

MASTER THESIS

Course code: SA357S

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Title

Stress and Coping among Adolescent Secondary School Students in Ghana.

Date: 15/11/2016

Total number of pages: 78

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Marit, who sacrificed her time to supervise me. Her thorough commenting on my write-ups as well as getting me additional resources for my work is highly appreciated.

Next, I would like to thank my husband for his support. His understanding and emotional support contributed in making the completion of this thesis possible. He understood when I had to stay long hours at the library and behind the pc at home while he tirelessly took care of the home and the kids.

I would like to thank my beloved brother, Reginald, who was always there to assist me with my data collection, bringing on board his expertise on data collection as he is into much scientific research himself.

Many thanks also goes to the staff and students who provided the data for this study. Obviously there would be no thesis without the information you provided as data. I really appreciate your contribution for making this thesis a success.

I would further like to thank all the staff and coordinators of the Master in Social Work with a Comparative Perspective for the support throughout my study period. Thanks to Lars, Siv, and Janne for making it possible for me to complete the program.

ABSTRACT

Stress is a major health concern in today's world. It can affect all age groups including adolescents. This study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of stress and coping among adolescent secondary school students in Ghana. Two sessions of focus group discussions were held with 20 students of one secondary school in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. After analysis for themes, Four major categories of themes emerged namely, understandings on stress (definitions and perceptions of stress), sources of stress which included self-generated stress, societal generated stress, family-related stress, peer-related stress and school-related stress. Coping was the third major theme. Students used several strategies to cope with stress; broadly emotion focused and problem focused coping strategies such as seeking social support, information seeking, and use of recreational activities. The fourth major theme was named the way forward or (adolescents' recommendations). Students' recommendations included the need to educate parents on such issues as parent-child communication, availability of quality teachers and other trustworthy adults, as well as the need for enough structural resources in communities.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In our current world of economic and social crises and change, stress is a major problem and theme that deserves attention. Stress is a major health issue for all age cohorts (Anspaugh, Hamrick, & Rosato 2003); children, adolescents, adults and the aged. For young people, especially those of the adolescent age, there are rapid changes in their physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological developments and coping with these may be overbearing sometimes. At this stage of life, the adolescent is developing personality and identity, personal values, commitments and expectation, emerging desires for autonomy and independence (Schraml et al, 2011). Young people also experience challenges of changing relationships with peers, demands at school, family tensions, safety issues in their communities, and pressures to experiment with sex, alcohol and drugs (McNeely and Blanchard, 2009). Other sources of stress are also related to one's future in relation to education and career issues. These, among other factors, contribute to making the adolescent period to be described as one of the most difficult periods in life (Arnett, 1999). Some amount of stress is considered beneficial for the development of young people, however stress can also be harmful and may create effects like suicidal ideations, substance abuse, poor academic performance, as well as other behavior and conduct problems (Kadison, 2005; Broman, 2005; Birmaher et al, 1994). Unchecked stress in the long term can also result in negative physical health outcomes such as heart diseases.

The ways young people cope with stress can have short or long term impact on their health and well-being. Difficulties in coping with stress can also result in severe health problems such as problems with mental health like depression and anxiety.

Despite the profound effects of stress among young people of the adolescent age, stress is often not paid attention to (Roets & Lewis, 2002). Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of sexual and reproductive health, research on youth health in general is limited (Karibu et al., 2013). This include stress research. It is further worth mentioning that most of the research that have been conducted on stress and coping in young people is quantitative. However, it is considered beneficial to employ qualitative methods which will make it possible for young people to by themselves discuss and prioritize what is of concern to them (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; McGonagle & Kessler, 1990; Rice et al, 1993, cited by Chandra & Batada, 2006).

Researchers in the stress and coping field have acknowledged the fact that context is a key factor to consider in order to study and understand stress and coping. The influence of sociocultural context is considered influential in this regard. By this, the kind of stressors that a specific group of individuals may experience in one sociocultural context may be different from what a similar group of individuals may experience in another context. Adolescents' understandings of stress, the stressors they encounter and their coping may vary from context to context. This study is thus an explorative descriptive study on stress and coping among secondary school students (adolescents) in the Ghanaian context.

1.1 Research questions and purposes

This study seeks to answer the questions:

- 1a. What are the understandings (perceptions) of secondary school students in Ghana on stress? 1b. How do they define stress in their own words?
2. What are the sources of stress for these students?
3. What are the coping strategies of these students? In other words, who do they talk to, what do they do, and where do they get help in order to cope with the stress they encounter?

