harvey, 1994, p. 96), the following statistics are revealing. A national survey in 1990 found that 14% more teenagers aged 15-19 described their lives as very stressful or somewhat stressful compared with data from 1985. For males in 1985, 30% perceived their lives as stressful compared with 37% in 1990. For females, the percentages jumped from 43% to 53% (Harvey, 1994, using Health and Welfare Canada data from Canada’s Health Promotion Survey, p. 96). A 1992 study of Canadian girls and boys who were 13-16 years of age showed about half of them agreed with the statement that their lives are stressful. One in five girls strongly agreed with this statement (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1992, as cited in Harvey, 1994, p. 74). Almost one in
three females between 13 and 15 years of age felt lonely very often. About 1 in 10 boys felt this way (Health and Welfare Canada, 1992, as cited in Harvey, p.74). A British Columbia study on emotional well-being reported that “a higher percentage of boys in Grades 7, 8 and 9 consistently had higher self-esteem that girls in the same Grades” and that self-esteem decreased for both genders as they aged. “While in grade 7, 42% of the girls had high self-esteem; by grade 9 only 26% had high self-esteem” (The McCreary Centre Society, Adolescent Health Survey, Province of British Columbia, 1993, as cited in Harvey, p. 73). When several national and provincial studies are compared it is evident that a “substantial number of young people are lonely, depressed, emotionally distressed, or not happy about their lives; 28% of young women 15 to 19 years rated high on a depression scale; and it was noted that young women are much more likely to express these feelings than young men (Harvey, p. 96).

When youth suicide rates are compared from 1960 to 1991 for young people 15-19 years of age, the following observations can be made.

In 1991, 23 young men out of 100,000 in the population committed suicide. This rate is six times greater than that for young women. However, teenage women are hospitalized [for attempted suicide] at a rate twice that of young men. The suicide rate for young men has increased four-fold since 1960. (Statistics Canada, Suicide in Canada, 1994, as cited in Harvey, 1994, p. 97).

Statistics from 1997 (Statistics Canada, 1997) showed the suicide rate for males 15-19 years of age in 1997 was 19.9 per 100,000 population and for females 5.5 per 100,000 population. A provincial Child Mental Health Survey done in Quebec on suicide and
suicidal thoughts found 10% of young women and 4% of young men aged 12-14 had considered suicide in the 6 months before the survey (Santé Québec, 1993, as cited in Harvey, p. 75). A similar study in British Columbia reported 20% of grade 8 girls and 13% of grade 8 boys had considered suicide in the past year (The McCreary Centre Society, Adolescent Health Survey, 1993, as cited in Harvey, p. 75). Girls from age 10-14 attempt suicide five times as often as boys; however, boys actually commit suicide at a rate four times that of girls. “The rate for this age group has almost doubled over the last 30 years” (Harvey, p. 75). More recent statistics reveal a slightly better scenario.

For the 15-19 years of age males, the suicide rates per 100,000 population have dropped slightly since 1997. Statistics Canada reports that in the year 2000 the rate was 16.3; in 2001 the rate was 14.6; in 2002 the rate was 14.7; and in 2003 the rate was 14.8 (Statistics Canada, 2006). For females, 15-19 years of age, in the year 2000 the rate was 5.2; in 2001 the rate was 5.0; in 2002 the rate was 5.2; and in 2003 the rate was 5.3 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Even though the statistics for males are dropping, I find these numbers are disturbing and ask the question, what is stressing these young people to the point of thinking about extreme self-harmful behaviours?

Statistical data about children’s mental health are useful as background contextual data for considering whether stress in adolescence is an issue about which to be concerned. Statistics in Québec (Santé Québec, 1993, as cited in Harvey, p. 76) regarding mental health problems in the 6-11 year old group are also of interest because “16% of boys six to 11 years of age and 13% of girls in this age group had at least one mental health problem. Boys are almost three times as likely as girls to have externalized mental
health problems, including problems in conduct and hyperactivity.” Girls’ problems present as anxiety, depression, and emotional disorders. The same study found that in 12-14 year-olds, 24% of girls and 11% of boys were reported as having at least one mental health problem. Girls reported simple phobias (16%) and depression (6%). Girls reported problems more than three times as often as boys, and yet “only 15% of girls received services compared to 30% of boys” (Santé Québec, 1993, as cited in Harvey, p. 76).

A lot of literature looked at very specific maladaptive behaviours, or negative coping strategies, of teens. “The literature is replete with a recognition that young people experience distress at high levels” (Petersen et al., 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Roberts, 1999, as cited in Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002, p. 420). Resnick et al. (1997) found, in a study of 12,118 adolescents from 80 high schools in the United States, that 18.4% of 9th-12th graders experienced significant distress (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002). Analyses of similar studies elsewhere place the rate of psychological distress in young people at one in five to one in three. These levels of distress interfere with well being and learning in academic settings (Compass & Hammen, 1994; Roeser, 1998, as cited in Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002). Many researchers have studied how an increase in negative emotions such as anger, hurt, and worry can lead to depression, doing poorly in school, disturbed eating patterns, affective disorders, delinquency, and suicidal behaviours (Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Cohen, Burt & Bjork, 1987; Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986; Larson & Hamm, 1989; Petersen & Taylor, 1980; Richards & Larson, 1990, as cited in Colten & Gore, 1991). Since the mid-1990s there has been some research about the psychological problems that stress is causing adolescents. Few studies are of the qualitative type or
focus on gifted adolescents in particular, and I think that the original voices and stories of these young people are not being documented.

Coping

Coping is a complex construct to study. There have been many approaches taken, from social learning theory models (Bandura, 1977), to the identity formation work of Erikson (1985) and Lankton and Lankton (1983). Newman and Holzman (1993) have used the research lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural context of learning, and Lave and Wenger (1993) have studied the apprenticeship model as a means to teach coping skills. Seligman (1995) has emphasized the use of humour, the development of optimism, and the use of metaphor as tools to develop self-awareness.

Definitions of Coping in the Transaction Model

In the transaction model of stress, coping is defined as how an individual continually changes cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that have been determined by the person as being taxing or exceeding their resources. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The use of the word manage in this definition implies efforts undertaken to minimize, avoid, tolerate, change, or accept in an attempt to master a stressful situation. Coping is considered to be a process as opposed to an outcome.

Problem-focussed strategies. Lazarus (1966) identified two forms of coping: palliative and direct action. In 1984 he changed these terms to emotion-focussed and problem-focussed strategies. Within the transaction model there is a problem-focussed and emotion-focussed component in each encounter. Problem-focussed strategies are
cognitive strategies. The problem is defined, pros and cons of various ways of dealing with the problem are assessed, and what can be changed is changed. This type of coping can be directed either outward to the environment or inward towards the self by acknowledging personal strengths or weaknesses, learning new skills, or changing the intellectual meaning of the stressful occurrence.

*Emotion-focussed strategies.* Emotion-focussed strategies are used to decrease emotional distress and are commonly used when events are not changeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Examples of this type of coping strategy are wishful thinking, distancing or avoiding, blaming, minimizing, selectively attending, venting of emotions, seeking social support, exercising, finding new meaning, and meditating (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

*Coping, Cognition, and Emotions*

In the transaction model of stress, feelings of anxiety, anger, fear, guilt, and sadness are considered to be the stress emotions. Depression is considered to be a composite of several of these feelings (Lazarus, 1966, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman developed a cognitive theory of emotions based on the premise that thoughts precede and shape emotions and, in turn, emotions can affect thoughts. For example, primary appraisal of a stressor such as a threat to one's safety can trigger emotion, which can affect the secondary appraisal of the threat and influence whether problem-focussed or emotion-focussed strategies are employed as coping mechanisms.

*Adolescent Stressors and Coping Strategies*

Adolescents reported school problems as common sources of stress in their lives,
followed by family disruptions and discord (Andreasen & Wasek 1980). Loneliness was also a stressor; however, with age and maturity comes greater capacity to manage and benefit from time spent alone. Smetana et al., (1991) listed some typical stressors as interpersonal relationships, homework, and regulation of activities with curfews, parental dress codes, and chores.

Adolescents often cited arguing with parents as a stressor in their lives. Asmussen and Larson (1991) discussed this changing cognitive perception of the role transitions between parents and children by stating that when the rules of engagement change, the stress level rises for both parties. Smetana et al. (1991) stated that girls in the teenage years show a significant decline in understanding parental social conventional viewpoints, leading to more mother-to-daughter conflicts. Females certainly have more reports of stress than males (Burke & Weir, 1978; Compas, Slavin, Wagner, & Vannatta, 1986, as cited in Colten & Gore, 1991; Ford, 1989; Siddique & D'Arcy, 1984). There are, however, some studies indicating that boys may be more vulnerable to stress than girls (Colten & Gore).

Frydenberg (1997) reported on relationships between coping and each of the following: age, gender, ethnicity, family, and a range of life problems. Also discussed were the measurement of coping skills, social support, and the effects of depression on youth. Friends and relationships, often cited in the literature as primary causes of stress, can also be moderating factors that aid in coping. Frydenberg identified the general categories of stressors for youth as being achievement (employment, exams, marriage), relationships (family, peers and friends, independence from parents), and social issues
(fear of nuclear war, Third World issues, sexual equality).

Swiatek (2000) studied social coping among gifted high school students and how it related to self-concept. She concluded that gifted adolescents have discrete social coping strategies and suggested the need to develop interventions to help gifted adolescents improve their social coping skills.

A cross-cultural comparison of Australian, Colombian, German, and Palestinian adolescents (Frydenberg et al., 2003) concluded that unique cultural communities have different coping strategies, and coping cannot be assumed to be the same amongst teenagers from one country to another.

Gender, Stress, and Coping in Adolescents

There are some warning signs, as cited earlier in the health statistics, that not all adolescents are well adjusted and coping. One example of negative coping is found in the fact that eating disorders have reached epidemic proportions, particularly in adolescent females (Jones & Nagel, 1992). There has been a great deal written on normal female adolescent development that suggests girls are socialized and influenced by the media to be unable to accept their bodies. Steiner-Adair (1986) wrote about adolescents with disordered eating, saying, “On a cultural level, these adolescent truth-tellers may be carrying a critical vision about the impoverishment of a culture. Girls with eating disorders have a heightened, albeit confused, grasp of the dangerous imbalance of a culture’s values.” (p. 176). Is it possible that there are other types of negative coping strategies that point to problems with our culture of acquisition (Luthar, 2003)? Girls are bombarded with media images of the ideal woman in advertising. Thinness is a symbol of
beauty and professional status. Our society perpetuates the erroneous belief that thinness is attainable by all women. As well, girls are often involved in sports subcultures that emphasize and encourage a perfectionist attitude (Levine, Smolak, & Hayden 1994).

Bolognini and Plancherel (1995) found that there are gender differences in adolescent coping strategies. Boys tend to use humour and more overt behaviours than girls. Hence, compared with girls, any behaviour problems with boys are noticed more quickly by teachers, and boys are more often referred to mental health services (Green, Clopton, & Pope, 1996). Girls invest more in social relations than boys, express more negative feelings than boys, and more commonly use consumption habits, such as shopping and eating, to deal with stress. They are more likely to get anxious, have sleep disturbances, show more depressive moods, and thus have a greater probability for eating disorders and full-blown depression. Girls are very good at concealing their difficulties, and teachers tend to think that the problems will disappear as the girls mature.

Resiliency

Resilience is a term that refers to the attitudes and coping behaviours that contribute to a person’s ability to bounce back from adversity (Joseph, 1994). Resilient people are described as exhibiting traits such as being responsible, committed, positive, self-reliant, and socially skillful (Joseph). Werner and Smith (1982, as cited in McGinty, 1999), in their longitudinal study of resilient children and youth, defined a resilient child as one who has the capacity to cope effectively with both the internal stressors that produce vulnerability, such as autonomic reactivity, developmental imbalances, and unusual sensitivities, and external stressors, such as illness, major losses, and dissolution
of the family (p. 3). Indicators of resiliency appear early in life (Werner & Smith, 1989, as cited in Frydenberg, 1999)

Wang and Haertel (1995, as cited in McGinty, 1999) studied educational resilience. Their definition of resiliency was “the heightened likelihood of success in school and in other aspects of life, despite environmental risks and adversities, brought about by an individual’s disposition, conditions and experiences” (p. 3).

Garmezy and Rutter (1983), Signorielli (1987), and Ebata, Petersen, and Conger (1990) discussed whether risk and protective factors are contextually or individually based. Their theorizing and modelling trends follow the transition in some research circles towards a more holistic approach and away from a crisis-centred approach. Research models need to provide several visions of risk and resiliency, and a contextual orientation is needed since social and developmental events cannot be studied in isolation.

**Characteristics of Resiliency**

Some common characteristics have been identified in resilient children (Werner, 1984, as cited in Joseph, 1994), and I believe these apply to adolescents as well. Resilient children take a proactive approach to solving problems. They construe their experiences in constructive ways. They are usually good-natured and easy to deal with. Resilient children usually have established a close bond with at least one caregiver (not always the parent) in infancy or early childhood. Early in life, resilient children develop a belief that life makes some sense and one has some control over it, often referred to as a sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979, as cited in Joseph).
Resiliency and Protective Factor Research

Resiliency research looks at why some children who are exposed to severe stressors don’t develop major psychological, educational, or behavioural problems (Schultz, 1991, as cited in McGinty, 1999). Protective factor research and the positive psychology movement have identified some factors that promote resiliency and the ability to cope with stress. There have been several protective factor research studies in the past 2 decades (Cohen, 1996, as cited in McGinty; Garmezy, 1991, 1992, as cited in McGinty; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Kline & Short, 1991; Minnesota Women’s Fund, 1990, as cited in McGinty; Rutter, 1984, as cited in McGinty; Schultz, 1991;). These studies identified the attributes of a resilient child as social competency, autonomy, having a sense of the future, and possessing problem-solving skills (McGinty). Intrinsic protective factors are constructs such as personality, temperament, and intelligence. Positive coping and resiliency have been associated with personal qualities of co-operation, assertion, self-control, a sense of responsibility, and empathy. Frydenberg (1999) concurs with this, identifying temperament, communications within the family, attainment of sexual milestones, use of self-talk, and metaphoric representations as important factors in determining coping strategies. Extrinsic protective factors are things such as a caring family, mentors, and good school experiences (Christenson & Carroll, as cited in Frydenberg). International research with adolescents from several countries universally reinforces the great importance of family as a collaborative learning environment where coping behaviours can be modelled and social learning of conflict resolution skills can take place (Frydenberg).
Some studies of resiliency have followed children from infancy through adolescence (Werner & Smith, 1982; Block, 1981; Block & Block, 1980; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976, as cited in Joseph, 1994). There have been studies of minority children who succeeded in school (Clark, 1983; Garmezy, 1983, as cited in Joseph, 1994) and studies of traits of resilient children from dysfunctional families (Anthony, 1974, as cited in Joseph). Resilient survivors of wars and concentration camps have also been studied (Moskovitz, 1983, as cited in Joseph).

**Resiliency Enhancers**

Research has shown that protective conditions, skills, and attitudes can enhance resiliency in adults and children (Kimchi & Schaffner, 1991, as cited in Joseph, 1994). Providing people with positive feedback about their natural skills and talents, as well as opportunities to develop them, have been found to be resiliency enhancers (Kimchi & Schaffner, 1991 cited in Joseph). Helping children develop stress-buffers through interests and hobbies allows children to develop a sense of balance between work and play. Helping a child develop positive social skills and a sense of purpose beyond themselves and immediate negative conditions is another resiliency enhancer. Encouraging children to initiate ideas, take charge of situations, and seek solutions fosters responsibility and accountability. Essential to becoming a psychologically resilient adult is an ability to access a wide variety of coping strategies to effectively manage stressors. Joseph stated the "single most important defense against stress [is] cognitive flexibility" (p. 37). This ability to see a problem from many perspectives enables creative problem solving. Another resiliency enhancer is teaching children to set, and stick with, realistic
goals. Qualities of persistence, tolerance, and the ability to ask for help build resiliency. Developing a meaningful philosophy to live by and encouraging an understanding of how to be a contributing member of a community are also resiliency enhancers. Fostering attitudes of excellence and an ability to push beyond personal limits can also enhance a resilient mindset. Becoming skilled at adapting to change through parentally imposed, but innocuous, changes in routine allows development of mental and emotional flexibility. Growing up within a structured environment and sharing experiences with nurturing and consistent adults who are good multigenerational role models provides children with opportunities to gain a sense of control within a challenging environment (Kimchi & Schaffner, 1991, as cited in Joseph).

*Self support.* Another area of research that links to resiliency research is the work done on factors leading to success (Bandura, 1977; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Kerr, 1985; McGinty, 1999). McGinty refers to past researchers to back up the claim that the young women in her study were affected by their life stressors, but their choices about what they did about the circumstances made them successful. The concept of self-as-agent, meaning the self is active in constructing one’s successes and failures, is identified as a major factor leading to success. The work of the authors cited above emphasizes the importance of attitudes and dispositions in achieving success (McGinty).

*Family and peer influences.* A second factor leading to success in school is family influences (Sorenson, 1993). Compas and Wagner (1991) found significant links between psychological symptoms in boys to both parents, but from girls only to their mothers. Other studies suggested that family relationships were not as stressful and
conflict ridden as once thought (Offer, Ostrov & Howard, 1981; Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987). In the intervening years since Compas and Wagner’s study, more research has been done investigating psychosocial stress as an interpersonal process. Some of the research found that parenting styles, socioeconomic status, the possession of cultural capital, and class lifestyles all influenced success at school. Much of an adolescent’s day is spent with peers in a school setting and, in that environment, peers play a very important role. Cohen (1996, cited in McGinty, 1999) found that for girls in particular, strategies for success included voicing their views freely and openly, being compliant and “doing school” (Pope, 2001) by meeting teachers’ expectations, and crossing borders or acting as a go-between for different cultural groups or between teachers and students. Students who experience success and acceptance tend to become more confident and more resilient.

External support: The community. Several research studies in McGinty’s book (1999) discussed the positive and negative effects of the school environment (Bernard 1991; Davies, 1983; Dweck, 1975; Weis, 1985; Willis, 1990, as cited in McGinty). Some studies found schools help children to establish communicative relationships. Caring environments found outside the home can provide a protective shield from stressors. Teachers’ interventions were found to be an important factor in how youth perceived themselves. Teachers’ comments could either lead to the youth developing a more resilient attitude or be debilitating to the child’s resilience. A positive school environment is a factor contributing to success in school. Garmezy and Rutter (1983, as cited in McGinty) reinforced the idea that personal attributes, environmental factors, and
external support systems aid in the development of resiliency in children and adults.

Summary of Resiliency Research

This review of the protective factor research illustrates that there are some researchers who believe that youth are affected by important life events in different ways. Some youth perceive changes as stressful. Some youth perceive changes as adventures or challenges. Some studies report large proportions of people between 12 and 18 are coping well with the physiological, psychological, and social changes they encounter (Bush & Simmons, 1987). Proponents of the positive psychology movement, championed by Seligman (1992, 1995), focus their research on ways to encourage and develop resilient qualities in children and adolescents rather than study the maladaptive effects of stress and coping. The present study aims to explore some highly able and gifted adolescents’ personal stories about stress and coping, and may shed light on whether they have resilient qualities and positive coping strategies.

Developing the Potential of Gifted Individuals

It is my opinion that research findings should ultimately find their way into the hands of educational practitioners. It would be my hope that my research may lead to other research into the benefits of adolescents becoming more aware of their personal stressors by talking and writing about stress and coping. The next section reviews past research about intervention strategies that have been used with adolescents.

Intervention Strategies

Some past studies focussed on intervention strategies to help female adolescents cope. Some ways to facilitate development of gifted girls' potential (Silverman, 1991)
include parent education, early identification of giftedness, association with gifted peers, early school entrance, more teacher in-service training, special programs to foster female academic needs and learning styles, career counselling, and conferences for gifted girls. Hollinger (1991) and Phelps (1991) focussed their research on the career development of gifted young women, identity formation, and career counselling. Hollinger and Phelps found some of the barriers to women realizing their potential in the late 20th century are similar to those in existence in the 1970s. The difference for researchers today is that we have more knowledge and understanding of giftedness than in the 1970s. Use of a broader definition of intelligence and giftedness (Gardner, 1983, 1999; Winner, 1996) should facilitate growth of new research and educational perspectives about achievement and potential for adolescents along with ideas for intervention strategies for coping with stress. Few past studies were found that focussed on developing the potential of male gifted adolescents.

Researchers looking at interventions that have been developed to specifically help adolescents deal with stress have suggested that therapists and educators working with adolescents to enhance coping skills need to be flexible in their approaches, innovative, and willing to be faced with walls of distrust. As researcher inquiring about personal experiences with a potentially sensitive topic, I formulated my questions carefully and drew on my experience as an educator working with this age group.

Since a chronic inability to cope is a high predictor of adolescent suicide attempts (Wodarski & Harris, 1985), enhancing coping skills is one way of reducing the risk that youth will consider suicide as a solution to their stressful lives. However, improving self-
esteem without changing negative thinking is not enough (Seligman, 1992). Cognitive therapy can help to change one's outlook from pessimism to optimism (Jaycox, Reivich, Gillham & Seligman, 1994). Resiliency can be promoted when individuals are allowed to experience stress and learn ways to build up adaptive qualities, self-confidence, and competence over time (Seligman, 1992, 1995).

Intermediate Strategic Intervention (ISI) is one technique in which gifted girls counsel other gifted girls who are in crisis. Gifted students are able to learn psychological concepts and techniques at a very young age (Strip & Swassing, 1991). Using the talents of gifted females to understand others' ways of thinking and feeling seems to have been put to good use in this technique.

Harnessing the cognitive potential of gifted adolescents may provide a therapeutic tool useful in any intervention strategies designed to help them cope with stress. Gifted students need settings for peer discussions about coping strategies, and situations must be designed to meet the intellectual challenge levels needed by these individuals (Glasser, 1975; Thoits, 1986). I hope that by introducing participants in my study to their personal Adolescent Coping Scale profile and engaging them in discussion and personal writing, they may harness some of their own cognitive abilities as they encounter new stressors in their lives.

Some adolescents do cope effectively (Groer, Thomas & Shoffner, 1992; Parsons, Frydenberg & Poole, 1996) but there are others who are not coping (Farrell, 1989). The ability to cope entails being able to be self-aware, being motivated to change, and having a set of skills. An educational setting could provide a safe environment in which to
design and teach such skills. The teaching tool commonly referred to as scaffolding, or building on what is known and moving to what is unknown, could be used when implementing certain intervention programs (Weissberg, Caplan & Sivo, 1989).

Activities such as reading literature on affective education, engaging in self-reflection and journaling, and using the Adolescent Coping Scale as a tool to facilitate self-analysis could be useful.

Goleman's (1995) concepts about emotional intelligence and emotional literacy which include self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal, self-motivation, empathy, and social expressiveness could provide the basis for designing group activities in which adolescents could explore their understandings of stress and coping strategies. Empowering students by teaching them the value of humour and laughter is also possible (Frydenberg, 1997). Seligman's work on optimism could also be tapped for ideas to incorporate into activities (Seligman, 1995). Metaphor has always played a role in the ability of humans to achieve insights into human thought and behaviour (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Leary, 1990). Teaching adolescents how to use metaphor effectively through writing, drama, and visual art could be another mechanism for self-exploration and growth. The use of psychodrama (Moreno, 1975; Starr, 1977; Taylor, 1984), play therapy (Axeline, 1974), music therapy, and meditation techniques might also be utilized to develop psychosocial competence. A holistic approach is needed. Reducing negative emotions caused by stress can allow rational and creative thinking to take place. It is necessary for young people to develop skills to classify and identify personal physiological and psychological stressors, to assess the warning signs of stress, formulate
strategies, monitor, clarify, and reflect on strategies that are necessary (Cross, Coleman & Terharr-Yonkers, 1991).

The Improving Social Awareness-Social Problem Solving (ISA-SPS) was a 10-year study focussed on coping with stress-related transitions from elementary to middle school (Elias et al., 1986). The goal of the study was to equip children with a set of cognitive and behavioural coping skills as they entered middle school. Family, school, and peers were the interactive support network. Skills for self-control, group participation, and social awareness were taught to the students in the school setting. Significant differentiations could be made between students receiving partial or full-level skill building and those who received none (Elias et al.). Stress management, stress reduction, and stress relief procedures were all seen as viable interventions. Successful interventions had a multi-level focus, long-term goals, and followed an action research model that had clear lines of communication amongst all participants.

Elias (1991) and Gottlieb (1991) suggested that prevention and intervention strategies should be based on two concepts. The first concept is that adolescents can learn how to use their social support networks to help them cope. The second concept is that decision-making or problem-solving skills can be developed in adolescents as tools to reduce exposure and vulnerability to stress. Gottlieb and Elias suggested that stressors, coping resources, and health outcomes are all developmentally mediated. Hence, a multidisciplinary approach to interventions and research is needed.

Gottlieb (1991) discussed how to build social support networks for adolescents. Adolescents need to be embedded in supportive relationships by asking them directly
what kinds of supports they feel they need. Gottlieb showed that adolescents viewed support as coming from intimacy and close relationships, as well as from the larger social world in the form of affirmations and stability.

Bibliotherapy, the use of literature to teach social skills and emotional awareness, is one technique (Pardeck, 1994) that has been used to help adolescents cope with life changes such as family breakdown, foster care and adoption. Some of the intervention strategies reported in the literature include the use of stories and life narratives (Biever & McKenzie, 1995). Meanings develop when teens listen to and share their stories. Sometimes the walls preventing communication and healing come down.