The purpose of this study is thus to explore and describe stress and coping among adolescent secondary school students in Ghana.

1.2 Motives and goals of the study

I seek to undertake this study as a result of my interest to work with children and young people. Thus my motive for undertaking this research is career-driven. I consider the fact that undertaking this research will give me an opportunity to have some knowledge about stress and coping among young people. This will prepare me to be able to work with young people. The primary interest is to understand and describe.

1.3 Significance of study

The social work profession is defined as one that promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.

Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. Thus any research in the field should be relevant to the field and must promote the aims and goals of the profession. In this regard, I perceive this study useful in the sense that it will be informative to the section of social workers who are engaged in working with young people in difficult situations in relation to their relationships, with peers and families, and the school context. This study will contribute to their existing understanding on how young people cope with stress. This study does not only contribute to knowledge in the social work profession but is also relevant to other disciplines and professionals who provide health and social services to young people like psychologists, mental health workers and medical professionals. It will further contribute to general knowledge in the research field on young people and stress and coping.

1.4 Contextual background

Ghana can be found on the west coast of Africa. It is bordered on the north by Burkina Faso, on the west by La cote d'voire, on the east by Togo, and in the south by the Atlantic Ocean. The population is approximately 25 million in 2013. Administratively, the country is divided into ten regions with its capital, Accra situated in the Greater Accra Region. Each region is subdivided into districts, with currently a total of 216 self-administrating districts. English is the official language of Ghana. Ghana is, by western standard, economically poor. Notwithstanding, the country has a much higher per capita economic output than most West African countries (IMF, 2010). Ghana attained a lower-middle income country status in July, 2011 (World Bank, 2013). It was the government's national vision for the country to attain middle income status by 2015 (ACCA, 2013). Ghana is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, partly as a result of the oil find in some parts of the country.

1.4.1 Educational system in Ghana

Ghanaians value education since it is considered a means for social advancement and key factor in reducing or eradicating poverty. Ghana's educational system is based on the British school system. The public schools have four levels: preschools such as nurseries and kindergartens, primary, junior secondary, now called junior high, and senior secondary, now

called senior high school. Students who finish secondary school may further their studies by attending university or other forms of tertiary education such as teacher training colleges, polytechnics or nursing training colleges. Like it is in many African countries, English is the official language in the Ghanaian educational system. Primary school starts at age six and ends at age 12. After primary school, students proceed to junior high school for three years. After taking the national exams, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), students can continue to the senior high school. After approximately 3 years of secondary education, students then take the WASSE, the West African Secondary Examination to prepare them for all forms of tertiary education (Weatherly, 2008). The senior high schools are either day or boarding schools. Day schools are where students travel from home to school everyday, while students are housed in the boarding schools for some months for each term. The boarding schools are considered more prestigious than the day schools because their academic and social training are considered better than those of the day schools (Falola, 2004). The Ministry of Education is the sector in charge of the educational system and forms overall policy for the educational system. There is also the Ghana Education Service, which acts as the implementing arm of the Ministry of Education (Oxford Business Group, 2012). Although Ghana's education system has experienced considerable enrolment growth and financial commitment in the last decade, the system still faces serious challenges such as gender, ethnic, socio-economic and geographic disparities in terms of access to quality teachers, adequate school infrastructure, and education materials. This results in student dropout and retention, poor student achievement, failure to pass the national exams and transition to higher levels of schooling, among others (Rew, 2013; Avotri, 2015).

1.4.2 The health system in Ghana.

The Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service are in charge of healthcare and delivery in Ghana. The latter is in charge of policymaking, monitoring and evaluation whilst the former oversees service delivery. The delivery of healthcare is provided by both public and private sectors. The government is committed to service delivery. However, it is evident that government is more committed to physical health than it is to mental health and wellbeing. The World Health Organization (WHO) assessment instrument for mental health in Ghana reveals that while government commits a significant proportion of its budget to physical health only a small amount is devoted to the mental health sector (Ghana News Agency, 2015).