Social-skills training and Structured Learning Therapy have been used to develop social competencies, self-evaluation skills, and affective expression in teenagers (Reed, 1994). Reed's study found treatment effectiveness differed with gender. Another study looked at the effects of two types of relaxation training on levels of anxiety in high school students (Rasid, 1998).

Australian researchers have been implementing intervention strategies not only with at-risk children but also with all youth (Frydenberg et al., 2003). Examples of such interventions include: The Year 7 students psychoeducational depression prevention program (Rice et al., 1993, cited in Frydenberg et al.); RAP: the resourceful adolescent project, a cognitive behavioural approach aimed at preventing depression disorders (Schochet & Osgarby, 1999, as cited in Frydenberg et al.) The Bright Ideas program, a cognitive behavioural program for 11-12 year olds (Brandon et al., 1999, as cited in Frydenberg et al.) and Best of Coping, a program for the regular population as well as
adolescents at risk (Frydenberg & Brandon, 2002, as cited in Frydenberg et al.).

The ultimate goal of research and intervention strategies, from my perspective as an educator, should be to promote the well-being of the participants. I was curious to see whether the act of personal writing in concert with analysis and discussion of the Adolescent Coping Scale personal profiles during interviews would prove to be a form of stress and coping intervention that leads to positive self-talk and increased self-awareness on the part of the participants in my study.

I believe that writing and talking are positive ways to encourage emotional well-being in adolescents. Empowering students to take control and assume responsibility for their own learning and personal growth is an essential part of an educator’s job. Adolescents need time to both write and talk about their emotional worlds.

*Implications of Interventions: Empowerment*

The topic of empowerment of female students is one that has been investigated by several people. Presented here is a synthesis of many of the ideas. Some of these could be adapted to apply to both genders (Silverman, 1991, 1993).

Girls especially need to be guided to understand the value of solitary time so that they can experience freedom from negative stereotypes that are strong in adolescent peer groups. This allows time for focussing inward on their dreams and aspirations. Reflection on the lives of eminent women and those in their own families can be a useful process. They should be encouraged to immerse themselves voraciously in reading, for the voices of authors can be very powerful to young women. Reading also provides an escape from tension. These girls need to be reassured that it is acceptable to feel different. The bright
and gifted are intellectually in the top 3-5% of a population but find themselves in a school system that is designed primarily for the other 95%. It is important for them to receive small-group or individualized instruction in their areas of interest, especially extracurricularly. Co-operative learning situations as opposed to competitive ones are often better for girls’ learning styles. Single-gender classes in subjects that are traditionally male dominated may enable their levels of confidence to improve by developing a sense of a collective identity. Their innate sense of caring for others should be stimulated and challenged by creating situations where they can identify with oppressed or afflicted people. Girls need to learn to identify themselves as young women who are passionate about ideas, who are committed to a set of beliefs, and who can deny the typical gender-based limitations that a society or culture tries to impose on them. They need to acquire knowledge about power, sources of information, skills for controlling information, and skills of inference to help them challenge fate (Nyberg, 1981). By their example, strong women can be mentors to younger women by showing a dedication to the roles they have chosen and that integration of several roles is possible if that is what is chosen. Girls can then see that independence, resilience, risk-taking, and creative behaviours are part of the solution to dealing with stress.

Compared to adolescent females, researchers have not investigated empowerment strategies for males. Recently, Pollack (2000) wrote about three culturally embedded myths about boyhood. The first myth he dispels is that boys will be boys. Pollack says people “assume they have less power to affect a boy’s personality, behaviour or emotional development than in fact they do” (p. 53). Studies have refuted the misconceptions about
testosterone being the cause of violent and aggressive behaviour in males. This hormone leads to a proclivity for action, and by using creative parenting and teaching techniques, Pollack advocates that boys have a deep yearning for emotional connection and that "early emotional interaction can actually alter a boy's brain-based biological processes." (p. 56)

The second myth is that boys should be boys. The "Boy Code" (Pollack, 2000, p. 58), based on a very North American male stereotype, tells boys to be tough, demand respect, and never "act like a girl" (p. 58). Through shaming and humiliation tactics, and what Pollack refers to as hardening tactics, some members of our society encourage the upholding of the Boy Code. Thus, boys are often not allowed or shown safe places to voice such things as pain, grief, embarrassment, or feelings. Their "voices no longer fully connect with their emotional selves" (p. 59).

The third myth that exists is that boys are toxic, and are viewed as "psychologically unaware" and "emotionally unsocialized creatures" (p. 62). There is a double standard, in Pollack's view, that is not challenged by parents or teachers. He sees this as a societal backlash against males.

Pollack states that the image of a well-adjusted male should encompass such qualities as self-confidence, exuberance, an action-orientation, flexibility of personality, a positive attitude towards females, and an ability to connect with females. One way to empower males to outdistance these myths is to provide them with experiences that will encourage empathic behaviours towards themselves and others.

Pollack says that the natural inclinations of boys to be physically active can be channelled into appropriate and healthy outlets. Pollack advocates that boys have a deep yearning for emotional connection and that "early emotional interaction can actually alter a boy's brain-based biological processes." (p. 56).
The Present Study

As outlined above, over the years since Terman's (1925) and Hollingworth's (1926) seminal studies on gifted individuals, gifted children's academic needs have been widely researched. Institutionalized gifted programming and enrichment options have been designed, modified, and offered with varying degrees of success. Sometimes, gifted individuals' psychological and emotional needs have been ignored, dismissed, misinterpreted, or just not heard by well-meaning educators, parents, and psychological theorists, some of whom believe that to be gifted means guaranteed survival within the school system. My experiences as an educator and as a parent tell me that this myth of survival is not always true.

One main purpose of my narrative research was to collect and share the stories of gifted adolescents so that their voices can be heard. The second purpose was to help promote the participants' emotional self-awareness, as well as recognition of the importance of self-awareness in adolescents for other readers who work with youth. Through the process of participating in an interview, completing a writing task, completing the Adolescent Coping Scale, and discussing their personal coping profiles, the participants were exposed to some of the tools of self-reflection. It is my hope that this will strengthen adolescents' self-empowerment, which may help them to deal with stress as they traverse their adolescent years. Frydenberg (2004) showed that students' self-awareness could be raised by exploring personal coping profiles as generated by use of the Adolescent Coping Scale. By completing the Adolescent Coping Scale and reviewing their profile charts, individuals have the choice to think about and perhaps
compare what they say they are doing to cope with what they actually do; they have the opportunity to change coping strategies that are not effective, or try out new strategies. Frydenberg stated that it is important for adolescents to develop the ability to reflect on a stressful situation, and then assess or develop the appropriate responses to stressful or conflict-ridden situations. Adolescents need to be shown strategies to deal with the stressful world in which we live.

In summary, the main research questions that guide this study are: How do highly able and gifted adolescents attending two Canadian independent schools experience stress? What do adolescents perceive and experience as stressors within their academic, personal, social, and familial settings? How do adolescents employ strategies to cope when experiencing stress? Given a creative writing/art task as an alternative way of communicating their ideas about stress and coping, how do highly able and gifted adolescents choose to express themselves? Are there common themes of stressors and coping strategies amongst highly able and gifted adolescents?
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the methodology and procedures used in this study. I explain my epistemological stance through an artistry metaphor. I describe both research sites and explain the process for selection of participants. I outline and explain the research methodology, strategy of inquiry, and three modes of data collection. I describe how the data were analysed. I elaborate on the methodological assumptions alluded to in Chapter One and discuss in greater detail the limitations of this study. I summarize techniques used to establish credibility and the ethical considerations for this study.

My Epistemological Stance: The Gallery Metaphor

The preparation an artist undertakes before beginning the messiness of creating a work of art is a necessary first step in a long process. This chapter outlines the methodology for this study. To continue my artist metaphor, each individual's narrative in this multiple case study is considered as a separate canvas that requires preparation and on which the participant's story will be represented. When assembled, the word-paintings will be displayed as a gallery collection circling around the theme experiences of gifted adolescents as seen through my understanding and interpretation. Just as an artist or a curator who is assembling paintings for a gallery showing will choose a certain frame for a particular work of art, the frames for the participants' stories have been chosen by me as the researcher. My biases and inclinations are reflected in those choices. Others who read and view this collection of narratives will, no doubt, see the word-paintings differently through their own lenses of experience and research. They may perceive different aspects of the stories that need to be highlighted, and hence prefer to frame the narratives in alternative ways. It is hoped that they will still gain insight into the adolescents' stories.
Description of Research Methodology

This section includes a description of the research sites and how the participants were selected.

Research Sites

The research sites were two independent private schools in southern Ontario. School A is a coeducational independent school that had a student population of approximately 675 from grades 7 to 12 when the study was conducted. Students come from 26 different countries. Students live off campus in their own family homes or on campus in residence. All students are required to live on campus for their grade 12 year. The school is nondenominational, however a daily chapel service is held. The school is in a residential area of a southern Ontario town (population 155,700). It is within a short bus ride of the downtown commercial area. The school has a staff of 90 and offers a complete, well-balanced curriculum based on the Ontario Ministry of Education standards. The staff to student ratio is 1:7.

School B is also an independent coeducational school that had a student population of approximately 185 from preschool to grade 12 when this study was conducted. Almost half of the students are international students from Korea, China, Mexico, Africa, and the Caribbean. Students may live off campus in their own family homes, be billeted in home-stays, live in miniresidences that are small apartments in multiplex houses owned or rented by the school, or in rented rooms in a nearby university residence. There are city and school-operated shuttle bus services to the university residence. The school is in the downtown core of a southern Ontario city (population 433,000). The school has an academic staff of 15 with two administrators and an
executive director. It offers most of the courses based on the Ontario Ministry of Education standards. There is not a physical education program for grades 7 through 12; however extracurricular programs in dance and sports are offered by some staff. This school also offers five courses called World Citizenship, one for each year from grades 7 through 12. The school bases its philosophy around developing 19 moral leadership capabilities in their students. The staff to student ratio is 1:12.

Selection of Participants

Upon ethics clearance from Brock University (Appendix A), and requesting and receiving ethics clearance from each school’s respective principal or research ethics board, I arranged, at each research site, a meeting between myself as researcher and the school’s administrators or their designate to explain the research and to field any questions or concerns. The liaison contact person was the Head of Guidance at one site and the Head of Student Services at the second site. These liaison contact people, who were also teachers, had access to the personal files and Ontario Student Records (OSRs) of their students. Guidelines given to these liaison people by me were that, ideally, the participants had to have been identified as intellectually gifted within the province of Ontario by their IPRC (In-school Identification and Placement Committee), IEP (Individual Education Plan; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001, 2004) designation, by a registered psychologist’s report identifying them as gifted, or in some cases identified as highly able by the teachers and administrators at the school. Due to privacy laws preventing me from accessing these legal documents, I had to rely on and trust the knowledgeable advice of the teacher-administrators at their respective schools to aid with the final screening of potential participants.
To establish a pool of potential participants from which these teacher-administrators could choose, I distributed information letters to all the students and their parents or guardians in grades 7 – 12 in both schools. This was determined, after consultation with the administrators at both schools, to be the least intrusive and most effective way of soliciting a pool of potential participants. At both schools, the administrators wanted to avoid singling out individual highly able and gifted students in a large group setting at this phase of the selection process. The information letter outlined the goals and objectives of the research, explained how the research would be undertaken, and invited participation from the students, with parental or legal guardian permission. Participants who were 18 years of age did not require parental permission to sign the consent form. A 2-week time period was given for people to respond indicating their interest in participating by completing consent forms. At both sites, this timeline needed to be extended by another 2 weeks due to some senior students being out of the country on school trips or due to school and religious holidays and also a general lack of sufficient response initially at both schools. The liaison contact person at each site then voluntarily screened the responses and narrowed down the selection to those students deemed highly able or gifted.

The sample group was thus relatively homogeneous with respect to the fact that participants had to be already identified as highly able by the teacher-administrator who was my contact person at the site or intellectually gifted within the province of Ontario by their IPRC (In-school Identification and Placement Committee) and IEP (Individual Education Plan) designation, or by a registered psychologist’s report identifying them as intellectually gifted. I also specified that I wanted the group to be as diverse as possible
with respect to ethnicity, cultural background, types of stressors experienced, and age and
gender, within the age parameters of adolescence.

Once this process of receiving potential applicants for participation in the research
had been completed, I met again with the teacher-administrator at each school and
consulted about each of the chosen participants. They briefed me about each candidate,
and once I was satisfied that the criteria had been met, I finalized the sample group’s
composition. Ten participants were selected, 5 males and 5 females ranging in age from
13-18 years. One female chose not to participate, reducing the sample to 9 participants.
The group was comprised of two 13-year-olds (1 male, 1 female), two 16-year-olds (1
male, 1 female), three 17-year-olds (all male), and two 18-year-olds (both female). Based
on the teacher-administrators knowledgeable choices, the participants represented North
American and European Caucasian, Haitian French Canadian, African Canadian,
Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultural backgrounds.

*Initial Group Meeting with the Participants*

At each site I arranged a group meeting with the participants, held in a classroom
at the school immediately after school hours, to further explain the research study, answer
any questions, arrange for individual interview times, and get an email contact address if
the participant wished to give one. They all did. At this meeting the participants were also
assigned six-digit identification numbers. The identification number included a gender
and site code along with a unique participant code number. Participants then spent about
10-15 minutes completing the Adolescent Coping Survey (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993),
which I collected. Later the same day I scored and graphed each participant’s individual
ACS profile. At one research site 3 participants completed the ACS on the same day as
their interviews since they could not attend a group session all together due to other activities. My observations of the participants during this initial group meeting at each school were recorded as written field notes in my logbook both at the research site and immediately in the hours afterward.

Overview of Research Design and Strategy of Inquiry

This research study adopted a narrative analytical approach and followed a multiple case study design (Creswell, 2002). Data were collected using three methods. As mentioned above, a self-report survey instrument, the Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS, Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) was completed by each participant. The ACS is available for purchase through the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2004) after one has met certain educational and professional standards and submitted proof of these qualifications to ACER. A copy of my certification is appended to this thesis (Appendix B). The ACS instrument assesses the degree of usage of a broad range of 80 coping strategies. It lists some coping behaviours that might not spontaneously come to mind for participants and can be used for initiating self-directed behavioural change and to stimulate group discussion. It is with this last use in mind that I chose the ACS as one tool for tapping into the experiences of highly able and gifted adolescents. As mentioned above, the long form of the Adolescent Coping Scale was administered in a classroom setting at the initial meeting with the participants, after regular school hours. Each participant’s responses were hand-scored and profiles graphed by me later on the same day.

Individual audiotaped interviews were then conducted with all the participants. At the beginning of each individual’s interview session, I reviewed with each participant
their consent forms and the purpose of the study, and I gave them some background information about myself as the researcher. I answered any further questions they had. The audiotaped interview was then conducted using a few leading questions followed with probe questions to elicit individual stories of stress and coping (Appendix C). The interview lasted from 60-90 minutes, depending upon how talkative the participant was. The personal coping profile graphically showing the participant’s responses to the Adolescent Coping Scale was shared and discussed at the end of the face-to-face audiotaped interview.

The third data source was a writing or art task. Each participant was asked to document in a one to two page written or graphical form their personal experiences with stress and their coping strategies. Participants were asked to focus on what causes stress for them personally, what strategies work or don’t work for them, and to try to portray why (Appendix D). Initially, I intended for the writing or art task to be completed immediately after the interview. All of the participants asked to be able to take this task home with them and complete it on their own time, which I allowed them to do. Seven of the 9 participants returned their writing task to me.

**Detailed Description of Data Collection Methods**

In this study three methods of data collection were used. These are described in the next section.

*Description of Instrumentation: The Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS).* The ACS is a psychometric assessment instrument that was field-tested with several thousand adolescents in grades 7-12 over a 6-year period, with Australian and international exposure. The Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) is a self-report
inventory that assesses 18 conceptually and empirically distinct coping strategies. The General Form addresses how individuals cope with concerns in a general context way. The Specific Form is used to measure responses to self-nominated or administrator-nominated concerns. I chose to use the General Form, which took about 10-15 minutes to complete. The 18 conceptual strategies for coping were based on "descriptions of 2014 coping behaviours, collected from Australian youth (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002, p. 423). The ACS was designed so that the items were generated using the language and vocabulary of adolescents. The long form has 80 items, each with 3-5 items, and 18 conceptually and empirically distinct coping scales. These 18 scales are: seeking social support, focus on solving the problem, work hard and achieve, worry, investing in close friends, seek to belong, wishful thinking, not coping, tension reduction, social action, ignore the problem, self-blame, keep to self, seek spiritual support, focus on the positive, seek professional help, seek relaxing diversions, and physical recreation. The final item asks students to write down anything else they do for coping that is not listed in the previous items.

Analysis of the statistical properties of the 1993 version of the Adolescent Coping Scale was reported in the administration manual by Frydenberg and Lewis (1993). The long form (General Form) was administered to 673 secondary school students drawn from five post-primary state schools in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. The schools represented a broad spectrum of the educational community in both inner urban and outer metropolitan areas. Item reliability was tested with two-thirds of the total grade 7 sample. The ACS was administered on two occasions, 14 days apart. On the General Form, which I used, eleven items (9, 15, 26, 35, 43, 52, 55, 65, and 78) were not significantly
correlated. “All of these items, however, were responded to by more than 70 per cent of the students within one point of measurement on the two testing occasions; they therefore satisfied the criteria for response stability” (p. 33). Item validity, or the extent to which the items in the questionnaire satisfactorily assessed the 18 related but distinct coping strategies, was tested with factor analysis. An oblique procedure was used since it was assumed that the scales would not be entirely orthogonal or independent. It was hypothesized that coping strategies were unlikely to be totally unrelated. Factor analysis was done using the short form (Specific Form) because it was considered that coping responses associated with a specific problem were more likely to demonstrate separate, conceptually interpretable scales than students’ more general responses. It was considered that the General Form responses would generate more confounded patterns. The analysis was done in three stages because it was not feasible to investigate an 18 factor solution in one step. The findings in the first two analyses showed clear differentiation between 12 particular constructs which the items were designed to measure. The third analysis showed that four of the six groups of items were conceptually distinct, but the items measuring Focus on Solving the Problem and Work Hard and Achieve appeared to be confounded. This was explained by the fact that the questionnaire was given during school hours, and it was possible that the students were focussed on the concern of school work. Additional analysis was done using the General Form, and these same two strategies clearly loaded on separate factors. Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) reported that the 18 scales have construct validity. All scales have approximately normal distributions covering the range of raw scores. Internal consistency was somewhat lower on the General Form but this was to be expected. The test-retest reliability correlations were
moderate, however stability of response was not considered to be an entirely appropriate way to assess the dynamic phenomenon of coping. The scales on the General Form were found to be sufficiently distinct. Frydenberg and Lewis stated in the manual that research is continuing on the ways in which coping patterns are modified to deal with different concerns of a specific nature such as achievement, relationships, and social issues. In summary, the authors reported that all scales are reliable, with alpha levels of 0.62 to 0.87 on the Specific Form ACS and from 0.54 to 0.84 on the General Form. The median of the alphas on all scales is 0.70 (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002). “The stability of responses as measured by test retest reliability coefficients range from .44 to .81 and are in general moderate, but nevertheless satisfactory given the dynamic nature of coping” (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993, cited in Lewis & Frydenberg, p. 423).

The ACS is hand-scored, and a profile chart is completed to provide feedback to the participant and provide a stimulus for thinking about behaviour. As mentioned, I used the long form in my research to provide in-depth participant profiles. The ACS claims to identify more coping strategies than other instruments. Individual or group profiles can be developed and used as part of clinical interventions to stimulate thinking and discussion and to help improve coping skills (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002). Each participant completed the long form of the ACS either during the initial group meeting or individually before the interviews.

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The Interview. All of the interviews took place in the school in empty classrooms between 3:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. Participants chose the interview time to fit with their schedules. The school administrator assigned the room location. The interview was recorded on audiotape and labelled with the participant’s numeric code number. Interviews were audiotaped on a hand-held Sony Clear Voice recording device with a built-in microphone. The leading questions for these interviews were "What are the stressful issues you face right now?" and "How do you see yourself dealing with them?" I recorded my observational field notes about the participants' nonverbal behaviours, such
as emotions and body language indicative of anxiety, fear, happiness, surprise, anger, sadness, and boredom, during and immediately after the interview session.

Near the end of this interview the personal profile of responses to the ACS was discussed with the participant as a way to elicit reflective discussion about stress and coping on the part of the participant. This was also captured on audiotape. After the interview, I transcribed the entire conversation as soon as possible. The transcription was then sent by email to the participant for member-checking, so that the participant had an opportunity to read and edit the transcribed interview before coding and thematic analysis took place. Each participant read, authorized, and sent back unchanged transcripts.

The Writing or Art Task. The third method of data collection was an open-ended task at the end of the interview session, during which each participant was allowed to choose from a variety of types of blank paper and writing materials and was asked to write or create a piece of artwork to represent their experiences with stress and coping. These tasks were identified by the numeric code number that matched with the code number used on the participant’s ACS profile. All the participants requested more time to write and create the artwork, and they all arranged to complete this task on their own time. Some emailed me the work, and some left it at their school for me to pick up in person. I told the participants that it was my intent that the original copies of the writing or art task would be photocopied or digitally photographed so as not to damage the originals. One piece of original artwork was given to me to keep, and I took a digital photograph of it. The other two pieces of art were sent electronically. Most completed the writing or art task within a few weeks of the interview. Two participants chose to not submit anything.
The journal or diary is a source of data that often reveals information not usually obtained in an interview format (McGinty, 1999). For this research, I originally thought all the participants would write a journal type of entry; however, I allowed participants to use personal writing, graphics, drawing, and computer artwork because they each asked if they could use a variety of media to complete the task. I agreed to be open to anything they wanted to try because I was interested in obtaining authentic representation of self-expression. Each piece of artwork was accompanied by a brief explanation by the creator.

*Recording My Experiences and Journey through the Research Process.* Along with the ACS profiles, the audiotapes of the interviews, and the subsequent transcripts, I recorded daily events and observations using a field logbook, and I maintained a personal journal. Excerpts from this personal journal have been used to weave my reflective pieces of story writing into the text of the participants’ narratives. As themes began to emerge from the data and from my own reading and writing, I tracked these ideas in the field logbook. I organized these ideas as jot notes and mindmaps to be developed into narrative later. I maintained a file of related media articles. I used a filing card system for recording important quotes and the sources thereof.

*Data Processing and Analysis: Thematic Coding.* I searched for ideas and the coloured threads of stories in this research in much the same way as I search for themes when I paint or weave or write a song. For example in painting, the paint, water, and the quality of paper have some say in determining what an impressionistic style of watercolour painting will look like. The thread of time is also an element of great importance when creating a work of art. In watercolour painting, the fluidity of water
moves the pigment on the paper, but various pigments have different qualities and react with water in different ways and at different rates of speed. In my research, I had an impression of what I was looking for and what I might hope to find, but the participants' stories wove a texture and pattern of their own as they emerged over time through my listening again to the tapes, their dialogue, and my own experiences with journaling. Thematic analysis of the participants' stories has been presented on an individual basis. My task as a qualitative researcher was to integrate parts of their unique stories, experiences, and perceptions into a richly textured and colourful piece of writing, a narrative painting or tapestry to enrich the body of literature about adolescents and stress. This was challenging. As McGinty (1999) states "it is easier to document student's progress in school, changes in behaviour, or other factors influencing teenage development than it is to document what they call the 'subjective' experiences of the adolescent" (p.150).

Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) echo this sentiment. The fluidity of adolescence allows freedom to alter the course of life, but it does make the job of social scientists a great deal harder. Psychologists like to be able to explain what people have done and to predict what they will be doing. Confronted with the provocative contradictions of this age, they are likely to be frustrated. (p. xiii)

This fluidity, though, is what excites me about the adolescent age group. The "provocative contradictions," like water, cannot always be controlled and precisely measured. In spite of the challenges, the unpredictability and the provocative nature of adolescents still appeal to me as a creative artist working as researcher.
The research has taken form as an analytical narrative, a word painting of my impressions of what I have seen and heard from the participants. I think that people tend to see their lives as narratives and will share their human experiences and emotions in their stories. Bateson (1994, as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) said we think in metaphors and learn through stories. Stories are also powerful tools for moral development and can provide a link between the morals of honesty, self-control, and altruism, and resiliency traits such as commitment, responsibility, and a positive orientation (Joseph, 1994). I hope that perhaps these adolescent storytellers have provided links for some readers between the research on stress and coping and the research into protective factors and resiliency.

I did thematic coding of the transcripts, based on key-word or key-phrase analysis, manually. Each transcript was read and reread several times, and I highlighted in two colours, one for stress-related comments and one for coping-related comments. Then for each of these two categories (stress and coping), I chose the theme words for each topic that was mentioned by the participant and listed them on a separate sheet of paper. From there, I grouped the ideas into more generalized categories for each participant. Then I looked at all the participants and made an overall list of common themes. The three pieces of artwork proved more difficult to analyze than the four written submissions, although the participants had included their own brief commentaries about what their work meant to them. My own interpretations were just that however.

The themes that emerged from the data sources were reconstructed into nine narratives to highlight participants’ unique individual stories. A summary of the overall themes of stress and coping from all participants was then collated. The three data sources
and the emergent themes are analogous to the elements and principles of design. They are the basic components from which the word-paintings were crafted. The gallery of word-paintings developed with distinctly different themes, but with common threads that interweave across several stories. Just as a watercolourist allows some freedom of expression to the water and the pigment, so too did I as a qualitative researcher, have to allow changes and serendipitous events to shape the final work. The story paintings are presented here as personal profiles using pseudonyms (Pope, 2001).

Methodological Assumptions

While conducting this research I assumed that teenaged participants would be interested in exploring their own coping strategies by completing the Adolescent Coping Scale and learning about their personal coping profile. Another assumption was that the participants would be forthcoming and honest in sharing their experiences with stress during an audiotaped interview and that they would welcome a chance to read the transcript of their interview and make any changes they felt were needed. I assumed that the participants would have advanced facility with oral and written English language. As the researcher, I assumed my personal experiences teaching adolescents would aid me in developing a comfortable rapport with the participants during the interview process. Finally, I assumed that during the interview stage of the data collection the participants would all feel comfortable completing and sharing a writing task for me to analyze.

Establishing Credibility

Triangulation of Data

Three sources of data, the ACS profiles, audiotaped interviews, and the writing or art tasks, provided the triangulation (Creswell, 2002) needed for qualitative research.
Before conducting the research I anticipated that there might be similarities in what the participants said about their experiences with stress when the coping survey, interview, and writing task were compared. It was also possible however that the different types of data collection techniques would each reveal adolescents’ experiences with stress to a greater or lesser degree. My field notes and my research journal provided additional material for my personal narrative to be interwoven into the final paper.

**Thick Description**

By utilizing three different forms of data collection, I intended to create many potential layers of storying. Initially, the coping scale survey provided an entry point that was somewhat more objective and detached relative to the more personalized face-to-face interview or the sharing of artwork and personal writing. By asking participants to complete an open-ended creative task, the possibility for thick description of stress experiences that occur in many strands of an adolescent’s life was increased.

**Member Checks**

After the interviews had been audiotaped and transcribed, the participants had an opportunity to read their transcripts and edit what they said about their experiences with stress. It was made clear to participants that all requests for changes would be honoured. No one requested any changes.

**Peer Review**

As part of the drafting and editing of this research, I undertook a peer review process by giving individuals drafts of my research to read and comment upon. People involved in this process included educators, parents of gifted adolescents, and experienced researchers in the fields of education, psychology, and pure sciences
research. With respect to the coding and analysis phase of the research, I had professors on my thesis committee read drafts of my work and discuss feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Serendipitous conversations with gifted adolescents who were friends of my own teenagers and who had heard about my research corroborated and confirmed the need I saw for this type of study. They asked me very directly if they could take part. They were hungry to have their stories heard and told.

Ethical Considerations

The first ethical issue was confidentiality. By agreeing to participate in this study, individuals agreed to share their personal stories about experiences with stress and coping. Total confidentiality was not possible, as each participant’s narrative was woven into story format as part of the final written thesis; however, participants’ identities were maintained as confidential because they were assigned pseudonyms. I undertook to maintain as much confidentiality during the data collection phase as was possible, given that data collection took place in a school setting. I did not discuss personal information from interviews or writing tasks with school board administrators, colleagues, family members, or other school personnel. I did not encounter any situations that required me to fulfill my duty to report as required by Ontario law and the regulations of the teaching profession. There was a statement to this effect in the letter of consent so parents and legal guardians could acknowledge my legal obligations as a professional educator.

Anonymity for the participants was also an ethical concern, as it was not totally guaranteed. Only my advisor and I knew a numeric identification code for each participant. These codes were used on the ACS profile, the interview tape, the transcript,
and the writing task. These codes and the participants’ real names are being kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home office for a period of 3 years from the start of the research study. The original audiotapes, backup copies of tapes, transcripts of interviews, and photographs of the artwork are also being kept under the same conditions. I was the only person who did the transcribing of the audiotapes and thematic coding of the journal entries. My thesis advisor and committee members had access to read the transcripts and journal entries if deemed necessary. Participants were advised to not make copies of the transcripts during member checking. Student participants were counselled by me about the importance of anonymity and confidentiality.

Another ethical consideration was that the participants and their parents or guardians sign consent forms agreeing to participate in the study with no reimbursement of any kind and in full knowledge of the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty of any sort. Participants assented to participate verbally as well as with written consent. Participants granted permission during the interview and in follow-up contact by email to reproduce their artwork, poetry, and writing.

The academic progress, assessment, and promotion status of students participating in the study was not interfered with or compromised in any way. This was ensured by making interviews and consultations with the researcher take place at convenient times for the participants. The preferred time for interviews was during nonclassroom instructional time. All interviews took place on school property and with full knowledge of the school administrator.

Summary of Chapter

This study was designed to explore how highly able and gifted adolescents in two
southern Ontario urban independent schools experience stress and coping. Three types of data collection, the Adolescent Coping Survey, an audiotaped interview, and an open-ended writing or graphic representation task were used. This study looked for layers of information from which to recreate the narratives of gifted adolescents' experiences with stress and coping. The resulting word-paintings are presented as a gallery collection, highlighting both individual and collective experiences as personal stories profiling the highly able and gifted adolescents' journeys.
CHAPTER FOUR: LISTENING TO THE PARTICIPANTS' VOICES

This chapter describes the voices of the participants as I heard them express their stories of stress and coping. The participants' stories are organized, for simplicity's sake, chronologically by age and gender and without identification of the school attended in order to preserve the anonymity of research sites. Each participant's narrative is presented in five sections. The first section relates my initial impressions of the participant. It is included to give the reader a glimpse of how I perceived the participant before hearing their story. The second section is the participant’s story about stressful experiences. The third section is a reflection of the participant's thoughts about their coping strategies. The fourth section is a written summary of the participant's Adolescent Coping Scale profile. The fifth section is a summary of the participant's writing or art task. An overview of what the participants talked about is presented in the cross-case thematic summary of stressors (Tables 1-5) and the cross-case thematic summary of coping strategies (Table 6). This is elaborated upon in the remainder of the chapter.

Madison, 13-Year-Old Female

Madison was waiting for me outside the classroom we were to use for the interview, her private school uniform neatly pressed, skirt at regulation length, and blazer buttoned correctly. She was seated on her wheeled suitcase in the hallway, working on her laptop, her bass clarinet and books at her side. Madison’s one unique piece of adornment was a collection of red, white, and blue paperclips lined up neatly on the lapel of her blazer. When I commented on them she said it was the “in” thing in the United States to wear patriotic colours as a fashion statement.
Madison, a Caucasian born in North America, is the oldest child of three in her family and lives at home with both parents and a younger brother who is 9, and a 5-year-old sister. She referred several times to her younger siblings as sources of frustration for her. Madison had lived in many parts of the USA and Europe before coming to Canada. She talked a bit about what it was like to have to always make new friends each time the family moved.

As we set ourselves up to begin the interview I noted that she had just turned 13. As we tested the tape recorder with her voice she inadvertently revealed some personal information, her real name, and was visibly disturbed by this. I assured her it would not appear in the transcript, and she relaxed. Yet, as I began the conversation she responded to my questions a few times with “Well, what do you want to hear?” My response was that I wanted to hear her story about her experiences and that I had no preconceived expectations about what she might share with me.

Madison presented as a teenager who, once she was comfortable with the interview situation, became eager to participate and share her perceptions and experiences. She admitted being very aware of her need or desire to achieve high marks. She also pointed out to me that she has a “quirky sense of humour and often starts to giggle at what I call inside jokes” or, according to Madison, “things that are funny only to me inside my head.” I had already witnessed this during the first meeting with all the participants when she broke into giggles and I wasn’t sure why.

Madison talked about the stress of schoolwork, self-imposed expectations, and time constraints early in her interview. Outlined below is an illustrative example from our
interview to reflect Madison’s experiences at school, at home, and in her extracurricular activities.

My name is Madison, I am 13, and I want to be a child psychologist when I grow up. I love English class, and I have the lead in the school play this year. I am actively involved in my church group. I’m in grade 7, and this school is 10 times harder than my old school! But it’s fun, it’s good, and it’s definitely better for me than my old school. I’m really competitive, and I’m really hard on myself, so if I don’t do well then I’ll be really frustrated. I can get sidetracked really easily, which is so bad. Right now I’m not doing as well as I want to. I find French and Math to be the hardest subjects. There are a lot of assignments, but I guess I just try to go the extra mile or whatever they say and get a good grade. I try to do that on everything, and then I’ve got a time crunch. If you want to do well it requires a lot more thought than you would think at first. I don’t have enough time to get all my homework done, and with the play practices I often don’t get home until 6 at night. That gets annoying sometimes. On Wednesdays, when I have my church youth group, I have no time to do homework, and once I get home I have to go to bed. I’m a lot more worried about my school work, and I have higher standards for myself than a lot of other people do. So I guess the one thing that pushes me to the edge of feeling really frazzled is the time constraint of fitting everything into a day.

Dealing with change was an area Madison identified as stressful. Her comments about changes in her life illustrate another aspect of stress for her.
Changing schools was tough for me. I didn’t make the decision. My parents made it for me. When they suggested it initially, I thought why not, let’s go check it out. I didn’t know they were going to sign me up! I think teenagers as a whole get upset when parents make decisions for them. We’re at the age of independence, and we’re supposed to be able to make more decisions for ourselves, and when it would have a big impact on our lives, I think we’d like to have more say. I was kind of mad because I didn’t want to leave my old school and my friends. I was way stressed out, and I didn’t want to come to this school at all. I was really sad to say goodbye to friends. and I don’t really stay in touch with them now, except when I go to visit since my little sister and brother go to that school. It was hard at this school at first because everyone is older than I am.

I’ve also moved around a lot. I’ve moved seven times and lived in three countries in the last 4 years. It is hard to move and uproot yourself, go somewhere else, leave friends, make new friends, and leave them and make new friends again. I’m just really glad for email. I think the moving around a lot has made me a stronger person though, having to go through so many changes. We may move again next year, and my parents say we will stay put until I am finished high school. I’m not sure if I believe that, but time will tell. It can get boring if you stay somewhere forever.

Madison mentioned family stress and sibling issues as something that makes her feel angry.

My younger brother gets sick a lot. I get really mad because sometimes I think he
chooses what he can and can’t eat. For example he can eat Timbits, but he can’t eat crackers, so that kind of bugs me sometimes. When his stomach hurts and his medicine isn’t working, my mom gets stressed out too because she has to take time out of her day and the things that she is supposed to be doing in order to take him to the doctor. And then I have to go and get his homework for him. It’s a ripple effect.

Madison said teachers or peers have not really treated her differently because she is bright; however, she described an experience with being treated differently by a teacher because she was doing something unusual as “a very funny story” that she wanted to share. She then added a few anecdotes about peer pressure and how she deflects it.

My poor sixth grade teacher was very nice, caring, and matronly, but she thought I had a learning disability because I started writing backwards on the page. She called my mom and was very worried. My mom knew I could do this and wasn’t worried. Sometimes I’ll just say whole sentences all backwards too. It’s fun! Sometimes I laugh at inside jokes with myself and people wonder why. Some kids think I’m weird because I don’t roll my skirt up; I wear it at regulation length. I get some different looks, like sideways glances. It doesn’t bother me though. That attitude comes from church. I’m a pretty happy person and I know my parents care a lot, which I think is good. And that definitely helps.

Madison and I then talked about some global issues that were of concern to her. She included things that we have no control over.

When SARS hit southern Ontario my dad had to work from home and that drove
us all nuts because we were just together too much. Epidemics of any kind worry me a lot because diseases can get out of control. The tsunami disaster was another thing that worried me because humans had no control over it.

One of the comments Madison made was of great concern to me. I asked her whether she ever had any free time. After a very long pause, she said, “It depends.”

“How much homework I have. I don’t think I’d know what to do with a whole day away from the academics, the extracurricular activities, and the family scene. I’d probably watch a movie, because movies are so long that I don’t have 3 hours to sit and watch. I don’t watch much television; it’s just junk. I just don’t know.

Throughout Madison’s interview she made reference to things she does to help herself cope with stressful situations. She told me she loves English and enjoys writing and reading as ways to relax. Her favourite genres are fantasy and science fiction.

Madison also talked about the fun she experienced by being in the cast of the school musical and how it was fun to be with older students. Although both school work and being in the play had the potential to be stressful, Madison said she really tries to always do the best she can by studying a lot, going over her lines in the script, and trying to manage her time wisely. She admitted she is easily distracted by the internet, and she uses it as a way to escape from school work. She talked about how she uses email to stay in touch with friends she has met in the various countries where she has lived. A resilient attitude and apparent adaptability to constantly living somewhere new showed up in her comments, “It gets boring if you stay somewhere forever. Moving’s fun.” Madison also
told me that when she is stressed out by things people around her do, then she does things to deliberately annoy parents, family, and friends, such as play her music at a really high volume. She retreats to her room, closes the door, and asks to be left alone. She sometimes starts laughing for no real reason and has difficulty stopping. She also knows she uses sarcasm and sees that as a bad way to deal with people. Avoidance of people who are annoying her is another strategy she uses, especially with siblings, and Madison stated that she was "a pretty happy person." Her strong faith as a Christian "helps a lot. My church teaches strict morals, such as don’t lie, don’t cheat, and don’t steal. Try to be balanced, be your best, be loyal, tell the truth, and have a positive attitude." Madison credited attending a weekly youth group meeting at her church as a support network.

Madison’s responses to the Adolescent Coping Scale indicated that her most frequently used coping strategy was to work hard and achieve high standards by being conscientious about her school work. This was followed closely by worrying about the future and her personal happiness in particular, and wishful thinking or hoping for the best that things will sort themselves out. Madison’s profile also identified self-blame, indicating that she is hard on herself and sees herself as being responsible for the problem. Her other most frequently used strategies were to relax by reading, watching television, or going out to have a good time; keeping her concerns and feelings to herself and avoiding other people; and seeking spiritual support through prayer or reading a holy book.

Madison’s strategies that were in the sometimes used category were to solve the problem by systematically thinking about it and considering other viewpoints. She
sometimes is concerned about what others think of her and seeks to belong by doing things to gain the approval of others. She sometimes tries to stay cheerful and look at the bright side and remind herself that there are others who are less well off. Finally, her profile indicated that she can also ignore the problem by consciously blocking it out and pretending it doesn’t exist.

Madison’s responses in the little used category suggested that she is not one to give up, feel ill, or do nothing to solve her problems. Nor does she tend to share her problems with others and enlist their support and advice. Madison does not engage often in physical recreation as an outlet for stress.

Madison indicated that she does not take time to invest in close friends and build up relationships. Madison does not spend time organizing group action to deal with issues and concerns. She does not use tension-reduction strategies such as crying, screaming, or abusing substances as a way of coping with stress.

Madison chose to submit her writing task in the form of questions and answers. First she asked, “What is stress?” Her answer was

Stress is something that causes anxiety, sleeplessness, and severe stress can even make you sick. A lot of stress comes from pressure. It can cause people to develop nervous habits, take out their stress on other people, or even become depressed and suicidal. I don’t really know much about that though.

Her second question was “What stresses me?” In her answer she wrote about the pressure to get good grades, the feeling of competition amongst smart students to succeed, and the feeling of failure when a standard is not met. She said there is never
enough time to do everything she wants to do. She also said that when someone at home gets sick, “the whole world goes a little bit wonky.”

She then asked, “What do I do to cope with stress?” Madison listed five things. She listens to music; she worries; she sometimes tries to avoid the problem; she tries to remember something, someone, or some time that made her happy; and she tries to get lots of hugs and laugh a lot.

Madison then wrote her thoughts about ways others might use to cope with stress. Some people eat as a way of relieving stress. I think that this is a bad way because it does not accomplish anything but make you fat. Getting sick is pointless because it stresses people around you and you miss a lot of school and homework. Avoiding the problem could be a good or a bad thing. Most of the time it is a bad thing, especially if your parents find out you got a bad mark and then they will be madder at you than ever. Also, if you can’t get away from the problem it could be pretty hard. Worrying can be good or bad. Some people let worry control their lives. I think worry is helpful in a way because it gets you thinking about the problem and then you might come up with a solution or see other sides of the problem that might help you in some way. Becoming depressed is bad because you feel worn out and cannot do anything to relieve the pressure. Group therapy is an effective way to deal with stress because people like to know they are not alone and that others are experiencing similar problems.

Madison identified the high expectations from her church as causing stress for her when she feels as if she has been dishonest or bad. She also mentioned relationships as a
stressor for her peers, but that she doesn’t worry too much about what boys think of her.

Alex, 13-Year-Old Male

Alex was a young Caucasian male, who said initially that he was a “bit nervous” about participating in the interview situation. It was the end of a school day and he was still in his school uniform, and he said he was “anxious to be out in the spring air on his skateboard.” There were people in the hallway outside the interview room since tours for new students were being conducted. There was quite a lot of peripheral noise for the first half hour of the interview. Alex avoided eye contact with me for the first part of the interview, choosing to look out the door or averting his eyes and looking at the wall behind me.

He is the youngest child of three in his family and lives with both parents within a short driving distance of the school. He said he liked being the youngest because “parents are easier on the younger ones.” He felt his older siblings had mellowed his parents so that he had more freedom than his siblings did at his age. Alex spoke with passion and enthusiasm about sports in which he participates, especially rugby and hockey within the school setting. Alex also goes downhill skiing on a regular basis with his family both in Canada and in Europe. He participates in giant slalom races when skiing at home. He said he enjoys and does well in academics, especially French. Alex is involved in extracurricular activities as one of the lead characters in a school musical production, and he also plays in the school band. Alex stated “I have travelled to several parts of the world for skiing trips with my family, on school trips, and on an educational exchange to British Columbia.” Alex’s comments about family trips to holiday in Europe and their frequency
led to my impression that Alex comes from a strongly supportive and economically privileged family. Alex’s story centres on his interest in sports.

I’m an athlete. I play soccer, hockey, and rugby, and I like to play basketball and roller hockey on the street with my friends. I switched from the public school system to this school in order to try something different because they offer sports, academics, state-of-the-art computers, and lots of exchanges within Canada and other parts of the world. I don’t really have a favourite subject. I’m quite good at French, and I’m all right in English. I’ve also taken a bit of German, Mandarin, and Spanish in grade 9. Next year I have to choose one language. I’m all right in Math, and in Science there are some things I excel in and other parts that are really hard, such as the chemistry equations. But my real love is sports. I used to do giant slalom ski racing competitively, but I can’t this year because I had to commit to the school sports teams. Some coaches are really demanding and take it really seriously. I still ski and snowboard with my family when I can. Personally I just love being outdoors and going camping. I’ve travelled to many different places around the world with my family.

Alex described himself as a very physically active young adolescent with a strong attachment to his family. He said, “My family all participate in sports activities and travel together.” After Alex had told me a bit about himself, I asked him how he would define stress.

I believe stressing is more serious than worrying. Worrying takes place a few minutes before you have to do something, and stressing occurs the night before or
two nights before you have to do something. For example, if you have a lot of
work or you are really busy doing things and a lot of stuff is going on, and you
wait until the last minute, then you’re stressing out. That’s what I think stress is.
For me personally, the thing that makes me stressed is that I procrastinate and wait
until the last minute to do an essay. Sometimes I start 2 weeks ahead and complete
part of the work and then leave the rest until the night before. So that time crunch
at the end stresses me out. The other thing that bothers me is studying for exams.
That is always hard because there is just so much to study. I am involved in a
school play right now, and we’ve just had summative assignments, and then we
have to study for exams. And somewhere in there I fit in my sports teams!
Alex’s comments about trying to balance everything required for school and still
do what he loves to do, plays sports, were heard from other participants too. Somehow he
seems to be able to fit it all into his grade 7 schedule. I asked him whether it was difficult
to switch schools. He talked about the social scene in school, but he had a hard time
identifying any particular situations with peers that caused stress.

I only had one friend that came here from my old school, and then two people
from my street, and the rest I met here. I did find it really hard for the first few
days. But I soon made some friends. There are some things that bother me about
people though. I don’t like dishonesty and phoniness in people. For example, if I
ask someone to do something like check over something I have worked on, and
they say they’ve done it but I know they haven’t, then I get really upset. Another
example would be when I tell a friend something that I don’t want other people to
know about, and yet they go ahead and tell it anyway. They aren’t very trustworthy.

I was curious whether Alex’s siblings caused him any problems. He told me that his siblings often take stuff from him without asking, or they go on his laptop and talk to his friends. He then returned to the topic of academics and how he felt pressured thinking about his upcoming exams.

I want to do well on the exams, I have to do well on them, but I just want to get out of school. Exams are sometimes worth up to 30 percent of the mark and I don’t do amazingly well on my exams. I just find that there’s so much to memorize and such little time. It is hard to write it all down in an hour and a half.

When I asked Alex why the marks were so important, he commented that marks are going to be important in the future. Presumably he meant in his last year of high school. He said he had no idea of his career path, but he could see himself being an independent business person. Another area that Alex talked about as stressful for him was his body size.

I’m not a very big person. For me with my height and weight, playing rugby kind of scares me because the other players are grade 8s and much bigger and stronger. Actually that really scares me, but I’ve learned that if you’re going to get tackled, just run into it instead of walking in. You’re likely to get more injured if you’re going in slowly.

I was wondering whether Alex’s awareness extended beyond his immediate world of sports and school, and so I asked him if there were any issues on a more global scale
that he felt strongly about.

I just watch different sports that are played around the world, such as soccer and rugby. And I think that the NHL should have come to a conclusion so that there would be hockey this year. Personally I think that the ice surface should be larger, like the international size.

Alex appeared to rely on being able to actively participate in sports and outdoor activities as a way to cope with the pressures of school. Being physically fit and involved seemed to be a value instilled by his family participating in sports together. Alex said that “attitude is really important” and that even though he likes to compete in sports he doesn’t mind losing. He seemed to know his own strengths and to be aware of the value of not worrying. He said he tries to “focus on mentally getting out of the stress picture” and just try everything to the best of his ability. Alex used very concrete strategies to cope with some of his school obligations. He talked about trying to be well prepared ahead of time for assignments, exams, and even the rehearsals for the school play. He balances work and play time. Alex said he does not have a religious belief system that he relies on. He tries to work through problems on his own or by talking with an older person. He said he relies on a close group of friends who always help each other out. He said the school was very supportive in his first year and that the transition to the private school was not difficult. Alex referred to his family as being very supportive. He said his parents do not pressure him with unrealistic expectations but that they do assert some controls and there are boundaries to what he can and can’t do. He seemed to appreciate the limits they have established for things like bedtimes and study routines. Alex said it was his choice to not
fasttrack in Math even though he was encouraged to do so. He felt it would be creating undue stress for him to achieve high marks when he really didn’t need to prove he could.

Alex’s strongest responses to the ACS were in the frequently used category. He put equal emphasis on physical recreation (playing sports and keeping fit), relaxation (reading, watching television, going out and having a good time), and investing in close friends. He also indicated that he likes to focus on the positive and tries to stay cheerful by realizing there are others who are worse off than him. He is conscientious about his school work and works hard to achieve high standards.

The coping strategies that Alex sometimes uses include seeking to belong. This refers to being concerned with what others think and doing things to gain the approval of others. He tries to sometimes share his problems with others and enlist their encouragement and advice. He tackles problems systematically by thinking about the problems and seeking alternative viewpoints. Sometimes Alex will worry about the future in general and about his personal happiness in particular. Alex also indicated that sometimes he will just not do anything about a problem, give up, or feel ill.

Alex’s profile indicated that he does not avoid other people and keep to himself. He does not organize action groups and attend meetings and rallies to solve problems. Alex indicated that he rarely blames himself or sees himself as responsible for the problem, but he also doesn’t ignore the problem and pretend that problems don’t exist. Alex did not abuse substances, cry, scream, or take out his frustrations on others.

Only one strategy was never used by Alex, and that was praying for spiritual support and guidance and reading holy books.
Alex did not submit his writing task even though I contacted him several times about returning it.

Christine, 16-Year-Old Female

Christine, a girl of Asian heritage, arrived at the interview a bit late, and she apologized for keeping me waiting. She spoke very fast and did not hesitate to answer my questions with a great deal of detail. English is her second language, and occasionally there were some grammatical errors in her speech. Even after being in Canada for 8 years, she expressed concern about it not sounding correct. In fact, when the interview was done she expressed concern that I would be transcribing her words and putting these errors down as text. I told her the transcription would be written exactly as she had spoken but that her story that I crafted from the interview could be edited for grammar.

She was very forthcoming with her answers when talking about her experiences. Of interest to me was her comment that her artwork over the last year has had very dark themes and she was wondering why. Christine chose to do a piece of artwork as her writing task. Christine, although she did not seem worried during our meeting, emailed me after the first session to apologize for having to cancel her scheduled interview because she had just been assigned a task for the next day’s chapel service. She offered to still meet even though she really needed time to prepare the assignment.

Christine is an only child, and her parents now live in Hong Kong. When she first came with her parents to live in Canada, she was in grade 4, and she said she did not know how to speak English very well. Upon entering this private school in grade 7, her dad returned to Hong Kong for work reasons, but her mom stayed in Canada with
Christine for the first few months and then returned to Hong Kong. Christine said that was really hard at first, but now she is used to it. She talks on the phone to her parents on a regular basis and will vent to them when she is feeling stressed. She returns to visit them in Hong Kong during the summer break and finds Canada to be very slowpaced in comparison.

If there was one thing I had to say about stress for me it would be that I sometimes enjoy being in stress. Isn’t that so weird? When I don’t have a lot on my plate I feel kind of empty in a way. When I don’t have anything to do, there just seems to be no goal in life. Here at school if there was no stress I wouldn’t get anything accomplished. I think school is a big part of my life so I like having the stress that is coming from school. I see stress and depression as two different things. Depression occurs when you’re feeling sad, and stress is having a lot of things to do in a very limited amount of time. Stress is a more happy thing, and depressed is when you are really upset. But stress is really the same for teens and for adults. I don’t like it when there are way too many things to do, when I actually can’t accomplish it all. I just like having a lot of things to do in a time that is manageable. When I have all the stuff accomplished, then the stress is gone and that is when I feel really high.”