). The WHO defines mental health as ‘a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (World Health Organization, 2014). Thus mental health goes beyond the absence of mental illness and could be considered the foundation for individual and community wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2004). Mental health care in Ghana is skewed towards the curative rather than the preventive. There is only one day-treatment facility, which is located in the Western Region. It is a private facility run by the Catholic Church providing users with a structured daily programme - including pastoral care, psycho-education, psychomotor skills, occupational therapy and leisure activities such as games and crafts. Though there are a few health care professionals in some schools, they are not trained in mental health delivery. There are 123 mental health outpatient facilities available in the country, none of which are for only children and adolescents (Roberts et al, 2014). WHO in 2005 declared that young people’s mental health is a key area of concern and thus professionals and policy makers must direct their attention (cited by, Stengård & Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, 2010).

According to Stengård and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner (2010), the foundation for good mental health is laid in the early years of childhood and adolescence and there is increasing evidence that supports the long term value of promoting positive mental health of children and young people. Notwithstanding, as Stengård and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner (2010) observe, the focus of social and health care providers generally lies on mental health problems and illness and their treatment. Though Stengård and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner’s observation is in reference to the European context, the same applies to the Ghanaian context. In Ghana, focus on mental health is primarily on treatment and care and very minimally on prevention and promotion. In most western countries, for instance, there are very well laid out structures and strategies for mental health prevention and promotion in general, and for adolescents or young people in particular. A few examples are those that target schools. Schools are a natural setting to address the mental health needs of children and adolescents (Fertman et al., 2013). In this case, interventions are aimed at improving the life or social skills of children and adolescents to equip them cope with stress, deal with different emotional states, and to improve interpersonal relationships. Another example of mental health promotion strategy is the use of internet, since it is obvious that some young people may want to share their everyday problems and mental health challenges in anonymity. For example, agencies like *Web coaches* in Sweden provide help for young people via internet. The *That Is Me* project in

Slovenia is another internet based mental health prevention and promotion program which provides adolescents with information and aims at helping them solve their problems by getting advice from counsellors and peers (Stengård & Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, 2010)

In Ghana, in terms of support for child and adolescent mental health, none of the primary and secondary (high) schools have either a part-time or full-time mental health professional though a few primary and secondary schools have school-based activities to promote mental health and prevent mental disorders which is usually offered through teaching sessions by Community Mental Health Nurses. As Read and Doku (2012) blatantly puts it, mental health is a neglected area in healthcare in Ghana and that priority on it is very low (Doku et al, 2011). In Ghana, mental health is equated to psychiatric conditions. Thus, it is not common for people who may be having mental health challenges to see a social worker, a psychologist, or the psychiatrist. It is only when one becomes severely mentally ill that one sees the psychiatrist.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that

“of the 21.6 million people living in Ghana, 650,000 are suffering from a severe mental disorder and a further 2.166,000 are suffering from a moderate to mild mental disorder. The treatment gap is 98 per cent of the total population expected to have a mental disorder” (WHO, 2008).

One of the reasons said to be making it difficult for mental health practice is the traditional stigma attached to mental health. Also, mental health services in Ghana lack adequate resources generally.

In addition to the minimal priority given to mental health in Ghana, again stigma also affects help-seeking behaviour of people who should otherwise get professional help in general. In the recent news, two mentally ill people are reported to have butchered eight people within a week (Myjoyonline, February 26, 2016). This has raised concerns about the issue of mental health and wellbeing in the country, which calls for attention from policy makers and stakeholders to devote attention to mental health issues in general.

1.4.3 Socio-cultural context: children and the family

In Ghana, the family is the core of the social structure. It is the bedrock of the society. Traditionally, the Ghanaian family does not comprise only the mother, father and children

known as the nuclear family but also includes uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, grandparents and other relatives, which is known as the extended family. Oheneba-Takyi and Takyi (2006) defines the Ghanaian family as referring to “all persons related by blood, marriage, fostering or adoption” (p. 135)). A traditional Ghanaian household could be made up of Grandparents, in-laws, cousins, as well as brothers and sisters. In Ghana, it is usually said that ‘the family is a crowd’. It is common though in the urban centres to have a nuclear family household structure. In the nuclear family households, the father is the head of the family and it is his responsibility to provide for the needs of the mother or wife and the children. Wives on the other hand are expected to respect their husband’s authority, do house chores and take care of the children (Falola & Salm, 2002). Due to the changing economic situation, increase in education, migration and global issues, the Ghanaian family is undergoing rapid change and this is in relation to its functional as well as structural attributes (Falola & Salm, 2002).

Children are highly cherished in the Ghanaian family. This is seen by the fact that having children is a requirement and an obligation to the society after marriage rather than on choice as it is in some other cultures (Utley, 2016). In the Ghanaian society, children are welcomed with celebrations called *outdooring*. As a saying in Ghana goes, it takes a village to raise a child. This reflects the responsibility of the whole community to raise a child socially. Older children of the adolescent age in the context of the family have social and domestic roles. They are expected to do house chores, help with caretaking of younger siblings, help in the trade of their parents in some circumstances, and to respect the elderly.

Social scientists like Margaret Mead have argued that adolescence should be understood in relation to the contexts in which people live in (Falola, 2004). Thus adolescence should be defined broadly as a period of transition, where the individual is no longer a child but not yet an adult.

There are overlaps in the definition and classification of children, adolescents and youth. According to the 1992 Constitution of Ghana (Republic of Ghana, 1992), a child is any person below the age of 18 years i.e., the age of majority at which one is entitled to vote in national and local elections. The term child or children based on the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, therefore, refers to individuals from birth to the age of 17 years, which is consistent with international definition in most democracies worldwide. By the time they are 18 years, young persons are expected to have developed sufficient intellectual, emotional and physical

skills and resources to fend for themselves and to make a successful transition into adulthood. Until then they require care from adults, support, guidance and protection.

Demographically, the population is often classified into children, working population and the elderly or older persons in order to compute age dependency ratios. In this context, persons less than 15 years are classified as children and as such are dependent on the working age population 15-64 years. On the other hand, the term “adolescent” is often used synonymously with “teenager” that ranges from 13 to 19 years’. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, Ghana’s population stands at 24,658,823 of which 22.4% represents adolescents (persons between the ages of 10 and 19 years) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Thus a little less than quarter of all people living in Ghana in 2010 were adolescents.

In Ghana, adolescence is, as is generally understood, a transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition from childhood to adulthood could also be referred to as youth, although the term may vary in usage from country to country based on policy reasons (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). It is generally considered as spanning from age 13 to 19 years. It is marked by puberty rites to usher the child into maturity and eventually adulthood. At this age, children are socialized about reproductive health and socialized to understand their adult roles. Girls are mainly advised against premarital sex since they are now matured enough to be pregnant. Adolescents are part of a large family who have this role of socializing them into adulthood. As part of their socialization, adolescents are trained to respect the elderly. As members of a larger family, children and adolescents have roles and responsibilities as individuals. They take part in domestic activities such as cooking, washing utensils and cleaning. In addition, children from poor homes are also involved in economic activities and thus contribute their quota to the family income. It is estimated that 28 percent of 7-14 year olds are involved in paid work (DFID, 1998, P.2, cited by Jones and Chant, 2009). In Ghana, like in many African cultures, the adolescent is still to some extent seen as a child of the parent. Of course children are ushered into maturity at adolescence but then the adolescent is still ‘the *child of the parents*’. Parents have high control over teenagers and as Falola (2004) describes the phenomenon, actual transition to adulthood is attained after one marries. Other beliefs about childhood and adolescents include the notion that the parent or adult is always right. By this, a child must in most cases respect and obey their parents and other significant adults.

In Ghana today, as it is in many parts of Africa, the effects of globalization, facilitated by the vast influence of technology, has made western values and cultural practices exposed to the adolescent of today. For example, dating and marriage as well as other moral values are affected by western values and standards (Falola, 2004).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 What is stress?

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as that which arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their wellbeing. Thus this definition implies that it is in fact not the actual situation which causes stress but individuals' held beliefs and thoughts about the situation. Both Baum (1990) and Derogatis (1987) describe stress as an uncomfortable emotional experience or feeling of pressure influenced by a person's personality, environment and emotional response (cited by Kerr et al, 2011). It is generally agreed that stress involves discomfort and pressure. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasise though that this is both highly variable and subjective. Although Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress is most widely accepted till date, Grant et al (2015) criticise it on three grounds, particularly when the definition is applied to young people:

“First, the transactional definitions include appraisal processes as part of stress definitions, and cognitive appraisal is a process that changes across development, playing a different role for infants and younger children compared to adolescents and adults. For example there are clear negative effects of stressors (e.g. maternal separation, abuse and neglect) on infants that occur without the sophisticated cognitive appraisal processes present in adults... Second, appraisal processes may be affected by symptoms (e.g. depressed children may interpret environmental events in different ways than non-depressed children). Therefore, including appraisal processes as part of a definition of stress may bias research studies of the relationship between stressors and mental health problems. Third, mental health problems are the product of both genetics and environment, and appraisal processes may be affected by genetic vulnerabilities that lead individuals to view circumstances and events in particular ways. Thus ‘lumping’ of appraisal processes with environmental event makes it more difficult to examine the separate interacting roles of genetic and environmental factors in the prediction of psychological symptoms”.