Christine’s comments about stress focus mainly on her experiences with academics and expectations at school. At one point she said to me “If you come back next week to talk with me, I will not be that stressed.” She had a lot of essays and science labs due during the week I spoke with her, as well as a last-minute request to prepare the
program for the daily chapel service. Christine also talked about how changes with where she lived and went to school were stressful experiences.

Canada is actually a pretty foreign country to me, even though I've been here since grade 4. I found it pretty stressful moving to a new country and adjusting. I grew up in Hong Kong, and when I moved here I spoke only Chinese. The biggest difficulty was the language barrier. I only knew a few English words, and I could not think in English sentences. It took a lot of courage for me because it was really stressful coming to a new country. It took me about a half a year to stop that feeling, but now I am 16 years old and in grade 11 and I have adjusted.

One stressor that Christine identified during our conversation was that it was hard to be an only child and live in a different country than her parents. Her parents went back to Hong Kong when she started attending this private school in grade 7. She talked about this situation as well as the pressure she feels to get high marks.

I have always wanted a brother or a sister as a pal. I am an only child, and the attention is all on me! That is not too stressful, but sometimes as an only child, if you do something wrong, your mom or dad will kind of have everything focussed on you. Actually though, my parents never really pressure me; it’s me that is pressuring myself. In fact they’re telling me not to stress out. If I get a bad mark and I go crying on the phone with them (because they live in Hong Kong and I have to call them), they will just be there and listen. They tell me don’t be so stressed. Marks are very important to me because getting good marks shows I worked hard and accomplished the task, and the feeling of doing that is great! It’s
a very good kind of high. I get marks in the 90s usually. If a mark falls below that range the feeling is pretty depressing because I think that is not me, that the mark does not represent who I am. Sometimes there are disappointments, and sometimes I expect it, especially if I know I didn’t give 100% effort.

I asked Christine for her thoughts on whether she thought gifted teens experienced stress differently than average teens. Her response made me wonder how she is defining being gifted. Her comments about her own reactions to getting low marks reflect this attitude that being smart and achieving high grades is what being gifted is all about.

I think gifted kids will have more stress, but the person themself won’t feel it because they will know how to cope with it. People who do well academically live in that stress, and they just know how to handle it well. That’s the difference between a person that is doing well in school and a person who is not doing well in school. It’s how they handle their time and their stress.

Later on during the interview Christine offered more comments about her experiences with trying to make friends in a new country and what she called an experience with racism.

The issue of making friends is a problem when you speak a different language and have a different culture. It is hard to communicate with other people, and I came here at an age when people are actually starting to make good friends. I found the other kids wouldn’t make an effort to communicate with me, so there was this huge cultural gap. Multiculturalism in Canada is still really every culture being separate, no matter how much you want to group them together; it’s pretty much
impossible I think. I can actually tie that to racism. It can be pretty stressful if you are dealing with racism. I think it’s worse than academics really. I think it is more stressful than academics. Academics you can control. You can’t really control how other people are treating you. In grade 4 I had an experience with racism. I was being pushed around physically by this White girl. I didn’t feel comfortable, and it was an environmental issue that I couldn’t control. I even told the teacher, and she made this girl my study buddy! I didn’t like it. But after I got more fluent in English, the girl started giving me a little bit of respect and I could start to communicate with her.

Christine also experienced some difficulties when she started living in residence at the school in grade 9. Her parents had returned to Hong Kong. She talked about feeling homesick for 2 weeks and not feeling comfortable with having to eat Canadian food for every meal. She said the she seemed to adapt fairly quickly though, and began enjoying being surrounded by students her own age. At this point in our conversation she commented that she thought parents in general worried too much about their kids. I thought perhaps she was enjoying not having all the parental attention focussed on her. There seemed to be in her words a sense of freedom from having parental expectations to get right down to doing homework each day after school. When I asked Christine to talk more about these new friendships and her experiences with network stress amongst her group of friends and classmates, she said that sometimes friends pull her into their problems but that she doesn’t let it affect her. However, when she talked about getting into verbal fights, her comments seemed to indicate that it does affect her.
My biggest stressor is work, but after that it would be when I’m in a fight with my close friends, my mom, or anyone. That really stresses me out. I can’t do anything and I can’t focus on anything if I’m in a fight with anyone. It shuts everything down. If it’s a really big fight, I just blank out; I sit on my chair and I blank out for a half hour or even longer than that if it is more serious. These are verbal fights, not physical fights. Verbal hurts more.

Christine went back to talking about academics and said,

Stress affects me in other ways too. During exams or when I am nervous I have to chew gum. That is something that I can’t live without. And I pace back and forth when I’m studying. I don’t really have any troubles with sleeping, but when I’m really depressed, I don’t want to eat.

I was curious as to whether Christine experienced any stress when she returns to Hong Kong during the summer holidays and then when she comes back to Canada for school. She said,

Outside of the school environment is usually the holidays where I don’t have stress. I find that Hong Kong is too crowded, and the pace of life is faster. It’s not as boring there since you can go anywhere by very convenient transportation. There is a lot more stress in Hong Kong, people are more uptight, and the competition is very, very tight. When I come back to life in Canada it just seems more relaxed and so slow in comparison. It is hard for me to move from being more or less on my own here and then going back to live with my parents and their rules. Sometimes the fact that they are there watching me 24/7 can be pretty
stressful. When I return to Canada after the summer holidays I tend to not be able to speak English at first because I have been speaking Chinese for so long. When I’m here at school though, I think my parents have confidence in me that I won’t do anything bad, so they don’t worry about me that much when I am here alone.”

Christine had several comments about what she does to cope with stress. One of the main ways is to create art. She enjoys painting, drawing, multimedia techniques, and creating collages. She remembers when she was younger using scribbling over bad words she had written as a way of relieving tension. She told me that for the past 2 years her artwork has had dark and evil themes and she wonders why. Christine said that she enjoys the process of creating, as well as the space and ambiance of an art room. She is not as concerned about the mark she gets in art compared to math and science, and so she finds the subject more enjoyable. Although Christine does not create music, she listens to music as a way to relieve stress.

Other coping strategies include chatting on the phone to her parents. She said her parents have granted her a certain degree of independence and trust, which gives her the freedom to feel secure living on her own. This confidence in her ability to adjust also was evident when Christine talked about moving to Canada in grade 4. She said, “If you have the courage to learn and speak a new language, you’ll be fine. I adjusted fairly quickly. In grade 9 my homesickness was gone in about a week.”

She also talks to her friends using the internet. She said her friends at school have built up her self-confidence by encouraging her to take on leadership roles that she herself did not feel confident in trying. She has made conscious choices to not get into the dating
scene because she says she “does not want to take on that responsibility.” Christine said she chooses to not be influenced by peer or network stress. She says she feels empathy for her friends but does not get dragged down by their problems.

Christine tries to stay focused on her school work, with advanced placement courses and her university entrance requirements. By keeping very busy, organizing her time, and chunking work into smaller components, she maintains her focus and works efficiently. She commented that when she does not have enough to do she will waste time and the quality of her work is lower.

I asked Christine whether her behaviour changed when she was stressed. She gave two examples in response.

During exams I constantly pace the room holding my study notes. I also have to chew gum. If I get really depressed, not stressed, then I don’t want to eat. If I have had a fight with a friend or a parent, I can’t focus on anything at all. It shuts everything down. I can sit and blank out for more than half an hour.

Christine’s profile indicated that she uses four coping strategies a lot. The two top scores were for the strategies of working hard by being conscientious and achieving high standards, and for tackling problems systematically by thinking about them and seeking alternative viewpoints. Christine’s profile indicated that she worries about the future and her personal happiness in particular.

She frequently shares problems with others and enlists their support, encouragement, and advice. Christine also uses the coping strategy of seeking relaxing diversions such as reading, television, and going out for a good time. She engages in
wishful thinking as a coping strategy. Christine indicated she is frequently concerned with what others think and does things to gain their approval. Christine frequently sees herself as being responsible for the problem and blames herself. She also uses social action as a way to deal with her concerns and has enlisted support for causes that are important to her.

Christine uses physical recreation such as sports and trying to stay fit to relieve stress. She tries to stay cheerful and look on the bright side of things. She sometimes invests in close friends and makes new friendships. Occasionally she engages in tension reduction strategies such as crying, screaming, or physically releasing frustration.

Christine is not one to keep to herself and avoid other people. Christine indicated that she does not ignore a problem and pretend that it does not exist. She does not turn to prayer and ask for help, nor does she read a holy book for guidance. She does not use the strategy of doing nothing, giving up, or feeling ill.

Christine submitted the following explanation of her artwork (Figure 1).

The picture as a whole represents the result of stress. The clock on the right bottom corner symbolizes that stress is usually caused by the lack of time. The sword on the top of the picture piercing through the head with a drop of blood represents that the troubles stress causes can be deathly. And the person in the picture has huge dark bags under his/her eyes symbolizing a person under stress. The person is not gender specific because stress can occur to anyone.
Figure 1. Christine’s artwork
Jonathan, 16-Year-Old Male

Jonathan’s interview was not all captured on audiotape. When the technical problem was discovered, the first 20 minutes of conversation was summarized in field notes that I wrote immediately while reviewing the conversation with Jonathan so that he could correct any of my misunderstandings of what he had said. He was satisfied that my notes were acceptable, and we continued with the taping of the interview.

Jonathan identified himself as a rugby player who also plays football and basketball. He placed great emphasis on his sports identity. At the time of the interview Jonathan had just turned 16. He lived at home with his parents and commuted to the school. Along with sports he told me he excelled in Math, Physics, and Chemistry, and he had a love of music, especially alternative music and classic folk music. In both grades 9 and 10 he took advanced placement (AP) courses and planned on doing more in grades 11 and 12. As a grade 10 student he said academics weren’t that important because those marks don’t count for university entrance. He said, “I am confident that I will be able to get the marks when I really need to.” Jonathan said he would prefer to live in residence to avoid the 6 a.m. wakeup for his commute. He said he finds the school day very long, especially when he has sports practices and stays at the school until 6 p.m. Jonathan said his coping strategies are sports and relaxing to music. He is learning to play the acoustic guitar and enjoys digging through his dad’s music collection. Jonathan defined stress as pressure to get a lot done with not enough time. He acknowledged that he is highly competitive, especially with respect to sports. Jonathan came across to me as young man who had a good understanding of where his personal strengths are.

Jonathan’s intense interest in athletics came to the forefront early in the interview.
He indicated that he does not get stressed about academics that much because he does well without a lot of effort, but that he does get stressed when it comes to sports because he is very competitive. He experiences stress before competing on varsity-level teams and worries about getting seriously injured when he plays rugby. He sees peer pressure as playing a strong role in creating stress for teenagers.

Everyone wants to be with the in crowd, and everyone has their own core group of friends. Social things like fights or disagreements can stress people out I think. As far as academics are concerned, I’ve experienced some teasing and some joking around about being really good in math. My friends can give me a hard time about it, but I know they are just joking around. There is a level of understanding amongst us as friends.

I asked Jonathan whether he had any experiences with stress that were caused by changing schools and having to make new friends.

My parents were trying to find the best program for me, so I got moved around in the primary grades and finally ended up in a private school at the beginning of grade 2. It didn’t make that much difference to me.

I then asked Jonathan if he had experienced any network stress as a teenager.

It has happened a few times, but nothing very extreme. I have tried to help a friend get through a hard time by helping them figure out what was going on. Also there was one time when one of my parents was dealing with a problem at work and I was worried about how it was going to work out. But it ended up being OK.

I was curious how Jonathan perceived his own reactions to stress. He said, What usually ends up happening is that I end up thinking too much about a
problem, I get caught up in it, and then I get angry. Sometimes when I have something I am worried about I will become less outgoing, and I joke around a lot less. I become more focussed on the sequence of tasks I need to get done rather than just having fun. When I am playing rugby I get stressed out about winning and about potential injuries, but I am also happy playing the sport, so the stress is balanced by the enjoyment of the game.

Jonathan talked about his family situation and offered the viewpoint that when both parents and adolescents are stressed at the same time the combination of everyone in bad moods can create problems. He also mentioned having squabbles with his sister.

When I was younger, my sister and I used to get into a lot of fights over nothing really. It was just sibling rivalry, but when I was in about grade 6 and she was in grade 9, we grew out of that. We had moved at the time, and we only had each other to depend on as friends. We seem to have called a truce then, and now she is one of my best friends. I can talk to her about anything.

Jonathan stated he was concerned about global issues such as the Kyoto Protocol and the American involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I think most of the global concerns I am interested in have to do with North America more so than the rest of the world. My friends and I talk about these issues and voice our opinions, but I think as a 16-year-old there is not a lot I can do to change the whole world in a big way.

One of the major stressors in Jonathan's recent experience was the unexpected death of a very close friend at school. Near the end of the interview Jonathan talked openly about his experience and how it affected his awareness of spirituality and religion
I'm semireligious, my beliefs fall somewhere between science and religion. I really believe in the laws of science, but at the same time I want to believe in God. The main thing I really try to believe in is the afterlife. When my friend died earlier this year it was really tough for me. I hung on to my religious beliefs at that time, and I think I actually grew spiritually a lot more. I would sit down, and if I wanted to talk to my friend I would just think that I could talk to him and that he would be somewhere listening, you know? I have never had anyone in my life die before. I was in shock, and I had no reference points. The last time we had a science project to do, I chose to do it with one of my other friends, and I remember saying to my friend who died I'll do the next one with you. We're not going to have a next time now. I will always feel that I got much more from him than I ever gave to him. I think about it all the time. It's just one of those things that keeps coming back to me over and over again. It just hurts everywhere. The worst part is there is no explanation, no one to blame. It's just one of those things that happens. So this experience attracted me to a stronger belief in the afterlife. I've always wanted to find some sort of assurance that it's real or not. I've always been questioning, and for now I believe in it because it gives me a way to talk to my friend.

I sensed that this had been a very powerful experience for Jonathan, and I told him that I had just had a former student die. He and I talked about one is never really prepared for the death of someone you have known. I asked Jonathan how he saw himself coping with stress, and he began to talk again about sports.
Jonathan’s involvement in sports is an important way that he deals with stress. He said he is happy playing a game, and it is easy to forget about stress when he is having fun. He has a core group of friends that he interacts with on an academic level, on sports teams, and in his recreational time. Jonathan said they have a “level of understanding amongst ourselves” that acts as a support network. He also seeks out relaxing diversions such as listening to his dad’s collection of old music or “mellowing out”, as he referred to it. He also said he combines this activity with being productive by working on assignments while listening to music. Jonathan also has been learning to play the guitar as a form of relaxation. When he is involved in a sports competition or exams and the pressure to succeed is high, he becomes intensely focused on his task. Relying on his sibling for emotional support and friendship is another coping strategy Jonathan identified. He also talked about a few negative coping strategies that he sees other friends using, namely, taking out the stress on things, such as hitting furniture; taking out the stress on another person, by physically getting in a fight or playing emotional games with them; and taking the stress out on your family and the ones you are closest to. He was not clear as to whether any of these applied to him. Jonathan spoke about his need to have a belief in something beyond this material world as a way to make sense of his friend’s untimely death.

Jonathan’s ACS profile indicated two coping strategies were used a lot. One was to seek relaxing diversions from problems by reading a book, watching television, or going out for a good time. The other was the use of physical recreation and keeping fit as a coping strategy.

Jonathan frequently uses the strategy of tackling a problem systematically by
thinking about and seeking alternative viewpoints. He also indicated that he uses wishful thinking.

Jonathan had several coping strategies that he identified as ones he would use sometimes. Focussing on the positive and trying to stay cheerful and keeping to himself and not burdening others with his problems were the highest scores in the sometimes used category. Next he identified being conscientious about his school work and working hard to achieve high standards. Jonathan indicated that he sometimes is concerned about what others think and does things to gain their approval. Jonathan sometimes uses praying for help and guidance as a way to seek spiritual support. His answers indicated that he is sometimes hard on himself and feels responsible for problems. Jonathan invests time in his close friends and tries to make new friendships. He has used the strategy of sharing his problems with others and enlisting their support, encouragement, and advice. Sometimes Jonathan will consciously block out the problem and pretend it does not exist.

Jonathan rarely resorts to making himself feel better by letting off steam, crying, screaming, or abusing substances. He does not get involved in organizing groups to attend meetings or rallies for issues he is concerned about. Jonathan rarely worries about the future and about his personal happiness in particular.

Jonathan’s profile showed that he is not the type of adolescent to do nothing about a problem, give up, or feel ill because of a problem.

Jonathan submitted this poem about stress.

Stress

Each breath is long,

Looking over the list makes you worry,
What if it is all done wrong?
You may need to really hurry.
Who wants to just relax and play some chess?
If you want to you really can say yes,
Calm down, relax, don’t worry about the stress.
Everyone’s eyes are glaring at you,
Why can’t you take back what you said?
Is there anything you can do?
You would much rather be dead.
Who wants to just relax and play some chess?
If you want to you really can say yes,
Calm down, relax, don’t worry about the stress.
Is it possible for you to do it?
You have one shot, one chance.
Just go and make that hit,
It’s okay, you’ve won in advance.
Who wants to just relax and play some chess?
If you want to you really can say yes,
Calm down, relax, don’t worry about the stress.

Logan, 17-Year-Old Male

Logan said, “I am a pretty easygoing person.” He was working on his laptop, seated in a corner of a room in which the lights were off and the curtains drawn. He explained he needed to use the waiting time to prepare a Power Point presentation for a
computer class. Throughout the interview Logan maintained this leaning back, slouching posture. Logan talked fast, and sometimes his voice would fade out at the end of his sentences, making his voice hard to decipher on the audiotape. His choice of where to sit made eye contact difficult for me as the interviewer. It was as if he didn’t want to be face to face. He chose to sit beside me with a chair in between us until it was time to look at his profile of the ACS. Then he leaned forward, moved the intervening chair, and he then seemed anxious to check over each response and his overall profile.

Logan has two older siblings and lives with his parents. He and his sister commute to the same school. The older sibling does not live at home and has what Logan called an alternative type of anarchistic lifestyle. Logan made a lot of references to this older sibling throughout the interview, commenting several times that he felt his brother was very smart in a worldly, experiential way as opposed to a book-learning way. These references were interspersed with Logan talking comfortably about his two dogs and his relationships with his parents. Some events in the past with respect to the older sibling dropping out of school and getting into some trouble seemed to have links to Logan’s experiences with stress. Logan spoke openly about the time when he was not really happy at the private school in the first year. He said he learned to deal with it himself because he did not want to make more problems for his parents.

I am 17 and in Grade 11. I have a brother who is 4 years older who dropped out of school and has an alternative anarchistic lifestyle. My older sister is in high school with me. My siblings don’t really talk to each other much, if at all. I used to feel like I was in their shadow when I was younger, but not now because we are all so different. My parents are pretty relaxed about what I do, as long as I don’t
end up doing what my brother did and drop out of school.

I define stress as pressure that affects you. Stress can change the way you act and it is usually bad or negative. Worrying or getting anxious or nervous about something does not have as big an impact as stress. For me, one thing that really bothers me is the phoniness of people. Everyone is always trying to please someone else or trying to make a good impression. Even at this school there is so much phoniness, especially when you look at people’s motives for being involved and active in certain global issues or causes. It’s just because they want to say, oh I was involved in this, I care so much about this, when they are really just trying to further themselves. North American societal systems are so focussed on being capitalistic at the expense of being a kinder, gentler society that really cares about people.

Early in the interview Logan pinpointed a few issues that concerned him, and I was curious to find out more about his ideas about this phoniness that he saw. First however, I asked Logan to talk about stress on a personal level. He said that changing schools in grade 8 had been stressful, and that because of what his parents were dealing with at the time, he did not burden them with his problems and feelings.

I just tried to find a better way to deal with my problems instead of quitting school. As far as academics go for me in grade 11, I find the days long, and there is an expectation at this school that you will do well. From what I’ve heard there are parents who email the teachers regularly and keep it all pretty intense for a lot of kids to keep their marks up. Doing poorly at this school just makes you stand out! I worry about doing well in my weaker subjects, but even more bothersome is
the overall relevancy of courses and what I see as too many busy work assignments. That is a major stressor. The teachers here are really good but some days it feels like we have to do the same thing everyday. If I can present good reasons why I should not have to do an assignment then teachers should listen and make accommodations accordingly. I remember back when I was in grades 7 and 8 I was getting fed up with school and my grades went from A pluses to B minuses and C pluses. I was getting sick of playing the game of school. I was more un-at-peace with being between social groups too. I don’t like all the glamour and a lot of the stuff here because it seems like a waste. I have a problem with some of the school’s expectations such as attending daily chapel, wearing uniforms, and the expected time commitment for involvement in extra-curricular sports and clubs. Some days I am here past six o’clock for swim team practices. This week I have so many assignments and summatives due. I think getting everything in on time is stressful. When I am stressed I get very impatient, and I tend to keep to myself.

These comments were interesting because Logan had started out talking about societal issues that concerned him, and yet he, like many other participants, also said the lack of time to get everything done was stressful. And it sounded as if he felt pressure, either from himself or from others, to do well.

A lot of times I just don’t know where I fit in, what I want to do, and what my strengths are. I have no clear idea, and so it is always a worry in the back of my head asking, where am I going? There is also peer pressure at this school to be popular, to be higher on the social chain. The phoniness extends to the dating
scene too. Guys want to date girls who will make them look good. People here buy into it, but that is a game I don’t want to play. I think girls have pressure to do with their appearance, and for boys it has to do with strength and sports.

Sometimes I see examples of network stress amongst friends and classmates. I’ll try to be nice to them and help them out, but it doesn’t really bother me that much. I would say that my friends stress about school, sports, and dating. On a more global stage, I don’t think I know enough to comment on the issues; however, there is evidence of corruption in governments, and this disturbs me. In the grand scheme of life I perceive a lot of inequities. You should try your best to make life fair, but life is not fair to the disadvantaged, like the homeless for instance. A homeless teenager who was smart would not have the opportunities that I have here. People just exploit other people to get ahead. It’s kind of sad, but that is how it is. Everyone’s guilty of it, myself included. No matter what we do, it’s human nature that the world isn’t going to be perfect.

When I commented to Logan that it sounded as if he had a clear sense of what his thoughts were, he responded,

That’s not what it feels like! A lot of times I just don’t know where I fit in totally, what I want to do, and what my strengths are. I’d like to have opinions on global issues, but then I ask myself what do I really know, because to have a really good opinion you need to actually be in the situation, be there and live it. I just don’t have enough background experience or knowledge.

Logan’s frustrations with the education system were obvious. He said

I do not want to play a lot of the game of school; however, the benefits of playing
it to a degree stand in contrast to my brother’s choice of just quitting. Last year I really did want to leave here for a while, but I decided it was kind of like running from a problem. I think in an ideal educational system students would be engaged in learning because they really want to learn about something, and there would be no plagiarism. Plagiarism is just failed teaching, because if you are a really good teacher then kids will want to do the assignment and not just copy or download answers from the net. The best part of learning occurs when you get off topic and start talking about the ethics behind decisions someone makes. That is when I get interested in learning. I am not a competitive person, because winning doesn’t matter in the long run. A long as I’m enjoying my time, that is more important than worrying so much about the perfect average or being involved in everything.

Logan identified his own personality and his philosophy of life as contributing to his coping strategies. He said he was a fairly relaxed person who didn’t get too worried about things. His philosophy of life was that everything works itself out.

When I need to know, I’ll know, and it isn’t really important right now. I do my own thing, and I know where to draw the line and say enough is enough. As long as I’m enjoying my time here, and I do what I feel is right, everything is O.K. In the end I’m going to die anyway.

Logan said he was atheist and did not have a spiritual belief system he relied on for coping. When asked to be more concrete about coping strategies, Logan said he would sometimes try to forget about a problem, find some distractions, keep to himself, or just avoid dealing with the problem that is stressful. One of his main distractions is building his own computer. He also participates in online computer medieval war games with
people from other parts of the world. He spends time hiking, backpacking, and camping with a small group of friends. Logan has talked to his parents and school advisors on occasion when he felt the stress building up and he wanted to leave this particular private school. He doesn’t turn to friends for help with things that are bothering him, but he said he tries to be helpful to his friends when they are stressed. Logan has seen friends turn to drugs as a way of coping with stress. He also has seen peers decide to rebel by quitting school. He commented that some other friends deliberately overdo their busy schedules by being involved in too many things. Returning to his philosophical stance, Logan said that he saw a need to try to change society and make life a bit fairer for everyone. That is how he copes with the frustration of seeing inequities amongst people.

The ACS profile revealed that the one strategy Logan used a lot was to keep to himself and not burden other people with his problems. Logan did not identify any coping strategies as ones that he would use frequently. The remaining coping strategies were roughly evenly distributed amongst the sometimes used, little used, and not used categories.

Logan’s responses to the ACS indicated that he sometimes tries to tackle a problem by systematically thinking about it and searching for alternative viewpoints. He sometimes blames himself for the problem. Logan indicated that he occasionally will try to focus on the positive and that he can be conscientious and work hard to achieve high standards. Sometimes Logan will seek out relaxing diversions such as reading, television, or going out for a good time. He also indicated that he sometimes is concerned about what others think and will do things to seek their approval.

In the little used category, Logan’s profile showed that he does not typically
choose tension reduction strategies such as letting off steam, crying, screaming, or abusing substances. He does not usually pretend problems don’t exist. He also indicated that he does not very often use coping strategies of physical recreation and wishful thinking.