2.2 Stress among adolescents

An array of research have documented that adolescents encounter a host of stressors which if not checked can affect their physical and mental health. Stress in adolescents and children may go unnoticed and sometimes ignored. The American Psychological Association (APA) has identified some emotional and behavioural cues that can help adults to identify signs of stress in young people in their teens. Among these are negative changes in behaviour such as avoiding parents, abandoning long-time friendships for a new set and showing excessive hostility towards parents. At least, these negative behaviors can indicate that there is something wrong with the teen. Physical symptoms like stomach ache and head aches, and frequent visits to the school nurse may be indicators of stress. Teens showing signs of stress may behave differently and unusually in different settings and this calls for the awareness of parents on how their children interact with others. This can be done by parents communicating with teachers, school administrators and leaders of extra curricula activities. As the APA further stresses, children and teens may not use the word stress but may express their feelings by using negative words about themselves like “No one likes me,” “I’m stupid,” “Nothing is fun”. Parents must pay attention to these words and find reasons why the teen is using such words. Upon observing any of the above signs in a teen, it is necessary for a parent to seek support from a mental health professional (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

The direction of research on adolescent stress is on two paths; the hypothesis that adolescent stress stems from non-normative stressors whilst the other line of research emphasise normative stressors. Several researchers have categorized stressors of adolescents differently. Some researchers categorize sources of stress or stressors adolescents encounter broadly into normative, non-normative and daily hassles (Hauser & Bowllds, 1990; Rice, Herman & Peterson, 1993). Normative stressors are those events that all adolescents must confront. These include physical changes, the transition to high school and awakening sexual interest in others (Heaven, 2002). Non-normative stressors are those events that can occur at any time. An example can include death of a loved one. Stress from daily hassles are the day to day events that in total results in stress for the individual (Heaven, 2002). Alternatively, Gore and colleagues (1992) categorize five classes of adolescent stressors namely direct to self, direct to family, direct to friends, between self and friends, and between self and family (cited by McNamara, 2001). Compas et al (1993) points out that the most frequent and prominent stresses encountered by adolescents are termed generic stresses which results from day to day interactions associated with the developmental period of adolescence (cited by Howard &

Medway, 2004) . These include peer and family conflicts, academic problems and school transitions, initiating and maintaining friendships, self-image and puberty concerns, and financial and work related issues (Bagley and Mallick, 1997; Groer, Thomas & Shoffner, 1992; Hartos & Power, 1997, cited by Howard & Medway, 2004). These daily stressors have been found to be more powerful in predicting psychological and somatic symptoms in adolescents than do life events (McNamara, 2001).

Research supports the family as a major source of stress for adolescents. Stress from the family can result in parent-adolescent conflicts or sibling rivalry. From a developmental perspective, moderate parent adolescent conflict seems healthy for adolescent development as it promotes adolescent development in the areas of autonomy, relationships and identity (Juang et al., 2012). Notwithstanding, conflict within the family environment can be a source of increased stress leading to depressive symptoms in adolescents (Auerbach & Ho, 2012). According to Fisher and Johnson (1990), conflict within the family is inevitable. Adolescents increased capacity for logical reasoning and their growing critical thinking skills together makes them cease to accept their parents as unquestionable authority (ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, 2002). They further push for autonomy. This fuels family conflict. Conflicts within the family may include issues related to chores, bedtime, appearance, homework and personality (McNamara, 2001). However, as the adolescent develops these arguments about these issues decreases (Galambos & Almeida, 1992). These seemingly trivial issues may be stressful to both parents and adolescents and may degenerate into serious conflicts (McNamara, 2001). Parent-adolescent disagreements or arguments tend to cause depressive symptoms and internalizing of emotions for adolescents. This can be a cause of internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression (Reuter, Scaramella, Wallace & Conger, 1999). Also, Bray and colleagues (2001) found that overall stress and level of family conflict was predictive of increased alcohol use in adolescents over time (cited by Stephan, 2008). In addition, parental stress is another source of stress within the family environment. Examples of parental stress are parental mental illness, parental unemployment, low socioeconomic status and marital discord (Stiffman, et al, 1986). Another parental stress encountered by adolescents is divorce.

The adolescent period is stressful for both teenagers and parents. The way parents negotiate their parenting during this period is of relevance for the development and wellbeing of the adolescent. In other words, parenting style can have an effect on the adolescent (Heaven, 1994; cited by Heaven 2002). Psychologists have identified four parenting styles. These are

authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. Authoritative parents are warm and firm. They are both responsive and demanding of their children. Authoritarian parents are demanding but not responsive. Permissive parents are responsive but not demanding. The last is rejecting-neglecting parents who are neither demanding nor responsive (Smetana, 1995). Blondin and Cochran (2011) identifies that parenting styles influences children's psychology tendencies and can even predict future adult stressors. Dysfunctional parenting leading to stress coping seems to link parenting styles to depressive disorders or psychological stress after a child becomes an adult (Uehara et al., 1999). McGinn et al. (2005) found that persons exposed to authoritarian parenting style were more depressed than persons who experienced a different style of parenting. According to Davila et al. (2009) adolescents who experience parental stress tend to have increased depressive symptoms. In this case, females become more likely to indulge in romantic and or sexual relationships.

Other more severe and less common stressors that affect children as well as adolescents include exposure to intimate partner violence, dating violence, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, physical illness, natural disasters, and poverty (Grant et al, 2015) .

According to Chiang (1995), school is one of the main sources of stress among adolescents. This is evidenced by the plethora of studies on the school environment and stress present in the general literature on adolescents and stress. Adolescents spend much of their time in school and in school-related activities. Such school related stress comes from too much homework, unsatisfactory academic performance, preparation for tests, lack of interest in a particular subject, and teacher's punishment (Chiang, 1995). It may also include bullying by peers, problems with teachers and academic difficulties (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008). In a study from the United State of America, Brown et al (2006) found school grades were the most frequently reported daily worry among 1004 early adolescents between 9-13 years, followed by looks/appearance, problems at home, being liked/fitting in, being out of shape/overweight, the future, being a failure/disappointing loved ones, and friends and their problems. Worry about school grades everyday was reported by 42% of the participants and most of the others also worried occasionally, that is weekly, monthly, or once a month. Similarly, in Los Angeles, a study among middle school adolescents showed school-related stressors were highest in frequency, followed by siblings and fathers (de Anda et al, 1997). A study from Australia by Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) also shows that school-related situations are the main sources of stress in final year high school students. In this case, examinations and outcomes was of most concern, followed by too much to do, worry over future, making choices about career,

studying for examinations, amount to learn, need to do well imposed by others, and self-imposed need to do well. Females usually report more academic stress than males and one reason for this is that females are more likely to regard school performance as very important and thus worry more about academic failure (Jones & Hattie, 1991). Likewise, Swedish adolescents have also pinpointed school as the most important stressor (Bremberg, 2006 cited by Antonson et al, 2014) In Ghana, Bekoe and colleagues (2015) found that adolescent stressors included romantic relationship problems, social activities, course load, examinations, lack/inadequate family support, and feeling homesick. Like many other studies, romantic relationships have been found to be a source of stress for adolescents. In this case younger adolescents are more affected than their older counterparts. Healthy romantic relationships contributes to the development of a sense of identity, interpersonal skills and also as a source of emotional support (Sorensen, 2007). It also promotes quality in peer group relations and sexual development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). According to Conolly et al (2014), adolescent romantic relationships contribute to relational development and predictive of quality of intimate relationships in adulthood. Notwithstanding, the benefits of adolescent romantic relationships, the risks involved can be enormous. Adolescent romantic relationships may typically be characterized by verbal, emotional and physical abuse, break-ups and violence, which may altogether result in stress for young people (Sorensen, 2007). Romantic relationships can be a source of stress leading to depression, especially in females who are at greater risk of depression in general (Davila et al., 2009). Another common source of stress for young people is peer group relationships. Although peer relations have been documented to be a source of social support, it can also be a source of stress for adolescents (Mcnamara, 2001). Lack of acceptance by peers has been found to be associated with emotional and behavioural maladjustment (Sentse et al, 2010, cited by Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). Also, problems in peer relations in general causes emotional stress in adolescents (Korkiamäki, 2014). Bullying is one such product of problematic adolescent relationships which have attracted the attention of researchers due to its link to adolescent suicide (Sessa, 2015). It is defined as “the persistent harassment by one or a group of peers in the form of physical assault, verbal attack, relational attack, and cyberbullying such as threats and derogatory comments” (Sessa, 2015, p. 15). Peer relations stress could also result from conflicts, competition and peer pressure in relation to drugs, sex and other problem behaviors.