There were six coping strategies that Logan said he did not use at all. He did not identify with the strategy of choosing to do nothing about a problem, giving up, or feeling ill because of a problem. He said he does not turn to close friends. Logan also did not choose the strategy of sharing his problems with others and enlisting their support, encouragement, and advice. He does not use prayer or reading holy books. He does not join in action groups and meetings for causes.

Logan offered this explanation of his artwork (Figure 2).

I think all of the images in my work are each important and give the viewer a different idea of each, but it’s important to look at it for yourself and judge it by yourself first, because your own idea can, and probably is, a lot more interesting than mine. It’s all really simple really; just the lock and the fence represent closure and being locked in or out. The stick man and its shadow are about hiding in and out of shadows, or being stuck within them. The blue flames are a bit of a circle in that blue is cold and a flame is hot, representing a sort of circle inside of stress. Each part is important and I think what each viewer finds within it is a lot more important than myself.

Jay, 17-Year-Old Male

Jay’s entire interview was very fast paced, and he eagerly talked about himself.
Figure 2. Logan’s artwork
Jay admitted that he thrived on being busy, that his identity was strongly linked to the various activities in which he was involved. When asked to tell me a bit about himself he rapidly rhymed off all his activities and pulled out his agenda to show how full each page was. My first thoughts about him were, “Why would his world revolve around academics to the exclusion of other things? Maybe Jay is the stereotypical gifted student with social interaction issues?” He commented on this during the interview, remembering a time in kindergarten and grade 1 when his interests were very different than those of his peers and he felt very different.

Jay lives in residence at the school because he is in his final year. He mentioned some difficulties with the noise level in residence but that he has no problem reporting such infractions of the rules to the people in charge. Previously he lived at home with his parents. He does not have siblings. He is involved in activities with other youth and adults at his mosque. From his comments it seems that he has a good rapport with his parents and other adults.

Jay expressed that he was content with who he is. He said, “I have come to terms with some of my experiences of social isolation from my early school years.” He said he realizes that he is “different from my peers.” During our conversation he placed a lot of emphasis on his intelligence and seemed to know how he fit into the hierarchy of the school’s social scene. He talked about his trip to Harvard and the anticipated stress of moving there to start university. Jay has spent three summers at a summer institute for gifted students in the United States and maintains strong contacts with friends he made there.

Jay’s school agenda spoke volumes about how busy a schedule he maintained. He
turned page after page to show me how full every day was. He repeated the phrase, "Time is tight, time is very tight" at several points during the interview. Jay admitted that he needs to get high marks because he is off to a prestigious university and wants to do well. He voiced a concern that perhaps he is overextended with all his extracurricular activities such as running in cross-country races, working on the yearbook, acting as a school tour guide, participating in the model United Nations, competing on the School Reach Team, serving as an Army Cadet, and volunteering at his mosque in a leadership role. He also serves on the school’s academic council, a position that requires Jay to organize exam workshops for the student body; organize interhouse competitions; set up monthly academic challenge tasks; and attend meetings to discuss school policies about exams, advanced placement courses, and other business concerns with school administrators.

I asked Jay how he would define stress.

My definition of stress is that it is a negative feeling emotionally and physically when a lot of things are piling up. It is how I feel when I can’t handle something or when I am not sure I’m willing to do what needs to be done to cope. It is the mental recognition that things need to get done in a limited amount of time and that creates pressure, a bit of worrying, and a tiny bit of anxiety. For me stress is the feeling on the grey margin between being confident and being unsure that I can get it all done. For me, academics have always been my main interest, and I am good in every subject. Outside of academics I follow politics, international relations, and current events really closely. I tend to define myself in terms of my activities. I don’t know if that is just me or if I have been at this school for too long! Right now I have so many assignments, oral presentations, and the
provincial competition for the School Reach Team. I have the advanced placement course exams now, and the other exams are coming up in 2 weeks. My concern is just the sheer amount of work that is going to have to go into these projects. Right now the main stress is school work.

Jay said he depended on being busy. He talked in more detail about his expectations for excellent marks. He talked about his frustration with labour-intensive work that did not go beyond a factual level. His phrase to describe this dichotomy was “fluff versus substance.” He bemoaned the fact that the course content was not always relevant, and that he disliked being given busy work.

I’m getting stellar marks, but sitting through the course and doing the work is agonizing. Work can be fun and still challenging if you actually have to think about the assignment. I get really frustrated when I do a lot of work to get top grades and then I see some of my classmates are doing just as well with less effort and less thinking. Do teachers really just want regurgitation of facts? I have higher expectations of myself. I just get so frustrated when the expected level of analysis on a grade 12 assignment could be done by a ninth grader. This year really counts because I am applying for university scholarship money. I’m near the end of my senior year, and I just got back a couple of weekends ago from visiting the university I’ll be attending. My thoughts when I returned were why am I still here? I suppose it is because acceptance at a university is still conditional on final grades. I have to finish the game of school!

There were other things that Jay talked about that caused him stress. The lack of sufficient sleep time and quiet study time due to the noise level in residence was of
concern to him. However, he did say he has no qualms about reporting infractions of residence rules to the people in charge. He said he found some of the residence rules to be too arbitrary and restrictive for older students, but he could understand the need for boundaries, especially for younger students because they are starting to set new expectations for themselves. In spite of these more practical day-to-day concerns about his living environment, Jay continued to talk about how for him the more stressful situation with academics and workload was finding himself in a situation that he called the margins.

This is the zone of uncertainty as to whether I can actually accomplish and be successful at something. It is when I am confronted with the sheer mass of everything and I begin to doubt and question myself and my ability to complete the task. Also if I don’t fully understand something, particularly in math, I get stressed. Things usually come easily to me, and when the highest mark I could pull off in one section of the grade 11 math course was a 75, I was really stressed. For me it’s always the uncertainty, it’s always the what ifs that bug me.

I wondered whether these uncertainties and self-doubt extended to Jay’s social life. He told me

I’m not too concerned about fitting in and dating and the social scene. I’ve always been the misfit since about grade 2 and I have gotten used to that. I was always a serious little bookworm even then. Instead of playing a game with kids on the playground I would be trying to figure out the UV level based on the cloud cover. I was reading books for 9 or 10-year-olds when I was in Grades 1 and 2.

Nonfiction was my thing right from the start. Now I’m not invited to all the social
events and parties, but I’ve managed to work with it. I’m not the partying type to begin with, but I wouldn’t make time for it even if I were. There are always choices to be made. People know that I would choose to be at home doing my homework instead of going out to a party.

I asked what Jay did in his free time, and Jay offered an example of how he felt when he found himself with free time during preparation for the advanced placement course exams.

There were some days when I was exempt from work, had nothing to do, I’d finished my studying, and so I would sit down to read the newspaper or watch TV or play a video game, and I got this weird feeling in my gut. I figured out that this was a visceral guilt reaction about me spending all these years dealing with stuff by doing stuff, so that now when I don’t have to do anything I feel guilty if I am trying to relax. It was a bit of a shock to realize I couldn’t sit down and read because I felt I needed to be doing something more productive. I have a 30 centimetres high stack of recreational reading books on my desk, but I have to restrict that type of reading to when school is over for the summer. Whenever I have a physical reaction to stress it is that kind of gut feeling, like butterflies in your stomach, or going down a really steep drop on a roller coaster. It’s that feeling of unease in your gut and a nagging thought in your head that asks repeatedly, shouldn’t I be doing something else? Those feelings started about 2 years ago. I think this year I am managing to get over it. I just keep telling myself I need this downtime or I am going to go nuts and burn out.

I asked Jay whether he thought being gifted or highly intelligent was a stressor in
itself. He thought that even though he sees that there is a perception from others that he
should be maintaining high grades due to his giftedness, it didn’t really bother him.

It’s part of whom I am, and I do what I can with it. I’m at the point in my life
where I am going to be myself as long as I am not stepping on anyone else’s toes
too much. And if other people have a problem with me using a word they don’t
understand, well I’ll use it again, and I think other kids just come to accept it. You
need to do what you need to do to get through a day, as well as in the long term,
with academic and nonacademic goals. Being smart or gifted is just a label. Gifted
kids are just good with knowledge and using it in unique ways.

Jay expressed concern about some global issues. He said that he is not the activist
type but that he had already joined a political party and would probably become more of
an activist when he went to university. On the environmental front he has concerns about
the effects of climate change, peak oil, and the misuse of natural resources.

Society as a whole, myself included, is in a state of denial that these things are
happening to our world and that something needs to be done. Beyond
environmental issues there are a lot of things I am concerned about, things that I’d
like to see done differently, things that I think are wrong or are right. However, I
find that I tend not to let most political issues on the national or global level get to
me. I do try to help out with some of the advocacy and awareness events for
certain global causes at the school, but I try not to let that get to me too much. For
the time being I have enough on my plate!

According to Jay his main coping strategy for everything he has on the go is to
just work through things by willing himself to get things done. He stated that he was
confident in his own abilities academically, saying that his family's expectations that he achieve high grades are now his own expectations. He admitted that most academic work comes easily to him, and if not, he usually knows what he needs to do in order to succeed at the task.

Jay said he is good at advocating for himself, whether it be through setting schedules, organizing and micromanaging his time, or exerting his rights for quiet time in the school residential setting. Jay also identified a resigned sort of willingness on his part to follow the rules of the school system as a means of coping with the grade 12 workload and the hoops he had to get through for entrance to university. He said he is able to cope with most things because he knows his own personality.

Challenges with peer relationships have been a part of Jay's life since primary grades, and he said he copes with feeling different by finding and staying in touch with like-minded gifted and talented friends he has met at summer programs for the gifted in the United States. He admits to feeling like a social misfit who has found his social niche. Jay said that he complains a lot to friends who “feel the same pain” and to teacher advisors he has met at his school.

Being assertive when he sees assignments as just busy work and not being afraid to say so to teachers is another tool Jay uses to deal with the frustration of some academic assignments. He has taken the time to get to know teachers, and thus he feels comfortable asking for extensions when he needs to. His attitude that high school years are “not the glory years” helps him to “leave with no regrets.”

Jay commented that his parents were very supportive of his efforts by giving moral support and encouragement to get involved in the many activities of the school. He
said they have also acted as gatekeepers for his health by encouraging him to relax and take a sick day if he needs to. Jay told me he is recently learning how to take care of his own health by being more aware of his need to take time for himself, to nap, ask for extensions, say no to extra meetings, not squander his time, and take time for running or just a walk around the campus to relax.

Although Jay said he tries to keep abreast of current events on a daily basis and participates in advocacy and political awareness events at school, he attempts to remain detached and unaffected by world issues. Jay said that his beliefs as a liberally minded Muslim are undergoing a period of questioning and searching, a time of diffusion. He was not sure how much he depended upon his sense of spirituality for strength to cope with life’s issues.

Jay’s top two coping strategies on the ACS were to work hard, conscientiously strive for high achievement on school tasks, and to systematically think about a problem and search for alternative viewpoints.

In the frequently used category Jay identified that he shares problems with others and enlists their support, encouragement, and advice. However, he also said that he keeps to himself and doesn’t burden others with his problems. Jay also indicated that he often sees himself as being responsible for the problem.

Sometimes Jay will use physical recreation and relaxing diversions such as reading, television, or going out for a good time as coping strategies. Jay occasionally uses wishful thinking and sometimes uses the strategy of doing nothing, giving up, or feeling ill. He sometimes worries about the future and his personal happiness in particular.
Jay’s profile showed that he does not often seek professional help from qualified people, and he is not one to look on the bright side of things and think positively. Jay does not turn to tension-reduction activities such as crying, screaming, or abusing substances. His answers indicated that he does not rely on prayer or reading of a holy book as ways of coping with stress. He does not participate in activities that use social action as a way to deal with his concerns. He also said he does not use ignoring his problems as a coping strategy. The two lowest scores were on the strategies of seeking to belong by doing things to gain the approval of others, and investing in close friends.

Jay said that his perceptions of what stress and coping mean in terms of his own experiences are summarized in this short piece of poetry.

Imagine a tunnel

with black surfaces except for the road

which is a barely perceptible grey.

Dealing with stress is about focusing

on that dimly perceptible grey

and making your way through

    to the light

    at the end

    of the tunnel.

Luke, 17-Year-Old Male

On my very first visit to the school, even before I was recruiting participants, Luke had introduced himself to me as I waited in the lobby to meet with the principal.

On my second visit to the school he again made a point of introducing himself and
welcoming me to the school.

Luke is of Canadian and African descent and was born in Africa. He had lived all of his life in East Africa before coming to Canada for his grade 12 year. He is the middle child in a family of three boys, with a younger brother who lives in Africa and an older one who is at university in Ontario. Luke spoke in some detail about his schooling experiences in Africa, which brings richness to his story. During my second visit to the school to solicit greater participation, I was invited to speak to the student body about the research. Luke was presenting a devotional meditation at the assembly and was dressed in attire from his home in Africa. He was very interested in why I was doing the study and joined a group of senior students afterwards who had come to ask me questions.

When I asked Luke when it would be convenient for his interview his response was, "I usually work around other people's schedules." He was concerned that if we did the interview on the same day I would be getting home very late. He already had his permission form to participate and agreed to meet at the end of the day for his interview.

As he worked on the ACS he had questions and comments on the context of the questions; for example, he asked several times whether these are personal stress issues or global stress issues? He thought it was difficult to respond to some of the statements because his answers would be different depending on the context. During the interview, Luke seemed very aware of the different levels of questioning. He also appeared to understand the different levels of issues that can cause stress. His comments seemed very wise, both in his analysis of the ACS and when he talked about his Canadian schooling and life experiences. His views reflected his strong sense of values and morals. His perceptions of stress both in his interview and in his writing were unique, and I found
myself wondering why. Even after the data collection was completed he sent me encouraging emails asking how it was going. Luke talked about his reliance on a Higher Being that he called God, while also recognizing that humans have free will to make choices. He also commented that sometimes one needs to rise above worry because one can occupy one’s thought with worry over things that are not really important.

I’m a Canadian citizen, but I’ve never lived in Canada until recently. I grew up in East Africa, and I’ve been here for a year now. Hopefully I’ll soon be able to go back home! My dad is Canadian and my mom is African. I have a younger brother who is 14 and an older brother who is in second year of university here in Canada. Next year I will be doing a year of youth service in Haifa, Israel before I head off to university. I believe youth can change the world, and if they can understand ways in which they can overcome their own problems and difficulties and rise above how they see the world, they can act as catalysts for change and be helping humanity.

Luke had a unique perspective on the topic of stress and coping. He seemed to see everything through the lens of service to humanity, and most of his comments had a philosophical and spiritual slant to them. Even when I asked him to define stress, his answer seemed to be on a different level than the other participants’ definitions.

I don’t know how to describe stress. I would say stress is not enjoying what you are doing. There’s a famous writer who said to have joy in work is contained in one word, excellence. To know what you’re doing is to enjoy it. Sometimes it does get stressful, depending on how people perceive stress. Perceptions develop from the way you have been raised by your parents. As you grow up you develop
certain mental models. What you perceive is filtered through all these different models that you have within your mind. People can look at things through any different light. Some youth may find certain things very stressful and others may not. For example some students procrastinate and leave all their work until the last minute while others get it done right away. Usually I do a lot of things at the last minute unless I have a real desire to do an assignment because it is really interesting to me.

Luke’s comments echo those of other older participants with respect to the relevancy of the course work and assignments in conjunction with the amount of time required to complete the work. Doing busy work does not seem to be appealing to bright and gifted students. They need to know why the assignment is relevant within a bigger context to really want to invest their time and energy in it. I asked Luke to identify some of the things within the school environment that make him feel stressed or anxious. In his initial response he sounded like he was answering in the context of a hypothetical situation, saying what would bother him. Then he talked about stressors for himself and his peers as graduating students.

What would really bother me would be if people had no desire to learn. This would be quite disturbing because it could hinder other students’ progress. If you are in an atmosphere where people hold back their capabilities or talents, or do not desire to express ideas or share, that would be a stressful place in which to learn. Fortunately this school encourages unity in diversity within a clear moral framework, and it is very wonderful here! As a grade 12 student I see that there are three major stressors. First there is pressure to get high marks to get into
university. Second, we are having to say goodbye to friends we have made from all over the world, some of whom we may never see again. Third, I think that older teens have a driving desire to implement change in the world.

Luke talked extensively about his schooling in East Africa as a very different experience compared to what typical Canadian students might have had. He said that the school he attended was very strict, and the students had considerably less freedom than here. The freedom they did have as senior students to leave the campus was taken away by a new administration, and Luke said that unrest spread as the students’ comfort zone was being disturbed. Luke talked about this leading to a silent strike and a hunger strike by the students at his school. It escalated into violence during the day and even more violence under cover of darkness. Students got injured when the military police came in and used tear gas. Luke also told a story about abuse of power by the principal of the African school.

In my school, the curriculum followed the old British system. There was a lot of memory work, and expressing your own point of view was not considered to be that important. The school was a boarding school, and we originally had freedom to leave and return at any time we wanted. The school rules were not implemented that harshly, and the students got very comfortable with that setup. The new principal was hired to implement reforms, to tighten everything up, and consequently our freedoms were cut off. Using the military police and tear gas to quell the students’ strike was pretty scary. Many of us went home for 2 weeks, because in that country when they tell you to get out of there you leave! Probably the most stressful experience I had at school was after we had finished our O level
exams. A group of us headed down the hill to play soccer. The principal found us and ripped out one of the goalposts and beat us all with it. Then he dragged us to the office and made us sit on the concrete floor while he called our parents to tell them he was going to suspend us. He gave us physical punishment, and some of us had injuries from what he did to us. I’d never dreamed that I would be suspended from school for playing soccer after an exam! That was a very stressful time.

I wondered whether having to leave his family in Africa in order to come to school in Canada had been a stressful experience for Luke. He said that leaving home was not a problem because he had been away at boarding school for several years already.

Luke did find significant differences between the worries of Canadian youth and African youth. “If some of the youth in both countries were to voice their complaints the differences would be immense.” He viewed Canadian teenagers as being very self-centred and focussed on material things, while in his home country he said students worry about how small a script to write their notes in so that they don’t run out of paper before the course is finished. In Canada he hears students complaining about the way someone talked to them, or that they don’t get what they want, while in his country people are saying all I need is to get one plate of food a day.

Some people in Africa are dying for a plate of food, and somebody in Canada wants a car for their birthday. Yeah, I see a huge difference in that! Another example is clothing. Certain students perceive that when they put on certain clothing they are of more value to society, which causes them to be stressed. The first time I came to Canada I was actually a little angry that someone could
complain about something so insignificant, while in the north of my country people are saying they just want to be able to go home without fear of being gunned down by the rebels. It's two different worlds. Why are people in Canada depressed when they have material benefits that other people in the world will never see in their lifetimes? You know, in some places where people earn a dollar a day or less, there are people who are happy; people actually smile. In those countries their relationship with God is very strong, whereas in places where there is a more material achievement the relationship with God is veiled by the materialism.

When I asked Luke to comment on global issues that concern him, he spoke as if he had firsthand experiences witnessing war, poverty, and starvation. Luke identified the problems in Africa and other parts of the world as being due to the misallocation of world resources. He voiced concern about the extremes of wealth and poverty, the inequality of men and women, and the inequities in health-care services between first and third world countries. He also talked about how the basic structure of the family unit was breaking down and how for young people their peer relationships are becoming a substitute for family. He was concerned about the lack of respect for parents and for teachers. He also spoke strongly about how youth need to be empowered to make wise choices in order to maintain their morals and values. His main example of this challenge was the backbiting that can go on amongst teenagers.

Luke spoke about how personal perceptions of life and having a strong sense of spirituality help him cope with life's stressors. He said that spirituality plays a vital role in his life. He sees problems as being based in this material world, and having a spiritual
attitude helps to transcend those problems. By focussing his time and energy on serving humanity and striving for high ideals, he finds it is easier to deal with the stress of school and the teenage social scene. He said sometimes he needs to choose to be outside the group when an activity goes against his beliefs. Luke spoke about having strong principles and values instilled at home as he was growing up. Being involved in a creative dance group that has a shared vision of aiding social transformation is one activity at school that Luke found both rewarding and supportive. Maintaining a hopeful attitude about the progress of the world and focussing on success stories in international development help Luke to keep from getting overly stressed by world events. He helps himself to maintain this positive outlook by educating himself about world events and by planning a future in international development. Luke said he sees value in striving to be happy amidst the chaos and breakdown of society because “joy gives us wings.”

Luke’s ACS profile revealed two strategies that he uses a lot. He focusses on the positive by trying to stay cheerful and reminding himself that there are others who are less well off, and he seeks spiritual support by praying and reading holy books.

Frequently Luke will use the coping strategy of thinking systematically about a problem and trying to see other viewpoints. He conscientiously works hard to achieve high standards on his school work. He also tends to keep his concerns and feelings to himself and avoid burdening other people with his problems.

Sometimes Luke will turn to others for advice and encouragement. He sometimes turns to relaxing diversions such as reading, television, or going out to have a good time. His profile showed that sometimes he turns to wishful thinking and hoping that things will work themselves out.
In the little used category Luke identified eight strategies that he seldom uses. He is not one to ignore a problem or pretend it does not exist. He does not usually blame himself, nor does he join in group action to rally for issues or things he is concerned about. Luke does not often find himself concerned about what others think of him, and he does not seek to belong by doing things to gain approval. Luke does not often use tension-reduction strategies such as crying, screaming, or abusing substances. Luke does not take the time to invest in close friendships as a coping strategy. He also does not worry too much about the future and his personal happiness in particular. Luke is not one to give up, feel ill, or do nothing to solve his problems.

Luke submitted excerpts from three term papers he had written for his World Citizenship course and a dance course as examples of his thoughts about stress and coping. While his excerpts of essay writing stayed true to the philosophical slant he took during the interview session, the pieces of writing seemed to lack cohesion, and I felt I needed to contact him for clarification of his thoughts. He responded in an email by saying

The pieces of writing focus on a few wonderful things in our lives and on solutions to certain major problems. The solutions are education and the independent investigation of truth. When we dwell on unpleasant things we become unhappy, but by developing our talents and capacity in order to create solutions to social problems, one fulfills a purpose in life which rarely leaves time for stress and instead brings great joy.

I have a sample of Luke’s writing from one of the term papers to illustrate his comments.
As individuals we must forsake our own presumptions, assumptions, and ideas, and with an open and free mind acknowledge the other pathways that lead us to recognize the whole truth. We have a choice to either cause darkness or to bring light into the world. We have innate capability as humans to acknowledge our impending unity and underlying oneness and to celebrate our diverse qualities.

Mari, 18-Year-Old Female

Mari expressed concern for my having to wait for her to finish a presentation in class before we could start the interview. She was very focussed while completing the ACS and did not ask questions. Once we began the interview she was reluctant to say very much. During the interview she answered questions as briefly as she could; sometimes yes or no would suffice. Mari did not make a lot of eye contact as we talked. She seemed in a rush to get the interview over with, and I wondered if this was because the guidance counsellor had not confirmed the date and time with her as I’d asked, so perhaps Mari was not prepared. I felt very awkward as the interview progressed and wondered how badly I was doing. Does she really want to be a participant? I wondered this as we met, because Mari was always glancing up at the clock or looking through the window in the door.

Mari is from Haitian and French Canadian background, and she indicated that she lived with her mom, grandmother, and a large extended family of aunts and cousins newly arrived from Haiti. Her father lived in a different city. She didn’t really open up until the end of the interview when she was very anxious to get going home. At this point, I asked her how she would cope with something really disastrous. She became emotionally engaged in the discussion of stress in her life when she began talking about
her mom and how important a person she was in her life. It seemed that worrying about her mom was one of the biggest stressors for Mari. She apologized for her tears, saying she always starts to cry when she thinks about her mom.

Mari didn’t reply to approve her transcript for the longest time, more than a month, and she chose to not submit her writing task. Her emails were short and to the point, for example, “Hey I read the attachment and it’s fine!” Further attempts to get her writing task proved futile.

Finding out Mari’s story was, for me, the most difficult of the nine interviews. I had been ill for a few days prior to the interview, and when I went to the school to interview Mari, I was still not feeling well. In hindsight I perhaps should have tried to reschedule it, but the school term was ending and she was leaving the country the following week for a period of volunteer work abroad. I felt this was my only chance to get Mari’s story. She began the interview talking about her family.

I am 18 years old and of French Canadian and Haitian background. I live with my grandmother, mom, step-dad, brother, and four of my cousins in one house. Some of the extended family recently moved to Canada from Haiti [she told me laughingly]. For grade 11 I lived in a different city with my dad, and this year I am completing high school at this private school, far from my home. I really miss my mom though. If I had to say one thing that would be very traumatic for me, it would be if something happened to my mom. Every time when I think that my mom might die, I start crying. I always cry. I’m crying now just thinking about it! It’s weird I guess.

I asked Mari how she would define stress. She said,
Stress is something that affects you emotionally and physically. It is when you don’t feel comfortable in your own body. Stress can make you sick because it affects your body and your mind, and you’re just not the same. Frustration is different than stress. It is more immediate than stress and happens in a short period of time. For example, if I am mad at something or someone, and things are just not going my way, then I can get frustrated.

Mari seemed more comfortable talking about her observations of stress in others rather than talking about herself, so that was the direction our conversation followed.

I think that too much homework is a huge stress trigger for a lot of people, especially in the senior level independent study programs. The expectation is there that you are able to finish everything by a given due date. I have seen friends get really stressed out if their projects and assignments are handed in late. They cry and say they feel like failures. I just say whatever! A lot of us don’t finish work on time, and I know I will lose 5% a day for every day it is late. But I don’t worry about it too much. A second cause of stress is when people set excessively high personal standards for themselves. This is the reason one friend has gone home for a while. She just couldn’t cope. The third area I see that is a source of stress for teenagers is friends and family. A lot of people get affected by things that happen in other people’s lives. When there are family issues, it is going to show up in the student’s marks because their mind is preoccupied by problems at home. Some people have a lot of problems I guess, and they always talk about it with their friends. Then those friends take it all inside and they begin to feel bad, so it affects their lives too. In a small school like this one, it happens a lot because we are so
close and most of us live in different types of residences together. Even though friends’ problems can affect everyone else, I will be really sad to leave here at the end of this school year. Since it is an international school there are a lot of classmates I may never see again, and even with email it is just not the same as being able to get together in person.

I asked Mari whether she felt pressure from her friends. She talked around the issue a bit before zeroing in on a specific example of dating.

I don’t get a lot of pressure from my really good friends, but I do from other friends when they tell me a guy likes me and pressure me to go on a date with him. And it is really bad, but I give in and do what they suggest. Afterwards I usually wish I hadn’t gone on the date. I suppose one thing that really bothers me is when people make assumptions about me because of my appearance, or because of the way I walk for example. They don’t know me, but they make assumptions.

I asked Mari if she ever experienced any physical reactions to stress. She wasn’t really sure whether physical symptoms such as headaches or getting ill were a reaction to stress.

Usually I’m just really easygoing and I try to make the best of it. If I fail it’s because there’s a reflection to that, it’s because I didn’t study, or didn’t study enough. I don’t really know if I have stress symptoms. Even when I interact with other people my behaviour does not change just because I have been stressed out by something. I just keep going on.

We then talked about global issues that Mari felt strongly about. She said she was “a feminist, but not a radical one,” and she wants equality for women.
I know there are differences between men and women; however, women are not always given the same opportunities to strengthen their potentiality and their innate capabilities. There are always expectations on women. Something I am really mad about is the double standard for girls and guys. If a girl has a lot of boyfriends she gets called a lot of derogatory names, but a guy with a lot of girlfriends would never get thought of that way. For guys, life and dating is a game and a lot of fun, and society doesn’t see anything bad. There is more pressure on the girl in that situation.

I encouraged Mari to talk more about her passion for the equality of men and women.

Things like maternity leave need to be changed. If a woman wants to stay home with her children she doesn’t always get enough money and may have to struggle for years. Then when women are ready to go back to working outside the home, they can be so out of touch or out of date with their skills that they find it very hard. Sometimes there are not enough daycare centres for them. Society is living for men and not women.

Another very important issue that Mari spoke about briefly had to do with her spiritual beliefs and practices. She defined spirituality as being the connection between oneself and God, whereas religion is a path that guides you towards God. “I pray, but I don’t think I pray enough. I still question life and myself and things like that. But it is good questioning!”

Mari couldn’t wait around to look over her Adolescent Coping Profile. She had prior commitments to which she had to attend. She promised she would send me her
writing task; however, she never responded, and even after I contacted her many times by email, I did not receive any further data from her.

Mari said her main way of coping was to maintain her sense of herself as an easygoing person who doesn’t let herself get stressed by things or by other people. She seems to recognize her own personality traits. She said, “I’m just not attracted to people who have a lot of problems, because I know that can drag you down. I tend to detach myself from people who are always criticizing and talking about their problems because it really affects other people. I just don’t have any friends right now that are like that. I keep the ones that stick with me!” Mari also referred to the family-like atmosphere at her school and said because everyone seems to care for each other there are fewer stressful expectations from others. Mari copes with academic pressures by having the attitude that marks are not always so important. If an assignment is going to be late, then she accepts the consequence and gets docked a percentage of marks per day, but she doesn’t let it bother her. External things that Mari does to relax included playing volleyball and watching long Indian films with her friends.

Mari’s ACS profile of coping strategies revealed that she has only one strategy that she uses a lot, and that is to seek out relaxing diversions such as reading, watching television, or going out for a good time.

In the frequently used category, she identified working hard to achieve high standards and being conscientious about her school work as one coping strategy. A second strategy was that of focussing on the problem by systematically thinking about it and seeking alternative viewpoints. In the sometimes used category, Mari had the highest number of strategies. Solving the problem and use of physical recreation were the top
two. Worrying about the future and her personal happiness in particular, and seeking social support from friends in the form of enlisting their advice were identified as coping strategies that she sometimes uses. Mari indicated that she sometimes could ignore the problem and pretend that it doesn’t exist. She also indicated that she sometimes spends time organizing group action to deal with issues and concerns. Mari also said she sometimes will seek to belong by doing things to gain the approval of others.

One of the strategies that Mari uses least is prayer and reading of holy books for spiritual support. Her responses in the little used category suggested that she is not one to give up, feel ill, or do nothing to solve her problems. Mari does not invest a lot of time and energy in close friendships. She does not resort to crying, screaming, or abusing substances to release tension. She identified self-blame as a little used strategy. Mari did not have any coping strategies in the never used category. Mari chose to not submit anything for the writing task part of the research.

Paige, 18-Year-Old Female

Paige arrived for her interview immediately after classes ended and said she felt rushed. She was concerned about how long the interview would be because she said she didn’t want to miss the last shuttle bus to her residence. She completed the Adolescent Coping Scale first, asking for some clarification, in the same way Luke did. Paige was not visibly bothered by interruptions when students brought projects into the classroom to be stored. When asked to tell me a bit about herself, she spoke about her family and sister and had to be prompted more than the other participants to talk about herself. Until grade 11 Paige lived in western Canada in a small town with her parents and sister. It seemed as if Paige and her sister are quite close and can talk about anything together. Paige also
mentioned closeness with her parents. She calls them to talk when she feels people around her who “haven’t known me my whole life” are not available.

As our conversation progressed she seemed to become more comfortable, and she spoke with me about witnessing severe depression in one friend and self-mutilation in another friend. Paige referred to herself as being naive when she moved from her home in another province to Ontario. She referred to this school year as “one of those defining moments in my life.” She voiced concern about her indecision about postsecondary school plans, sounding almost apologetic for not really knowing what she wanted to do next. Paige said it bothers her when people press her for details about future plans.

Paige opened up as the interview progressed, talking more about her talents as an artist and a dancer. She really misses the intensive dance program she was involved in before coming to this school and lamented the lack of art studios and places to pursue her passions. She commented that just the previous week she surprised her housemates by painting for a day. When I asked her what that had felt like she said it had been long overdue and was quite fun.

For me right now one of the biggest stressors is figuring out what to do after I graduate from high school. Anyone at this school would say that I’ve wanted to be 16 different professions this year and I’ve wanted to go to 25 different countries and 4 different universities, but I’m not sure. It changes. About a month ago that was a constant stress because every time I would meet someone new, or see someone I hadn’t seen in a while, or talk with a member of my family, they would say, so you’re in grade 12, what are you going to do next year? I think that for a long time my friends expected me to be the one to know what I was doing. I
change my mind about what I want to do all the time. My mom calls it delicious ambiguity!

I see stress as having so much to do and not enough time to do it, or just that sense of impending doom to do with academics, such as too many assignments. Sometimes I’ll have a problem and I don’t know how to fix it. There is one type of stressful situation where I have to relinquish control or when I feel I have no control, and that really is the most stressful for me. I have to sit back and say I’m going to let this happen. It can drive me crazy. The other type of situation occurs when I have control but choose not to exercise it, and then I easily get into the self-blame cycle and the “I should have done such and such” or “if only I had acted earlier” messages. Then there are times when I’ll get that feeling of constantly, constantly having to do a lot. It feels like I have too many obligations such as doing well in school, doing extracurricular activities, and feeling obligated to do well because my parents sent me to a private school, which costs a lot of money. When I am worrying about something, then I am stressed. However there are times when I have periods of short-term worrying when I’m not actually stressed. There are internal and external expectations. I have realized that I have a tendency to “do the race” and that I am a perfectionist. I can often get the feeling that I should have done more, with both school work and with relationships.

Perfectionism: that’s where all the extreme things come from. But now that I’m almost done grade 12 I’m getting kind of apathetic, and I don’t care anymore.

It seems to me that Paige has reached a point in her life as an older teenager where she is able to be reflective about why she reacts the way she does to stress. She referred to
this school year as one of life’s defining moments for her, where she was facing life experiences and choices more independently. She explained that social and peer pressure is not too much of a problem now compared to when she was 15. She talked passionately about going through some emotional challenges in the 2 years she has been at this school.

Not having enough time for friends and finding destressing time when I can relax has been a problem for me. Last year was the first time I’d ever experienced actually living with people who had serious depression. That was the first time I’d met someone who self-mutilated. So I remember last year, and even this year, sometimes feeling really stressed just by the fact that these people whom I care about a great deal are either upset or doing things to themselves that they shouldn’t and there isn’t really anything I can do about it. So then there’s this stress over do I say this or do I try to help them or do I just assume that the school knows what’s going on and will know what to do. There are a lot of people whom I know already have an unbelievable amount of stuff to deal with. It is emotionally challenging for me, and sometimes I get to the point where I absolutely can’t deal with it on my own. Then I talk to someone from home who knows me really well and who is not involved here, like my mom or my sister. I miss them a lot. I worry about my sister and my friends at home.

I asked Paige if it was difficult to decide to leave her family and come halfway across the country for her last 2 years of high school. She said that initially she really wanted to leave home and go to this school.

I live in a small town, and everyone dreams of getting out. I decided I would try it, knowing that I could always go back home if it didn’t work out. Homesickness
was a problem at first, but I found it easy to make friends in the residence. I’ve been more homesick this year than I was last year, because in my second year I began to notice the things that drive me crazy. I got to know people better and see the things in them that irritate me and vice versa.

It seems to me that Paige was saying she was longing for the familiarity of home during the most stressful times.

When it is people who are close to me who are suffering, I can get emotionally drawn into their issues, and it feels like a heavy weight. I try not to take on their sadness, but I also feel it.

I was interested in whether as an 18-year-old Paige felt any stress from the social expectations about dating and lifestyles. Her responses were from personal experience and from the context of what she and her classmates talk about.

Because of the way I’ve been raised as a Bahá’i, I have certain values that my parents instilled and that I have chosen to follow. I think there was more pressure to date when I was younger, around 15. Now the whole boyfriend thing is not what I am looking for, partially because I’ve grown as a person. So now I understand the value and the concept of investigating a person’s character as opposed to dating. This school also discourages what they call exclusive relationships. Maybe the social pressures would be different if I were at a public high school. As far as marriage goes, we all, the entire grade 12 class, stress about marriage. Actually we joke about it, and we talk about it a lot. We all wonder what is going to happen to us in the future, and we play the what’s going to happen in 5 years game and think of the most ridiculous situations!
Paige said there were many global issues that she is passionate about. She had just completed an independent study unit for her World Citizenship course. She focussed her research on child soldiers and spoke with great fervour about how she felt it was impossible not to be concerned over such atrocities as sending young children into war.

On a more personal level, Paige talked near the end of our conversation about how she missed being able to pursue her lifelong interest in dance, visual arts, and playing the piano. She told me she had loved performing on stage. Before coming to this school she had completed grade 8 piano and was also doing competitive dance in ballet, jazz, tap, and hip hop. She also misses the sports teams she was on and the gym classes from her old school. Not only are some of her interest areas not offered as courses at this school, but also she feels she has no time for those activities due to other academic obligations that link with university entrance requirements. “I seem to hear myself always saying that I used to dance or I used to paint. And I have no time anymore,” she said rather ruefully.

Paige’s comments about coping were more about how she deals with the emotional challenges and depression being experienced by her close friends than about her own personal problems. She spoke about her awareness that this year seemed to be a defining moment in her life. Her self-awareness about her own coping strategies and her conscious choice to not burden others with her own problems was evident throughout her interview. She said that she talks to her best friends in an attempt to understand the mindset of people going through depression but that ultimately talking to her mom was more beneficial because of her objectivity and her perspective as a counsellor and social worker. Paige also used the school guidance teacher as another person with whom to talk. She said she has realized the importance of being fully present and attentive for friends in
distress. Sometimes she complains along with her friends about the stresses within the academic environment. When stress in others who are not close friends gets too much for Paige to handle, she chooses to either tune it out or she leaves the situation so as not to be influenced by it. Paige talked about the role her beliefs and values play in her ability to deal with the stressors in life. Paige relies on the power of prayer as a way of helping herself and her friends deal with stress. She believes in the essential nobility of human beings and said she relies on her beliefs as a Bahá’í to give her inner strength. Paige was aware of her own behavioural changes that indicated she was stressed. She said she becomes more moody and irritable, reacting more strongly to situations emotionally. Sometimes she has trouble sleeping because she does not feel tired, even after being awake for long periods of time. She was not sure whether her headaches were stress induced or not. Paige thought her negative coping strategy of just not talking about things that bother her was linked with being a perfectionist. She said that by trying to relinquish perfectionism, she had become somewhat apathetic about the academic expectations in the last term of grade 12. This seemed to be causing some stress because she also felt an obligation to do well right to the end of the year.

Paige’s ACS profile identified her top coping strategy as focussing on solving the problem by systematically analyzing it and seeking alternative solutions and viewpoints. She also indicated that seeking relaxing diversions such as reading, television, and going out for a good time was used a lot. Paige also relies on prayer for spiritual guidance and reading holy books for inspiration.

Paige’s responses indicated that focussing on working hard to achieve high standards and finding time for physical recreation and keeping fit were important
strategies she used frequently. Seeking to belong by doing things to win the approval of others and focussing on the positive were two additional coping strategies that Paige uses.

In the sometimes used category Paige indicated that she invests time and energy in close friendships and seeks social support from others by asking for encouragement and advice. She occasionally worries about the future and about her personal happiness in particular. She sometimes takes personal blame for problems and indulges in wishful thinking as a coping strategy.

In the little used category Paige said she does not often seek professional help. She does not tend to keep to herself. She does not usually get involved in action groups to rally support for a cause. She does not cry, scream, or abuse substances as a way to release tension. She is not one to ignore the problems or pretend they don’t exist. In the not used category Paige indicated that she is not one to give up, feel ill, or do nothing to solve her problems. Paige submitted this explanation of her artwork (Figure 3).

The background is just parts of articles from the Globe and Mail that I cut out that are about various world issues. The writing is not that important, I was merely interested in the fact that they were newspaper articles. The pictures are people from different places that were all involved in some kind of stressful situation, although their faces may not betray that. The fingers on the bottom of the picture are mine, and they are supposed to be reaching both towards the people above, and towards the words of the Bab. The quote says ‘Heed not your weaknesses and frailty; fix your gaze upon the invincible power of the Lord, your God, the Almighty. Arise in His name, put your trust wholly in Him, and be assured of ultimate victory.’ It is from the Bab’s address to the Letters of the Living.
included it because it reminds me that no matter what is going on in my life or in
the world, I can always put my trust in God, and 'arise in His name,' and
contribute in that way, even if there seems to be nothing else I can do.
Figure 3. Paige’s artwork
Thematic Summary of Stressors

The participants' definitions of stress collectively encompass several facets of how stress has been defined in the literature. The participants' commentaries on what they perceived as stressors seem to fit within the stress-as-transaction model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model emphasized the role of appraisal in how a person reacts to stress and chooses coping strategies. Stress was described by the young people in this research study as: feeling as if there is not enough time to do what needs to be done; a feeling of constant pressure; a feeling that you’re not enjoying what you’re doing; a feeling of not being able to handle something; having negative feelings emotionally and physically; feelings of anxiety; a feeling of being not willing to do what needs to be done to cope; a feeling of impending doom; and a feeling of having no control.

I have identified five stress themes around which to focus my presentation of this gallery collection of the participants' story portraits: (a) time issues; (b) relationships, emotions, and communication; (c) ethical, moral, and spiritual issues; (d) global issues; and (e) silences, or the stressors that were not spoken about in depth. A summary of the main findings according to each theme is presented in Tables 1-5.

*Time*

The most common theme that links the nine stories about stress and coping is the thread of time. Menzies (2005) talked about this stress of time issues, calling it the crisis of modern life. Some participants said time acted as a constraint, most commonly as it pertained to completing schoolwork, where they often felt rushed. The theme of time as a stressor echoed what I had read in Honoré's (2004) writings about the changes starting to occur in some school systems to counterbalance the stress of school demands. The
academic workload, especially in grades 11 and 12, in conjunction with being involved with extracurricular activities, led to the older participants in particular feeling that there was not enough time available to complete everything they were expected to complete. Pressure to do well and to compete with others within a time line was cited as a stressor by the participants. Academic pressures such as these could be considered to be the daily hassles of school, as mentioned in the literature review (Andreasan & Wasek, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Several of my participants felt that time spent on school work that they determined was not important was also an issue. Relevancy of academic course material, what one participant called “substance versus fluff," and not having enough time to understand concepts in depth was cited by several participants as being a source of stress. Linked with this was the feeling for some participants that there is a mismatch between their abilities and the expectations of the curriculum. Joseph (1994) has written about this mismatch as being a stressor for some youth. All 9 participants mentioned not having enough time for sleep and relaxation, but the older participants emphasized it more. Sleep deprivation has been documented as a major stress trigger for most people (Joseph). Missing opportunities for artistic pursuits to nourish one’s inner being was cited by one of the eldest girls in the group as being a source of stress. Honoré’s discussion of the doctrine of intensification in some types of schools and the ripple effects of the hurried, speed-obsessed society we live in was echoed in the participants’ comments about feeling rushed and time-bound. Other participants, such as Christine, the 16-year-old girl, and Jay, one of the 17-year-old boys, viewed the theme of time as providing exciting stimulus and desirable challenges. They pointed out that stress is not always a negative experience. Christine and Jay said that having a lot to do forced them to improve
### Cross-Case Summary of Stressors: Time Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time constraints</th>
<th>School stressors</th>
<th>Future plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• lack of sleep time</td>
<td>• amount of homework</td>
<td>• uncertainty as to what lies ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lack of recreational time</td>
<td>• not understanding concepts in depth</td>
<td>• worrying about university acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lack of relaxation time</td>
<td>• relevancy of course material, “fluff vs. substance”</td>
<td>• feeling ambiguity about the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• linked with schoolwork expectations</td>
<td>• atmosphere of not wanting to learn</td>
<td>• don’t know where I fit in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• missing opportunities to nourish inner self through artistic pursuits</td>
<td>• overly full agendas, academic and extracurricular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Cross-Case Summary of Stressors: Relationships and Emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer group</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Changes</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dating, popularity, and the social hierarchy</td>
<td>missing them, being homesick</td>
<td>switching schools and/or residence</td>
<td>feeling different, learning to accept it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressure to conform to societal expectations</td>
<td>fighting with parents</td>
<td>family moving several times</td>
<td>feeling angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>network stress and arguments with friends</td>
<td>family structure breaking up</td>
<td>new country, customs, language</td>
<td>feeling frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fitting in or being the social misfit</td>
<td>sibling rivalry</td>
<td>leaving high school friends</td>
<td>feeling unsure, lacking confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling stronger pressure from peers than from family</td>
<td>feeling emotional closeness to siblings but being far away physically</td>
<td>experiencing different sociocultural attitudes and expectations</td>
<td>feeling pressure to perform, to conform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others’ perceptions of our giftedness or being smart</td>
<td>problems with siblings’ physical and emotional health</td>
<td>family in another country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death of friend</td>
<td>lack of respect for family unit in our society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depression and self-mutilation in friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Cross-Case Summary of Stressors: Ethical, Moral, and Spiritual Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical and moral issues</th>
<th>Spirituality and faith issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• dishonesty and untrustworthiness in people</td>
<td>• feeling pressure to follow faith group’s rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• racism and prejudice</td>
<td>• feeling guilty if act or speak inappropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• backbiting</td>
<td>• confusion about what to believe in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• authenticity in people</td>
<td>• questioning issues of faith, life after death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• procrastination by oneself or others</td>
<td>• taking liberal views of own faith’s teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• competition academically and in sports</td>
<td>• feeling responsible to develop talents and faculties for the betterment of human race and the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• using other people to further yourself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

**Cross-Case Summary of Stressors: Global Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global inequities</th>
<th>Global politics and ideologies</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
<th>Epidemics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• inequalities between men and women</td>
<td>• corruption in government and business</td>
<td>• global warming and Kyoto protocol</td>
<td>• AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• extremes of wealth and poverty</td>
<td>• capitalism and materialism</td>
<td>• public ignorance about peak oil issues</td>
<td>• SARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• starvation and homelessness</td>
<td>• use of child soldiers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• misallocation of natural resources</td>
<td>• proliferation of wars in Iraq, Uganda, Afghanistan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• inadequate health care worldwide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Cross-Case Summary of Stressors: Silences – Stressors Not Spoken of in Depth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Physical body image</th>
<th>Self-imposed expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• frustration with being</td>
<td>• male body image: self-perceptions of being small to be an athlete</td>
<td>• grade 12 marks really important for university acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impatient with self and others and how behaviour is affected</td>
<td>• peers make assumptions because of appearance or the way someone walks</td>
<td>• tendency to “do the race”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• withdrawing from social interaction</td>
<td>• females did not mention body image as stressor</td>
<td>• self-blame when things don’t go well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• not eating</td>
<td>• thoughts about sexuality and sexual orientation not talked about</td>
<td>• choosing to not exercise control or good judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• pacing when nervous</td>
<td></td>
<td>• perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• gum-chewing when nervous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and develop their organizational and prioritizing skills. Christine and Jay both said they would feel at a loss if they were not overly busy. Madison, the 13-year-old girl, also said she would probably not know what to do with a free afternoon. Are these 3 teenagers losing the ability to live their lives without a day planner and a schedule of events? In a different sense, for some of the participants, the time of life they were experiencing, adolescence, was perceived to create boundaries to their freedom of choice and movement. Some of the teens felt they were very bound by societal and parental rules and expectations for their respective ages. Some of the participants in my study referred to the stress of meeting the biopsychological needs of adolescence (Csikzentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998). In particular, the 4 female participants, Madison, Christine, Paige, and Mari, and the youngest male, Alex, said they felt somewhat stressed when they tried to meet the challenge of being assertive and speaking up to teachers when they felt overwhelmed by the fact that there was just too much academic work to be completed. Csikszentmihayli and Schmidt discussed unreasonable restrictions of physical movement and freedom as one category of stressors experienced by teenagers. In my study the older male participants, Luke, Logan, Jonathan, and Jay, did not seem to feel as bound by these societal and age restrictions as the 13- and 16-year-olds.

The future was another aspect of time that caused stress. The senior students were all worried about their grade 12 marks, university acceptance, and scholarships. They were completing summative assignments and exams in the last few weeks of school. Some of these adolescents felt that worrying and thinking about their futures was stressful, and their reactions ranged from fears and uncertainties of "not knowing where 1
will fit in and what lies ahead” to a sense of “delicious ambiguity” about the future. Self-blame, uncertainty, and self-concern were identified as causes of stress in the literature review (Harter, 1999; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1981).

Relationships, Emotions, and Communication

The second theme that emerged was that of relationships, emotions, and communication. Emotions as a subtheme of relationships encompasses the intrapersonal, looking at one’s own feelings, and the interpersonal, looking at relationships with peers and family members. Communication as a subtheme involves looking at whether the interactions between people are based on principles of inclusion, exclusion, or consultation.

Peer relationships were viewed by the participants as sources of both tension and pressure, and as well as sources of support. Some peer issues are normative stressors, some are daily stressors, and some can be significant life-changing events (Compas & Wagner, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Peers were referred to in terms such as close friends, intimate friends, good friends, best friends, acquaintances, and classmates. Issues about popularity and the social hierarchy amongst peers and classmates were mentioned by the 16- and 17-year-old boys as being stressful. Rutter (1979) reported that some boys are more vulnerable to stress. Pressure to date was felt to be a stressor by two of the 17-year-old boys and one 18-year-old girl. Several participants said that peers definitely had more influence on them than family. All the participants talked about relationships with family members. Arguments with friends or family members were a common cause of stress for several of the participants, but more for the 2 youngest girls, Madison and Christine. This had emerged as a stressor discussed in the literature by Asmussen and
Larson (1991). Family-related stressors included living in a different country and the subsequent initial homesickness, sibling rivalry, frustration with being away from siblings to whom they felt close, sibling health issues, arguments with parents, breakdown of the family structure, and the perception by Luke, one of the 17-year-old boys, that the lack of respect for the family unit in our society was both a cause and an effect of stress on family members. Family members were referred to as being either nurturing or restrictive. Peers' perceptions of the participants' giftedness and being highly able or talented was considered by a few participants to be stressful, but most felt they had learned how to handle this stressor at a younger age. Self-defeating attitudes and erroneous assumptions (Joseph, 1994), such as feeling like a social misfit and not fitting the normal social expectations, was mentioned as being somewhat stressful for Madison, the youngest girl, and Jay, one of the 17-year-old boys. Both said they had accepted that fact they are different. Emotions such as feeling angry, feeling frustration, feeling unsure, lacking confidence, and feeling pressure to perform and to conform to an expected code of behaviour were talked about as being stressful by many of the participants to different degrees. Joseph referred to self-defeating attitudes and erroneous assumptions that contribute to stress in some people. Some of the participants felt they were able to communicate with friends and family in an open, inclusive, and trusting way, some felt isolated and excluded from both parents and the teen social scene at their school, and some had developed long-distance links with like-minded friends and family members that they maintained as a social support network. Regular consultation with these people at a distance was very important. School-related stressors link with the emotions theme. Stress was experienced when teens felt academic boredom and when they felt they were
being expected to do well because they are bright or gifted. Other areas of concern for the adolescents in this study were getting obsessed with marks and performance expectations, feeling conflicted about whether the expectations to follow had been externally or internally set, feeling like classmates were not wanting to learn, holding back on one’s own talents and capabilities in order to be accepted by the peer group, choosing to not exercise good control or judgement in a stressful situation, and needing to be treated with fairness and justice by teachers and administrators. Only 1 student spoke about a stressful life experience of in-school violence that took place in a school setting outside Canada. In general, the participants referred to teachers, administrators, and mentors as being supportive, helpful, and aware. Luke’s experiences in the African school system led him to portray teachers there as unapproachable, unreasonable, and distant.