Social disadvantage is another source of stress for adolescents. Social disadvantage is associated with increased stress regardless of whether disadvantage is defined in terms of race or socioeconomic status (Goodman et al., 2005). It is noteworthy that the types of stresses adolescents encounter varies according to their different ages. For example, Wagner and Compas (1990) noted that early adolescents more often report family related stressors. On the other hand, in mid adolescence, individuals report more on network and peer-related stressors whilst more achievement and school-related stressors are reported in late adolescence (cited by Seiffge-Krenke, 2013).

2.3 Coping and coping strategies

As See and Essau (2010) put it, “coping is a human approach to solving problems”. It encompasses the thoughts, feelings and actions that a person uses to tackle problematic situations that are encountered in everyday life and in particular circumstances (Frydenberg, 1997). Frydenberg and Lewis (1991) identifies that the concept of coping has a variety of meanings which are often used in place of such concepts as mastery, defense and adaptation (cited by See & Esau, 2010). Other closely related concepts to coping are competence and resilience. Coping refers to processes of adaptation whereas competence refer to the characteristics and resources that are needed for successful adaptation. Resilience is the reflection of outcomes for which competence and coping have been effectively used in response to stress and adversity (Compas et al, 2001). As Compas and colleagues (2001) further acknowledge, a definition of coping to guide research with children and adolescents must overcome two challenges. First is the need for a definition that takes into consideration the nature of developmental processes. Second there is the need to distinguish coping from other aspects of the ways individuals respond to stress.

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) also define coping strategies as the dynamic efforts, which involves the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful (cited by See & Esau, 2010). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identifies two main types of coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

Coping strategies can also be categorized into functional or dysfunctional, as well as adaptive versus maladaptive (O'Connor et al, 2010).

Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner, (2008) identify twelve commonly used families of coping for adolescents with their associated coping strategies, adaptive processes and other behaviors shown in the table below.

Fig.1.1

Twelve Families of Coping, Associated Coping Strategies, and Links to Adaptive Processes and Other Behaviours			
Family of Coping	Example Coping Strategies	Function In Adaptive Process	Related Behaviours
1. Problem Solving	Strategizing Instrumental action Planning	Adjust thoughts And actions to be Effective	Watch and learn Mastery Efficacy
2. Information Seeking	Reading Observation Asking others	Find Additional Contingencies	Curiosity Interest
3. Helplessness	Confusion Cognitive Interference Cognitive exhaustion	Find limits of actions	Guilt Helplessness
4. Escape	Behavioral avoidance Mental withdrawal Denial Wishful thinking	Escape Noncontingent environment	Drop and roll Flight Fear
5. Self-reliance	Emotion regulation Behavior regulation Emotional expression Emotion approach	Protect available social resources and attend to goals	Tend and befriend Pride

6. Support Seeking	Contact seeking Comfort seeking Instrumental aid Social referencing	Make use of available social resources	Proximity-seeking Yearning Other reliance
7. Delegation	Maladaptive help-seeking Complaining Whining Self-pity	Find limits of resources	Self-pity Shame
8. Social Isolation	Social withdrawal Concealment Avoiding others	Withdraw from unsupportive context	Duck and cover Freeze Sadness
9. Accommodation	Distraction Cognitive restructuring Minimization Acceptance	Flexibly adjust Preferences or goals to options	Pick and choose Secondary control
10. Negotiation	Bargaining Persuasion Priority-setting	Find new options or select goals	Compromise
11. Submission	Rumination Rigid perseveration Intrusive thoughts	Give up preferences or goals	Disgust Rigid perseverance
12. Opposition	Other blame Projection Aggression	Remove perceived constraints	Stand and fight Anger Defiance