Linked with peer and family relationships was the factor of having to undergo major life changes in places of residence or schooling. Moving to Canada from overseas was cited by Christine, the 16-year-old girl, and Luke, one of the 17-year-old boys as initially being a challenge, mainly from the point of view of experiencing and learning the different sociocultural attitudes and expectations and having to adapt to a North American way of interacting and speaking. Frydenberg et al. (2003) have written about how someone’s unique cultural background can affect school anxieties and coping strategies. Harter (1999) discussed how socialization histories with family, peers, and media could influence perceptions of experiences. Madison, the youngest girl, had experienced numerous moves to several different countries and cities over a short period of time due to parental job transfers. Having to leave and make new friends so often was cited as being difficult for her. She said she now doesn’t try to get close to friends because she
knows how hard it will be to leave again. For the senior students in this study, Paige, Mari, Luke, and Jay, the reality of having to leave their closest high school friends within a month of talking with me was a big stressor. Interpersonal relationships (Smetana et al., 1991) can be a big stressor for adolescents. This theme of leaving friends took on a different slant when Jonathan, the 16-year-old boy, spoke about having to deal with the stressful life event of the sudden and untimely death of a very close friend. He said it was extremely stressful and that it tested his spiritual beliefs. One of the oldest girls, Paige, said that seeing the effects of depression and self-mutilation in a close friend was one of the hardest experiences she has had to cope with on a spiritual level.

Ethical, Moral, and Spiritual Issues

Ethical, moral, and spiritual topics that the participants discussed bring this study of stress in adolescents to an intrapersonal, emotional level. Some gender differences showed up in the comments of the participants. Self-imposed expectations as a cause of stress were more evident in the girls’ comments than the boys’ comments. The girls all said they know they tend to use self-blame when things don’t go well. Paige, one of the 18-year-old girls, said she was a perfectionist and identified her tendency to “do the race” (Pope, 2001) as a major cause of stress. She also identified choosing to not exercise control or good judgement as an emotional stressor.

Almost all the participants had strong opinions about ethical issues between people that were stressful. Issues that concerned them were: dishonesty and untrustworthiness in people; perceived lack of authenticity in people; racist and prejudicial attitudes in people; backbiting; attitudes of procrastination in oneself and in others; tendencies in people to use others to further themselves; and competition in
academics and sports leading to unethical practices and behaviours.

Issues of faith and spirituality also were raised by some of the participants. The youngest girl, Madison, expressed a feeling of pressure to follow her Christian faith group's rules and that she often feels guilty if she acts or speaks inappropriately. There was a sense amongst almost all the participants of confusion about what to believe. They all had questions about issues of faith and spirituality, and some, such as Jonathan, about life after death. Jay, who was Muslim, and Mari, who was Bahá’í, both voiced concerns that they were taking overly liberal views of their religion's teachings and felt a bit guilty because of this personal interpretation of the laws and tenets of their faith. Luke, Mari, and Paige, all Bahá'is, felt a great social responsibility to develop their high intelligence, talents, and faculties for the betterment of the human race and the world.

Global Issues

Concern for their world and their future place in it was very much evident in almost all the participants' responses (Frydenberg, 1999; Frydenberg et al., 2003). Everyone except Alex, the 13-year-old boy, identified several global situations as being of great concern to them. These gifted and highly able adolescents had a vision and concern for the world that made their stressors from school, family, and friends pale in comparison. They spoke with passion and fervour about global inequalities and the extremes of wealth and poverty. They were worried about widespread corruption in business and government, and they saw the culture of affluence (Luthar, 2003) that focuses on capitalism and materialism as being the root cause of poverty, homelessness, and starvation around the world. Luke, Mari, and Paige spoke about the inequality of men and women worldwide being a hindrance to the progress of society. On the environmental
front, these young people worried about the misallocation of natural resources, about public ignorance about peak oil issues, and the Kyoto protocol and global warming. The inadequacy of health care for everyone on a worldwide basis and the proliferation of AIDS and other epidemics were of concern to many of the participants. The older students talked about their concerns with American foreign policy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The African Canadian boy, Luke, spoke more specifically about the devastating effects of more than 40 years of war in Sudan and Northern Uganda. Paige, one of the 18-year-old girls was very concerned about the use of child soldiers. Madison, the youngest girl, expressed concern and fear about the number of environmental disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis and health epidemics such as AIDS and SARS that had been occurring over the past few years.

Silences: Stressors not Spoken of in Depth

Some topics were just not raised by the participants during the interviews. Other topics were spoken about only briefly. Two topics which were not mentioned by the participants but which had appeared in the literature were gender competition and fear of success. Three areas that were mentioned, but not in depth, are presented here.

Behavioural changes. When the participants were asked about how their behaviour changed under stressful conditions, the responses varied; however, no one really spoke at any length about this topic. Madison and Alex, the 2 youngest participants, did not say much about how their behaviour changes when they are stressed. Madison said she sometimes laughs for no apparent reason, or she withdraws to her room and turns her music on really loud to annoy others. Paige, one 18-year-old participant, said she became frustrated with being impatient with herself and others, and she didn’t want to
elaborate on the specifics of what frustration looked like. Jonathan, the 16-year-old boy, said he becomes much more serious and stops joking around with his friends. Christine, the 16-year-old girl, said she paces when she is tense during exams, needs to chew gum when she is nervous, and if she gets depressed she stops eating. Some of these behaviours had been mentioned in the literature on adolescent stress and coping (Lyon, 2000). Jay, a 17-year-old boy, said he simply withdraws from social interaction. Luke, also a 17-year-old, said his behaviour did not change. His belief was that it wasn’t necessary to be worried, that with discipline and a spiritual attitude he can rise above the petty issues that can cause stress. Logan, the third 17-year-old boy, said his behaviour did not really change when he was stressed. He just tries to have fun now because he knows he is going to die someday, so why worry too much about anything.

Body image. The topic of physical body image as a stressor was mentioned only by Alex, the 13-year-old boy. He said that he considered himself to be physically small for his age and that this really bothered him when he thought of himself as an athlete and when he played varsity sports against much larger boys. None of the girls mentioned body image as an issue. One of the 18-year-old girls briefly made reference to becoming angry and frustrated with people who make assumptions about a person because of the way a person might walk. The topics of female attractiveness, concepts of beauty, and society’s ideal female body image as portrayed by the media were not mentioned by any of the girls in this study. This surprised me because I thought it would be a significant stressor for young women, since it has been studied by researchers in the past (Levine et al., 1994). The only one who even alluded to the topic was Madison, the 13-year-old girl, who said she refused to roll up her skirt above regulation length to show off to the boys and that
boys should be interested in her for her mind, not her looks. She commented that all the
girls roll their skirts to show off more leg to the boys. I did not directly ask about the topic
of body image and, if I had, the participants might have spoken about it. I had reasoned
that perhaps there was not enough time to explore this topic in one interview.

*Sexuality and sexual identity.* None of the participants offered comments about
issues of sexuality or their sexual identity, which I had thought would be normative
stressors for the age group. It was hinted at by one 18-year-old girl in the context of
feeling pressured by her friends to go on dates with boys she really was not that interested
in dating, but she said she would give in and go on a date anyway and then feel bad
afterward. One thing that really bothered this participant was the double standard she
perceived about how society views females as loose women if they date a lot of boys
while telling a male it is fine to play the field and date a lot of different girls. One of the
18-year-old girls, Paige, said she had more stress with dating issues when she was 15 than
as an 18-year-old. She said that now she understands the reasons for getting to know a
person’s character before developing an exclusive relationship. It seemed that only one
of the 17-year-old boys, Jay, who declared himself to be the social misfit since grade 1
and who said during the interview that he was definitely not into dating, might have been
struggling with sexuality issues, but nothing was overtly spoken about. Perhaps there was
not enough time within the context of one interview for the participants to feel totally
comfortable with talking about sexuality as a stressor for adolescents; however, in the
context of our society, I had expected this topic to come up. I did not overtly ask about
their perceptions of whether sexuality was a stressor for adolescents because it was only
one interview and I felt there would not be enough of a comfort zone to get too personal.
Thematic Summary of Coping Strategies

The interviews and the summary profiles of the participants' Adolescent Coping Scales yielded the following overview of coping strategies used by the 9 gifted and highly able teens in the study. Their answers on the ACS surveys and what they said in their interviews were strongly similar. The 8 of the 9 participants who wanted to see their profiles all commented about how accurately the profiles portrayed the types of things they used as coping strategies. This concurrence of data was good and somewhat expected given what I had read about the ACS as an instrument to measure adolescents' coping strategies. I have identified eight themes within the coping strategies that the participants talked about. These themes are: (a) seeking relaxing activities; (b) having positive attitudes and making wise choices; (c) maintaining relationships with peers and family; (d) understanding the role of faith and moral beliefs; (e) having a supportive environment; (f) knowing your own personality type; (g) being aware of negative coping strategies; and (h) keeping busy and avoiding stressful issues. A summary of the main coping strategies for each of these 8 themes is presented in Table 6.
Table 6

**Cross-case summary of coping strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Seeking relaxing activities</th>
<th>Theme: Having positive attitudes and making wise choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• reading for pleasure</td>
<td>• striving to be happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• writing or keeping a journal</td>
<td>• being resilient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• doing anything creative</td>
<td>• being assertive about needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• playing or listening to music</td>
<td>• being self-confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creating art (dance, visual art, music)</td>
<td>• having the courage to dare to be different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• playing a sport (rugby, soccer, swimming, volleyball, fitness workouts)</td>
<td>• being very focussed and attentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• getting into natural environment (camping, hiking, walking, running)</td>
<td>• developing personal perceptions of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• having a spiritual attitude to transcend problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• becoming self-aware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• realizing that academic marks are not all that important</td>
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</table>

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Maintaining relationships with peers and family</th>
<th>Theme: Understanding the role of faith and moral beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• realizing that close friends are supportive</td>
<td>• following the rules and expectations of Christian teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• connecting with friends and family by phone calls</td>
<td>• focusing on the spiritual and noble nature of human beings as taught in the Bahá’í faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• using technology (email, web cams, chat rooms) to stay in touch with friends and family</td>
<td>• having the freedom within a liberally minded branch of Islam to search for meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• knowing that good friends encourage strengths in others</td>
<td>• being atheist and believing we are all going to die in the end, so have fun now and don’t worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• appreciating a deeper level of understanding amongst friends</td>
<td>• understanding that no matter what your faith is, it is important to make ethical decisions to help change what is bad in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having parents who are supportive</td>
<td>• questioning the meaning of life and the role of spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having parents who do not have unrealistic expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having parents who set limits and boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having parents who give freedom and show trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having siblings who give emotional support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having a family that cares about emotional and physical well-being and health</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Having a supportive environment</th>
<th>Theme: Knowing your own personality type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• finding and maintaining a supportive peer group</td>
<td>• being an easy-going type of personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having the opportunity for consultation with teachers, guidance counsellors, mentors, social workers, and parents</td>
<td>• not being a worrier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• being in a school that supports and encourages adolescent growth and development</td>
<td>• accepting who you are, where you are, at this point in your life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• knowing if you have a tendency to become moody and irritable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• being able to stay detached from other people’s problems</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Being aware of negative strategies and worrying</th>
<th>Theme: Keeping busy and avoiding stressful issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• knowing when you choose to retreat from society or from friends</td>
<td>• deliberately having a full schedule helps to not waste time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• being aware of tendency to be sarcastic</td>
<td>• just willing yourself to do it all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• being aware of when you choose to deliberately annoy others</td>
<td>• overdoing your schedule to avoid looking at inner problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having knowledge about negative coping strategies that cause self-harm (abusing drugs, not eating, self-mutilation)</td>
<td>• just forgetting about the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• having physical ailments (headaches)</td>
<td>• finding distractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• experiencing sleep disorders</td>
<td>• tuning out, leaving the situation, refusing to talk about problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sinking into apathy or depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• quitting school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• blanking out, not responding</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seeking Relaxing Activities

The first coping theme is seeking relaxing activities. Reading for pleasure was one strategy for relaxing during stressful times, and it was one of the activities that was missed a great deal by Madison, the 13-year-old girl, and Jay, one of the 17-year-old boys, during the school year when academic reading took precedence. Some of the female students, Christine and Paige, mentioned that they write and keep a journal. The female participants favoured strategies that involved doing anything creative, such as creating visual art or dance. Both males and females said they like to play and listen to music as a way of relaxing. The 3 oldest girls and all of the boys mentioned participation in either individual sports such as skiing, running, or swimming or team sports such as soccer, rugby, and volleyball. The 16-year-old girl, Christine, went to exercise at the fitness gym. Logan, one of the 17-year-old boys, mentioned that he enjoyed activities in the natural environment such as hiking, backpacking, and camping with a small group of friends.

Having Positive Attitudes and Making Wise Choices

The second coping theme is about having positive attitudes and making wise choices. All of the participants clearly expressed their awareness of the importance of a positive attitude. They used action phrases such as strive to be happy, be resilient, be self-confident, and be assertive about your needs. Some of them said it was important to develop personal perceptions of life, be self-aware, and have a spiritual attitude to help transcend everyday problems. They identified the need to have courage to dare to be different. They also talked about need to be very focussed, and to realize that academic marks are not always the most important thing in life.
Maintaining Relationships with Peers and Family

The third coping theme is maintaining relationships with peers and family. This theme emerged as a stressor and as a coping strategy. The participants all identified close friends as being supportive. Good friends were seen as people who encouraged strengths in others. There was agreement amongst all the participants that the underlying level of understanding amongst friends was really valuable in helping them cope with stress. The participants all made use of technology such as email and internet chat services to stay in touch with friends and family. Parents and siblings were seen by most of the participants as being very welcome sources of emotional support and as gatekeepers for health-related issues. Parents who did not have unrealistic expectations and who set limits and boundaries were viewed as being people these adolescents would turn to if they needed help. The level of freedom and trust bestowed upon the adolescents by the adults in their lives was looked upon as being an important element that built up self-confidence in the teens’ abilities to deal with problems and stressful situations.

Understanding the Role of Faith and Moral Beliefs

The fourth coping theme was understanding the role faith and moral beliefs. The role of a strong belief system as a coping strategy emerged for 5 of the participants within the framework of three of the world’s religions: Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í faith. One participant was an atheist. The other 3 did not identify themselves with a specific religion or identify using faith as a coping strategy. The youngest girl identified herself as Christian, and said her values and beliefs were instilled in her through her church. By following its rules and expectations she found she could cope with most moral issues. The 2 oldest girls, Paige, and Mari, and 1 of the 17-year-old boys, Luke, were members of
the Bahá'í faith. All 3 identified with the principle of belief in the essential spiritual nature of human beings, and they all said they turned to the Bahá'í writings and prayers for strength and guidance. Jay, 1 of the other 17-year-old boys, was Muslim. He said that the branch of Islam that he followed was very liberal minded. He said that while he drew strength from his beliefs, he was also going through a period of serious questioning about the role of religion in his life. The other 17-year-old boy, Logan, identified himself as an atheist whose philosophy of surviving stress was one of resignation that we are all going to die in the end so one might as well have fun now. Common to all the participants’ concern about global issues was the awareness that one has a moral obligation to make ethical decisions for changing what is bad about the world.

**Having a Supportive Environment**

The fifth coping theme was having a supportive environment and being able to talk with people about stressful issues. All the participants said that consultation with teachers, guidance counsellors, mentors, social workers, and parents was a very helpful coping strategy. They also identified having a positive and supportive peer environment as being important to them. Swiatek (2000) had referred to these coping strategies in earlier research, as cited in the literature review. Both school settings were seen as being supportive and having a good mentorship and advisory program for students with problems. The smaller school was referred to by the participants as having a very family-like atmosphere, which they appreciated.

**Knowing Your Own Personality Type**

The sixth coping theme was that it was important to know your own personality type. This was espoused mainly by Logan, a 17-year-old boy, but was echoed by a few of
the older girls and boys. Other advice for this theme included be easygoing, don’t worry, accept who you are where you are, know yourself well enough to know if there is a tendency to become moody and irritable, and stay detached from other people’s problems.

*Being Aware of Negative Coping Strategies*

The seventh coping theme is about being aware of negative coping strategies and worrying. Some participants said they retreat from society and from friends when they are stressed. Madison, the youngest girl, said she would choose to deliberately annoy others or use sarcasm to hurt others. Other negative coping strategies were mentioned as being seen in peer group behaviours but not directly used by the participants. These included abusing drugs, quitting school, not eating, self-mutilation, blanking out and not responding, having minor sleep disorders, experiencing physical ailments such as tension headaches or migraines, slowly sinking into apathy, and depression.

*Keeping Busy and Avoiding Stressful Issues*

The final coping theme was one of deliberately keeping busy and avoiding stressful issues. The 2 youngest girls and 1 of the 17-year-old boys mainly espoused this strategy. These 3 participants all said that with a full schedule it helps them to not waste time. Sometimes one just has to will oneself to do it all. They admitted that by overdoing their agenda schedules they could avoid looking at inner problems. Some of the youth said they deliberately seek out distractions. Others just put the problem situation out of their thoughts, while others said they tune out, leave the situation, or refuse to talk about the problem.

*The Artwork and Writing Tasks*

Seven of the 9 participants submitted either art or written work on the theme of
stress and coping. Analyzing someone else’s artwork is not easy, and I do not presume to fully know what was in the minds of the artists when these works were produced. I think the participants’ comments speak for themselves. There is obvious symbolism for the stressor of time and a sense of frustration and entrapment in all three works. A sense of tension is present in all three pieces. I was pleased that three of the submissions were visual art, because I think this is one area for future researchers to explore. Over a longer study it might be possible to have students produce a portfolio of work on the topic of stress and coping for a specific age group and use the visual imagery rather than words to develop an overview of what the experience of stress is like.

The poetry submissions were from 2 of the 17-year-old boys. In Jonathan’s poem the inner anguish of stress from peers and the feeling of competition juxtapose with imagery of playing a game of chess. It also suggests to me that the writer knows how to cope with stress. In Jay’s rather spare piece of poetry, the bleakness and starkness of the road and tunnel image, mixed with the monochromatic shades of black and grey and the light at the end of the tunnel, seem to suggest that the writer feels there is only one way through stressful situations, and that sometimes you cannot see where you are going but you have to keep on moving through the tunnel.

The other two written submissions, from Madison and Luke, were done as question-and-answer and excerpts from essays written for a course, respectively. Madison’s question-and-answer format reiterated what she had said about stress and coping in her interview and on the ACS profile. I found it harder to extract meaning from the excerpts from the essays. In the context of Luke’s very philosophical and spiritual views, perhaps there is more meaning to him as the writer than to me reading only
excerpts from a longer paper.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins with an excerpt from my own journal writing during this research journey. I share it to provide a more personal frame for my questioning and searching for answers about stress in adolescence. Then the limitations and potential weaknesses of this study are discussed. Some implications of the messages in the participants' stories as gleaned from my analysis of the data and from my personal perspective are stated. I discuss the educational and theoretical implications of this study and suggestions for future research. It is my hope that this research will encourage educators, social workers, health-care providers, researchers, and parents to become more aware of the important roles stress and emotions play in the lives of teenagers and to think of and develop new strategies for empowering young people to deal with stress in constructive, positive, and healthy ways.

A Final Framing

As I listened to each participant talk about stress and coping, I found myself empathizing and identifying with different aspects in each one's story, since I felt that parts of their experiences and mine resonated with similarities, even though we were from different generations. In this final chapter, I include some of my own thoughts from my reflective journal writing about what led me to investigate the topic of stress in gifted and highly able adolescents and what this research journey has been like for me.

My reasons for choosing to study stress and coping strategies in gifted and highly able adolescents have roots in personal experience. Early in this Master of Education program, a professor advised me to choose a topic about which I was passionate. My experiences parenting three gifted children through the preteen and teen years as I was
beginning this research, teaching early adolescents for more than 2 decades, and remembering and needing to understand and tell my own experiences as a gifted adolescent all contributed to my choice of topic. The process of researching, questioning, and writing has facilitated my looking at my own experiences both as a teenager and as a middle-aged student reflecting and learning anew what stress and coping mean to me. As an educator beginning this research, I had hoped to find some new insights into how I can better prepare and empower my own children and my students to deal with stress, so that when they reach adulthood they don’t have to relearn and reexperience the lessons with which the stress of life presents them. The gallery displaying the portraits of my participants’ stories is now given the background framing of my own story.

My Story

Once upon a time there was a young girl who had a beautiful voice. She sang from morning until nightfall, sometimes out loud and all the time inside her head. Sometimes the music was even in her dreams. She was happy and lighthearted. She had loving parents who provided for her needs, and a wonderful caregiver who took her to the beach every day to play. The beach was a treasure trove of inspiration with the sun and the sand and the waves. The songs rippled through her soul just as the waves played tag with her toes. She had a special place where she often went alone to listen to the music inside her and just to think. The old willow tree in her backyard was a wonderful hiding place. Its weeping branches provided a delicate screen, from behind which she could see the world, but nobody could see or find her. It was her secret place, her safe place, where she could just be with her music, her feelings, and her thoughts.

There were a few things that really bothered her as a young child. Mostly these
things were situations when she felt she did not have a choice, that something was
decided for her by well-meaning adults who probably thought that as a child she had no
opinion worth listening to. Wanting to please, she learned how to ignore her own voice.
She has a memory of when she was 4: The neighbour boy from across the street told her
he was going to marry her. She protested adamantly that this would never happen
because she really did not like him at all, yet he vowed he would find her when they grew
up and that she wouldn’t have a choice. The imminent lack of choice resonated like a
dissonance inside her.

Then one day she started school. She wanted to run and explore, but the teacher
said that “girls have to be ladylike so don’t run around and get dirty.” The teacher also
insisted that they had to have naptime. She didn’t need a nap! She didn’t like to lie on a
towel on the cold gym floor! But she quickly learned how to “play school,” soon
realizing that once you learned the rules of the school game and the teachers saw that
you followed them, they let you have more freedom to run and explore. The young child
learned very, very quickly, and soon she was being sent to the principal’s office for tests.
The principal was a very stern man armed with a stopwatch and a book of puzzles, word
problems, and pattern blocks. The girl was extremely obedient and quite shy, so she
didn’t ask any questions about why she had to take these tests. She worried quite a bit
about the stopwatch and the tests. What if she failed? She couldn’t fail. Her father was
the provincial school inspector and a very highly respected educator. Her mother was a
teacher too. She just couldn’t do poorly on tests of any sort! The fear of failure was very
strong and was to remain so for a very long time.

Time passed and the girl grew older. Doing well on those tests had meant she was
accelerated through grades 1 through 4, and so sometimes she had felt she was challenged. At other times the teachers just gave her busy work, more of the same, since she could do it quickly and understood it all. That was frustrating, but she was too afraid to speak out and say she was bored.

All this time, the music continued to flourish and grow within her. She practised a lot, enjoying the many hours at the piano creating magical soundscapes. She won many prizes for her performances. She wrote long stories and poetry. She discovered a talent for art as well and felt proud when her teachers recognized her way of speaking through her stories and her paintings.

Then one day, when the girl was about 8, her family moved to a new city. The children there didn’t know her, everything was strange and new, and because she was shy it was hard to make friends. On the first day of school, when they went to pick teams for baseball, they ignored her until she was the only person left. Maybe it was because they knew she wasn’t good at baseball, she thought. The teachers at the new school didn’t really know her either and didn’t seem to care that the work seemed too easy and she was bored. But she kept quiet because that was how the game of school was played. It wasn’t cool to stand out.

Then one day in grade 6 a new principal called her to his office for more tests. The tests weren’t too hard, but there was one that she didn’t complete before the stopwatch clicked. That really bothered her, and she felt like a failure. But she told no one. Several of her classmates had to take the same tests. No one really talked about them afterwards, at least not until some were chosen to go to an enrichment class. The girl was left wondering for years and years afterwards why she wasn’t picked to go too. She was
too afraid to ask anyone, even her parents, believing that the adults must know best. After all, she was just a kid. She thought she was smart; at least that's what she had been told all along until now. Now she wasn't sure at all.

The next few years of middle school were not happy ones. Her friends were gone to the enrichment class, and school was very boring. She buried herself in music, reading, and writing as her solace.

More time passed, and the girl moved on to high school. The last few years of high school were happier times, and she finally found a group of like-minded friends. But all too soon it was time for everyone to head to university, and listening once more to the voices of teachers and parents, she chose a course that was of some interest to her but did not involve music or art. Once more the inner, creative, artistic voice was shelved in order to follow an expected path that might lead to more secure employment options. She tried to find ways to keep the music voice alive, but it was difficult. Academics took up so much time in order to get high marks. The soul-nurturing time of spending hours at the piano faded into a memory. And her creative voice faded with it.

Eventually the undergraduate university years were behind her. Along the way she had found small ways to further her passion for studying music, while completing other degrees. Oddly enough, she chose to become an educator, and perhaps unwittingly to continue the game of playing school. However, even over the ensuing years as a teacher her true voice had begun to drown under the other voices of "you should do this or be this" and so, unwittingly, she began to stop listening to the inner voice.

Unconsciously the choice was made to let her inner voice sink out of sight. With career obligations, the "you should" voices won out for many years, until she got older and had
three children of her own. As preteens and teens they began asking the same types of questions she had once asked, about life, and about educational and career paths. At this point she began to look at her own story again, but with a different lens and more mature vision. The need to teach her own children the power and strength of their own voices, gifts, talents, and visions became so very clear. The need to find ways to empower her own students to be true to their inner voices became very clear. The need to listen to her own voice and trust it was strong. And so she began learning again.

The processes of questioning, researching, and looking back at my own experiences raising and working with gifted children and adolescents have become a journey of self-discovery as much as a journey of academic research. My fears are still there, the uncertainty is still there, the ingrained lessons of how to play school are still there, the voices saying, “you should” are still there. I am hoping that from now on I will be able to use my voice to write a different ending, for myself and for the young people in my life. I offer this restorying of my own experience as a personal contextual lens or reference point for my commentary and framing of the stories of the 9 participants in this research. Each participant’s story, coping profile, writing, or piece of art gives readers a unique glimpse of the many facets of what it is like to be a gifted or highly able adolescent in a Canadian, urban, coeducational independent school setting and what types of things are perceived and experienced as stressful.

Limitations and Potential Weaknesses of the Study

This study is only one exploration of the experiences of 9 highly able and gifted adolescents in a short period of time. It is not a longitudinal study, which would probably yield a broader range of stories, themes, and observations. To get a more complete picture
of gifted adolescents' experiences with stress it would be necessary to follow many participants' stories over perhaps an entire year or more. The specific stories and results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to a larger group by age or gender, but themes did emerge that might be more universally applicable to gifted adolescents than to average students. Also, this study cannot claim causal relations for adolescent stress.

This study was limited by the fact that I was teaching full time in one school setting in one city and conducting research at the same time in two different school settings in two different cities. The interview times were predicated on teaching schedules for me and timetables and spare periods for students, both of which had some inflexible and predetermined finite time boundaries. Second or follow-up interviews were not possible.

Another limitation in this study was the challenge to maintain anonymity because the sample size was small and the interviews were conducted in a school setting where the potential existed for peers to possibly notice who was going into an interview session.

During this research I was studying students under the age of majority, and as a result, there were multiple gatekeepers such as principals, teachers, parents, and guardians, who could say no to participation at any point in the research. The students themselves had the option to refuse or drop out of the study. This did affect sample size, given that 1 participant chose to not show up for the interview. Two participants chose to not submit a writing or art task, the third piece of data from which I constructed their stories.

The fieldwork for this research took place during the spring term, and this may have influenced the students' perceptions of stress and how they told their stories. The
senior students were finishing up high school, awaiting university acceptance letters, and thinking about leaving friends behind. The time of the school year could also have affected the gatekeepers’ decisions about appropriate times for my access to the students, given that final exams and term assignments as well as sports tournaments, arts productions, and extended school trips tend to take place in the spring term.

The participants’ degree of comfort and trust with me as the researcher could have influenced how forthcoming they were with their stories. It was a challenge for me as the researcher to establish a trusting environment in a short period of time. A second interview might have revealed richer data. Another limitation to this study was the influence of social desirability, also known as the good subject syndrome. Participants may have talked about stress in their lives only in the manner they thought I wanted to hear.

The study also had limitations with respect to selection of participants. In essence, this group of 9 adolescents was a convenience sample. As mentioned previously, I had to trust the ethical, knowledgeable, professional judgement of the teacher-administrators in helping me choose participants for the study because I did not have access to Ontario Student Records (OSRs) to look at identification of giftedness for each participant. The original restriction of having participants have an official “gifted” identification had to be modified to include highly able students in order to achieve an appropriate sample size from the two schools.

This study was limited to looking at highly able and gifted youth within two private independent schools in two southern Ontario urban environments. Different results might be obtained in an alternative school setting, a public school setting, a
nonurban setting, a single-gender school setting, or in an area with an extremely diverse socioeconomic background. If the sample had been taken from highly able and gifted students who had dropped out of the school system and were in the work force, the results might be different. The voices of highly able and gifted youth who are not in the mainstream school environment and who have chosen alternative paths to learning are not represented in this study. This study also did not look at gifted youths with disabilities.

Another limitation has to do with the culture, vision, and mission statements of the two schools from which the participants were selected. One school has a highly regarded reputation and a long history in the world of private schools of Ontario. The teachers, administrators, and students might be expected to uphold this reputation, and this fact might influence how questions were perceived and answered. The unspoken parental pressures and expectations for students enrolled in a private school might have affected the teenage participants' experiences with stress. It might also have affected which students were nominated by the teachers and administrators as being potential participants. The first school has a larger school population and is situated in a very affluent part of the town. It is a nondenominational school, and religious beliefs did not seem to influence how courses were taught or what emphasis was put on course material. The second school, which has a smaller school population, is a newer independent school located in the downtown of a larger city. The philosophy of education in the second school is based on developing moral capabilities and world citizenship, and most of the academic courses have these themes as their central premise.

Other factors that might have affected this study include my personality, my gender, my professional and family background, and my ethnicity. These might have
affected how I chose to ask the questions during the interviews and how sensitive, empathetic, or insensitive I was to the participants’ stories. As the mother of three gifted adolescents who have all experienced stress and coped in different ways, I have personal and deep-seated perspectives on some of the stressors adolescents face. My reflective writing about how I cope with stress now and how I experienced stress as a child and teenager probably coloured the lens I used to hear and see the participants’ stories. As a Caucasian, middle-class, middle-aged, female educator, I have had many personal and educational experiences with adolescent learners that inform and perhaps bias my interpretation of the participants’ experiences of stress.

The data collection process had its limitations too. It was difficult with some participants to arrange times for interviews that did not seem to be squeezed in between their other obligations. Using the internet and email to communicate was very helpful since most of the students had a high degree of comfort with this mode of communication. The limitation with email arose when students moved elsewhere in Canada or even to different countries for summer jobs or preuniversity service projects, and perhaps they did not have access to email or just did not choose to complete the writing task.

Another limitation was how I gave the instructions for the third piece of data, the writing or art task. If I were to conduct this research again, I would give more specific directions and guidance about expectations for the writing or art task. I would also be more forthright in clarifying my expectations if I thought the sample was not sufficient. For example, I was hesitant to ask for a second writing task from Luke when he submitted excerpts from essays he had written. A suggestion for future research would be to have
students keep journals over a period a several months and ask them to submit weekly or bimonthly samples of their writing about stress and coping. The current study used only one sample from each participant. Even more effort on my part to try to collect outstanding data from participants would also have been helpful. Two participants chose to not submit anything for the writing or art task, and as a result the data gleaned from this part of the study is not as rich as I would have liked.

I also think that one interview was not a sufficient amount of time to build the level of trust and comfort necessary to discuss more sensitive issues that I have referred to earlier as the silences in the data. Some participants could identify sensitive issues such as sexuality, body image, self-mutilation, and depression and said they saw peers dealing with these issues, but they did not talk about these topics on a personal level during our conversations.

Implications for Educational Practice

In general, this study illuminates the need I had identified experientially as a teacher for more practical applications of the findings from psychological and psychoeducational research about stress and coping and pedagogical practice in the classroom. The need for in-service teacher workshops in educational settings and preservice workshops for teachers in training about the long-term importance of attending to the emotional health and wellness of all the students in their care is an area that warrants consideration. Faculties of education should be encouraged to include courses to facilitate teacher awareness of stress, coping, and emotional health in teachers as well as in their students. School boards should be encouraged to include professional development sessions and parenting courses on emotional health and how to build
resiliency in children and adolescents. Other caring professionals such as health-care workers, social workers, and law enforcement officers who work with children and teenagers could link in a conference format or in community learning groups with educators, psychologists, and researchers to share knowledge and expertise from research and from those who work directly with youth. The sharing of collective knowledge and experiences would be very valuable to all concerned.

This study has led me to think that relatively simple strategies to facilitate cognitive awareness about emotional health, such as focussed journal writing and discussion in a classroom setting, may help adolescents learn to become aware of productive coping strategies and help them develop resiliency to stressors. The participants in this study may have seen and experienced a personal benefit from taking part in the study. Through cognitive analysis of their own coping profile, discussion during the interview, and completing a reflective writing or art task, they may have been encouraged and empowered to independently try new coping strategies. Using the Adolescent Coping Scale as a tool to stimulate group and individual reflection and conversation in classroom settings could be one way to begin to focus on teaching positive coping strategies. Affective education can be encouraged in individual classrooms and entire schools by astute administrators. Teachers could be embedding journaling time within the written language strand of the curriculum. Creative writing tasks could focus on writing about one’s own character strengths and weaknesses.

Association with highly able and gifted peers, peer counselling, youth conferences about stress, single and mixed gender discussion forums, and workshops to enhance coping skills are all intervention techniques that have been studied and reported
on in the literature. Students in school settings can be exposed to the concepts of optimistic thinking (Seligman, 1995) and strategies to enhance emotional resiliency. Teachers could try to creatively use techniques of psychodrama and the power of learning how to play with ideas, with others, and with abstract concepts. Using drama and role play to teach about emotions and human interactions can begin very early in a child’s schooling.

This study suggests to me that there is a need for courses in academic and other settings that promote social awareness of larger societal issues so that consciousness of a more global context to problems can be fostered. As mentioned by some of the participants, this awareness of the state of the world puts their own stressors as teenagers in North America in a different perspective. Perhaps more emphasis on the plight of others in the world would help other adolescents deal with perceived stressors.

Theoretical Implications

This research has added to the literature on stress and coping in adolescents by presenting 9 unique voices and stories of highly able and gifted teens and how they perceive and experience stress in their academic, personal, social, and familial lives. This research has indirectly shown there is a need for more theoretical research into the most appropriate ways to define, identify, and nurture giftedness in children and youth. Are school systems adequately servicing the academic, social, and emotional needs of these bright students, or are they feeding the academic stress students feel by creating or perpetuating either overly demanding or unstimulating learning environments? Are gifted and highly able students more or less prone to stress than average students? Are they more sensitive to the expectations placed on them because they are bright? Do they feel
more stressed because they have multipotentialities and try to get involved in everything?

Does being identified as gifted create a stressful expectation? Is the stress to demonstrate one’s giftedness internally or externally imposed? Researchers could also focus on finding ways to foster, in educators and parents, a better understanding of the gifted student and of dispelling some of the myths surrounding the gifted label. Are parents of gifted adolescents adding to their child’s stress by either their tacit or their expressed expectations for superlative academic, athletic, or artistic achievement?

Studying the differences in perceptions of stressors and choices of coping strategies for youth in different types of schools in both rural and urban settings as well as studying stress and coping in youth who have chosen alternative learning settings would be valuable. What about the youth who have dropped out of school? Do the homeless and disenfranchised youth who live on the streets of large cities perceive and experience stress in different ways than mainstream youth in our school systems? Are there socioeconomic factors that affect these perceptions of stress and choice of coping strategies? Are there rural and urban differences in types of stressors and choices of coping strategies? Stress should be studied in youth of all developmental and physical abilities. This study focussed only on highly able and gifted students, but stress affects everyone, irrespective of intelligence.

There is a need to have more research that focusses on how the development of intrapersonal intelligence and understanding of self takes place and what changes take place in awareness of self during adolescence. What types of experiences nurture intrapersonal growth in children and adolescents? Self-understanding affects interpersonal interactions with others, and the adolescent years are a prime time of life for
looking at the development of these two intelligences. Does self-awareness and intrapersonal intelligence develop naturally based on inherent personality traits, the environment in which one grows up, how and by whom one has been nurtured, or is it dependent on where one is at with respect to psychological developmental stages?

There is a need for theoretical research about whether there is any inherent value in teaching coping strategies and a determination of the best age at which to begin. Are there ways to teach positive strategies from a very early age, and is this of greater or lesser benefit than waiting until the preteen or adolescent years? Could a spiral curriculum be developed beginning in the primary grades that had at its core the teaching of positive coping strategies and resiliency habits? Would this make a difference to the experience of stress when a child reaches adolescence? There is also a need to study the pros and cons of a spiritually based, not religiously based, curriculum for character development. It might be useful to conduct a research study investigating whether the students from a school in which the curriculum was based around the goals of developing moral capabilities and a sense of world citizenship have a different sense of the meaning of stress in their lives compared to students from a school that does not focus on developing moral capabilities. How important is it for coping with stress to develop awareness of one’s spirituality and one’s connectedness to a greater power in the universe? Does having this belief or understanding help one to cope with the stressors one is bound to encounter in life? At what age do children and youth become aware of their own sense of spirituality? How do we teach for inner wisdom and self-awareness and not teach blind acceptance of cultural and societal norms or religious creeds? Is there a place within the traditional curriculum in schools for teaching techniques for appreciating the
power of silence, for learning how to listen to one's inner voice, through meditation, yoga, and visualization?

As I mentioned in Chapters One and Two, other theoretical questions to be investigated are concerned with our societal obsessions with speed and the culture of acquisition and how these North American attitudes contribute to our sense of what constitutes a stressful experience. Also, to what extent do the media influence our choices of coping strategies when we feel stressed? Is perception of stress the reality of stress? Are these perceptions of stress and the role time plays in creating stress different depending on cultural backgrounds? Are certain coping strategies more accepted in one culture than another? Are there taboos in certain cultures to even acknowledging stress? Are there coping strategies that some cultures would not even consider acceptable?

Given that a semistructured interview and collection of student writing and art tasks about adolescent stress were used in this research, a number of new insights about alternative research techniques may be generated by people who read and question this work. I think this research has shown that when given a chance to express their experiences with stress in whatever format they choose, teens choose alternatives to do more than just writing. There were many teens with whom I talked about my research who expressed interest in their stories being heard and recorded. I heard and sensed that there is a hunger, a strong desire to be heard amongst youth. Further in-depth research using as data sources creative modes of communication such as the visual, musical, or theatrical arts and personal journaling over a much longer period of time, combined with strategies gleaned from psychodrama, bibliotherapy, and creative writing, might prove useful in helping educators and researchers better understand the multidimensionality of
adolescents’ perceptions and adolescents’ socioemotional development (Bosacki, 2005, p. 127.) Bosacki discusses the importance of literacy activities in the development of self-awareness, identifying the developmental importance of adolescents exploring verbal and written forms of storying, as well as dramatic and visual arts. She also identifies the importance of educators integrating metacognitive and metalinguistic activities into classroom activities (p. 128).

Future Research

Another significant area for research that arose from this study would be to study how gifted and highly able adolescents experience and understand ethical, moral, and spiritual issues. I think that the experience of stress and how we choose to cope has deep roots in the juxtaposition of one’s perception of the world as a physical reality and of one’s beliefs about the role of spirituality in one’s existence in this physical world. Williamson (2004, p. 69) states, “Recognizing the origin of stress from a spiritual perspective, we find a key to dismantling the thoughts that produce it. Stress is simply the inevitable consequence of thinking the unreal is real. In that sense, stress is a choice.” She continues by saying, “To the extent that our sense of well-being is tied in any way to the things of the material world, we will be prone to worry and anxiety.” Finding out in greater depth how adolescents’ belief systems affect their perceptions of the stressors in their day-to-day interactions with the world is an area of research that merits investigation. Bosacki (2005) discusses this in great depth. Encouraging and investigating the development of adolescents’ understanding of the role of religion, the role of spiritual understanding (Miller, 2000, cited in Bosacki, p. 147), and the importance of developing moral capabilities seem to me to be critical components of future research. As well,
educators could conduct research into designing courses and activities to help teenagers develop inner wisdom, inner spiritual and moral strength, and the ability to reach out beyond their internal adolescent-centred worlds to share their gifts and talents by giving back to society in constructive and caring ways (Sternberg, 2003, cited in Bosacki, p. 132).

Longitudinal studies on stress and coping beginning in childhood and following the participants through their adolescent years could reveal interesting data about whether perceptions of stress have their roots in early childhood and manifest later in adolescence. Researchers could also look at whether there are genetic factors, environmental factors, social factors, familial factors, gender factors, age factors, and socioeconomic factors. For example, research might be conducted into whether there are identifiable gender and age differences in how highly able and gifted adolescents perceive stress and choose coping strategies. Another area for future research would be to investigate the use of the moral capabilities and world citizenship courses and their affect on students' perceptions of stress.

Summary

This research study involved 9 highly able and gifted adolescents in a process that aimed to collect data about their experiences with stress and coping. Using data from personal interviews, completion of the Adolescent Coping Scale, and a writing or art task, the participants' stories were crafted and presented in a narrative case study format. The themes that emerged for stressors and for coping strategies were gleaned from looking at all 9 stories. Several areas for future research were identified.
Personal Reflections Summary

The implications of conducting this study for me as the researcher included learning how to plan and conduct sound educational research in an academic setting. I learned skills of interviewing, transcribing of audiotapes, and data analysis. An outcome of this research for me is that the findings can be presented to teaching colleagues in a professional development context at a conference on adolescence or to parents of highly able and gifted children in a workshop venue.

The process of finding my own voice as a researcher and learning to trust my sense of what is important in the data collection and writing phases, has become a personal learning curve unlike any other. I have had to reexamine my own stressors and coping strategies along the journey of researching this topic.

This journey of research has been one in which I have searched for a way to have the voices of 9 gifted and highly able adolescents heard. They are all unique personalities, as is evident in their stories and their ways of expressing themselves. I have narrated their experiences in story form, using their own words and experiences as a grounding point, and I think that this portrait gallery represents a diverse cross section of real-life experiences from gifted and highly able adolescents.

During the research and writing process I have confirmed, but not completely fulfilled, my wish to find practical ways to promote in adolescent learners the integration of a sense of trust in their own voices, a belief in their unique gifts and abilities, and an awareness of their moral obligation to give back to the world the ideas, the questions, and the inspired action that can blossom from being blessed with one or more of the multiple intelligences. As an educator and parent, I hope that teachers will strive to hear what
highly able and gifted students are trying to say and that they will encourage gifted adolescent learners to use experiential, cognitive, affective, linguistic, and spiritual tools (Bosacki, 2005) to explore their inner mental worlds and to then manifest their ideas into actions that will benefit society.

A new ending for my story about growing up gifted and not believing or realizing it is part of what I was searching for. Did I find one? Perhaps. I am a bit more confident that I have a voice and a story that has affected how I see myself and my role in society. I have learned to use my writing skills to enable the voices of my participants be heard. I think I am more comfortable with not knowing all the answers but in finding new questions. I think as an educator I am trying to be more sensitive to my students' life stories and not push them so quickly through the curriculum expectations. I want to now explore how I can use literature, the arts, and creative journal writing with adolescents in my classroom to empower them to be true to their inner voices and gifts. Throughout the time of researching and writing this thesis, I had many of my own challenges to deal with. Time was a big stressor. There never seemed to be enough time to complete tasks according to the timeline I had determined. There never seemed to be enough time in between teaching, parenting, and being an M.Ed. student to just stop and pursue my passions, my music, my art, my personal journaling. Actually, I did learn to say no more often when people would ask me to take on one more task, and I learned that it was OK to put some of my priorities ahead of obligations to academic timelines. But I still struggle with the impostor syndrome and the misguided belief that whatever I write will never be good enough. Health issues were a huge stressor, my own, and for one of my children. Chronic pain, lack of sleep, and worrying were often present for me as I pursued the task
of researching and writing this thesis. Relationships with family, friends, and colleagues were both stressors and coping mechanisms. I found myself wishing I had learned better coping strategies earlier in my life, and I am coming to a better understanding of how I use negative coping strategies learned as a child and adolescent as a default mode. I learned that my childhood link with the lake and the beach was deeply rooted in my soul’s awareness as a safe place of retreat and renewal. I have walked the beach near my home many times, searching for meaning, letting the wind and the waves, the sand between my toes, and an extremely old willow tree near the water’s edge teach me what I needed to hear and feel and believe. I have learned that the symbolic safety of the weeping willow tree I knew as a child is now, at midlife, my analogy for learning how to cope with stress in healthier ways. The tree I found on the beach has its gnarled roots going deep in search of water to nourish its growth. It looks to be about the same age as me. It withstands the perils of the seasons and the proximity of the lake’s water eroding at its roots and trunk by learning to bend with the stress of the wind and the winter ice storms; to drink deeply in the summer’s heat; and to rest and grow near the quiet calm of the lake at dawn and at midnight. I have relearned of my need to go deep within to the well of self and renew my awareness of spirituality and its role in my life. Therein lies my real coping strategy. And I am ever so slightly wiser now than when I began.
References


Appendix A:

Letter of Approval from Brock University Research Ethics Board
DATE: November 23, 2004
FROM: Linda Rose-Krasnor, Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)
TO: Sandra Bosacki, Education
Kerry MARSH
FILE: 04-064 - MARSH
TITLE: An Exploration of Highly Able and Gifted Adolescents’ Personal Stories About Stress and Coping

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as Clarified.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of November 23, 2004 to December 31, 2006 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board’s next scheduled meeting. The clearance may be extended upon request. The study may now proceed.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/Forms/Forms.html to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form Continuing Review/Final Report is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.
Appendix B:

Letter of Approval for Use of Adolescent Coping Scale from Australian Council for Educational Research
1 June 2004

Ms Kerry Marsh
Peel District Board of Education
2373 Cavendish Drive
BURLINGTON
ONTARIO L7P 3B5 CANADA

Dear Ms Marsh

Thank you for returning the completed qualifications form.

On the basis of the qualifications and training information you submitted, you are now registered as a QT, QS. An explanation of the categories appears on the back of this letter. You will be able to purchase tests within your category.

We have added you to our mailing list to receive the catalogues and other free information relevant to your qualifications.

Information about tests can be obtained from both the ACER catalogues (which contain descriptions of tests), and in the manuals themselves. If additional information is required it is available from the psychologists and educationalists in Consultant Services. You will be advised by them if a consulting fee is applicable for this service.

It is important that you notify us of any change of status or address and this can be done by phone, fax, mail or email.

We trust that your contact with ACER will be highly beneficial to your professional practice.

Yours sincerely

Marian Power
Psychologist
Consultant in Psychological Tests & Testing
Appendix C:

Interview Guiding Questions and Script
The audiotaped interview takes approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview starts with an explanation about how the interview will proceed and a reminder to the participant of the purpose of the study and the two main research questions. The following introductory script was used by the principal researcher with each interviewee at the start of the interview.

(Turn on audiotape recorder)

This tape is recording participant # XXX on dd/mm/yyyy. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. This interview will be audiotaped and will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

This research study is part of the requirements for my Master of Education degree at Brock University. I will be writing a thesis about how gifted adolescents perceive and experience stress and coping. During this interview you do not have to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable answering, and if you wish to stop at any point, please let me know and I will turn off the tape recorder. Your name will not be used in the audio recording, and you will be identified only by your identification number that you used on the Adolescent Coping Scale which you have already completed. I will share your personal coping profile, generated from the Adolescent Coping Scale, with you at the end of the interview and help you to understand the profile chart. Your responses to the coping scale tell you about your choices of coping strategies. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

(Continue with this line of questioning:)

1. What are the stressful issues you face right now?

2. How do you see yourself dealing with them?
Possible followup questions may include:


4. Are there any particular issues or situations which you feel cause you to experience a greater sense of stress?

5. Are you able to identify what triggers you to feel stressed? What are some of those triggers?

6. Do you ever feel affected by stress that your friends are experiencing? What are some examples of this “network” stress? How does it make you feel? What do you do to cope?

7. When you are in a stressful situation, do you feel or notice any physical manifestations of the stress such as headaches, stomach aches, etc.? Can you describe these physical reactions?

8. Does your behaviour change when you are experiencing stress? How does it change?

9. What types of constructive things do you do to help yourself cope with stress?

10. What types of things do you do that you see as negative coping strategies?

Possible probe questions may include:

1. Could you tell me more about ....

2. Can you explain that in a more detailed way for me so I can understand your viewpoint better?

3. Have you any other ideas about stress that I haven’t asked you about and that
you feel are important for me to understand?

This is your personal coping profile that was generated from your written responses to the Adolescent Coping Scale. There are 18 distinct coping strategies on this profile. The line graph shows your responses and which coping strategies you prefer. As you look at this graph, what observations can you make about your coping strategies? (Let participant look over their profile and talk about what they notice.)

Closing Script:

I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. Your insights and stories from the perspective of a gifted adolescent will help me to better understand the issues that gifted teens are facing. When I have transcribed your interview, I will return to the school with a copy for you to read. At that time, if you choose to do so, you may delete, change or reword any parts of what you have shared with me on tape today and I will honour your request for changes. Do you have any further questions before we turn off the tape recorder?
Appendix D:

Script of Instructions for Writing or Art Task
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study about highly able and gifted adolescents' stories about stress and coping. This component of the data collection involves your doing a writing or art task for about 20-30 minutes. Once again, I will remind you that your name will not appear on this document. You will be identified only by the same alphanumeric code that was on the Adolescent Coping Scale.

I will provide you with some blank paper and writing materials, and I would appreciate your taking time to document some of your personal experiences and perceptions about how you experience stress and how you cope. Tell me what causes you stress. Tell me which coping strategies work for you, and which ones don't. You may want to write as if this is a journal entry, draw pictures or graphically represent your experiences, draw a mindmap, write a poem ... you choose how to express your ideas. Before you give me your written document, I would like you to read it over, and black out any names of persons or places that you feel should be protected by being anonymous. The only people who will have access to read this document are me, my faculty advisor Dr. Bosacki, and my two committee members, Dr. Schutz and Dr. McGinn.

If you have any questions about this task, please do not hesitate to ask. When you feel you have finished documenting your ideas and feelings about the topic, let me know.