Similarly, Compas et al (2001) also identifies common types of coping by adolescents. These include problem solving, information seeking, cognitive restructuring, seeking understanding, catastrophizing, emotional release or ventilation, physical activities, acceptance, distraction,

distancing, avoidance, self-criticism, blaming others, wishful thinking, humor, suppression, social withdrawal, resigned acceptance, denial, alcohol or drug use, seeking social support, seeking information support, and use of religion. It is though noted that the type of strategy a young person employs depends largely on perceived control (Spirito et al., 1991). For example, problem-focused strategies are used if a solution to the problem is considered within the individual's capabilities, whilst emotion-focused strategies are used if the situation is perceived to be out of the individual's control (ibid). According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory, individual differences in appraisal of a stressor become a vital component for predicting the type of strategies a person will employ as well as how effectively or ineffectively he or she may deal with the stressor. The choice of coping strategies is influenced by the age range of the adolescent. In a study to examine the coping strategies employed by male and female students in early, middle and late adolescents coping with daily hassles and major life events, Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1999) found that older adolescents used a greater variety coping strategies and used methods that directly reduce the impact of the stressor and involved a cognitive component (e.g., planful problem solving; reappraisal) more often than younger adolescents. Choice of coping strategies is also influenced by the type of stressor. For instance, Seiffge-Krenke (1995) found that adolescents usually employ more active coping strategies in dealing with peer-related stressors, but use more dysfunctional coping strategies when troubled by school- or parent-related problems. The highest percentages of cognitive-reflective coping strategies were used in dealing with future-related problems. In addition, adolescents in all age groups varied their strategies in relation to the type of stressor, but there were no significant gender differences. Further, it has been observed that coping strategies changes during the period of adolescents due to changes in cognitive, social and behavioural ability, as well as the nature of the stressors ((Frydenberg, 1997; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2000, cited by Cicognani, 2011).

2.4 Coping resources

Coping resources are vital for every individual including adolescents. They “enable individuals to handle stress more effectively, experience fewer or less intense symptoms upon exposure to a stressor, or recover faster from exposure” (Marting & Hammer, 2004.). They can be grouped into personal (dispositional) resources and environmental resources. Personal

resources are the relatively stable personality and cognitive characteristics that shape coping processes. Some personal coping resources include, control beliefs, self-esteem, self-efficacy, (low) neuroticism, and (low) denial (Terry, 1991). Environmental resources are the relevant aspects of the physical and social environment (Terry, 1991, cited by Alexander et al). This include perceived social support. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identifies health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills and social skills as vital personal coping resources. In addition, environmental resources include social support and material support which refers to money as well as the goods and services that can be purchased.

Among the various coping resources, social support is the most widely researched. Friends, family and significant others have been found to be helpful in terms of adolescent coping by providing advice and informational support. Social support can be in the form of instrumental support (e.g., assist with a problem), tangible support (e.g., donate goods), informational support (e.g., give advice), and emotional support (e.g., give reassurance) (Schwarzer, n.d). There is a huge body of research that supports the positive effects social support exerts on individual's psychological wellbeing and health. In the words of Cooper and colleagues (2007), "Individuals who seek and nurture supportive social network during times of stress will have a more resilient constitution than socially isolated individuals and will likely fare better in the face of stress or adversity" (pp. 360).

2.5 Adolescent coping in different cultural contexts

Due to different child rearing practices in different cultures, children and adolescents may be stimulated to react to stressors in differing ways. Culturally derived values may become norms which may influence an individual's coping behaviours (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Research supports the fact that cultural background can influence coping behaviours of young people (Frydenberg, 2008). Notwithstanding, it is noted that most researchers have ignored the cultural diversity of coping behaviors among adolescents (Kagitcibasi, 1996, cited by Gelhaar et al, 2007). A study supervised by Diaz-Guerrero (1973) involving eight countries, such as Mexico, USA, Great Britain and Italy showed that adolescents in agricultural societies like Mexico used more passive modes of coping while active modes of coping is evident in adolescents in industrialized societies (cited by Zeidner & Endler, 1996).

Persike and Seiffge-Krenke (2012), in a study in different world regions i.e. western, eastern, and southern found that as regards perceived stressfulness of issues in different domains, levels were similar among all the adolescents from the different regions. However, there were differences as regards coping style. Adolescents from the western region used negotiating, seeking support, and emotional outlet more than their counterparts from the Eastern and Southern regions. Another example is a study by Frydenberg et al (2001). This study was about how young people cope with social issues of pollution, discrimination and fear of war and community violence. It was found that Northern Irish students were more likely to use non-productive coping strategies like self-blame tension reduction and 'not cope'. They also used friends and seeking social support more than their other counterparts. Columbian adolescents also were most likely to use solving the problem, spiritual support, social action, seeking professional help and worry (cited by Frydenberg et al, 2003). In a subsequent study by Frydenberg and colleagues (2003), involving Australian, Columbian, German, and Palestinian adolescents also showed significant differences and similarities in the usage of coping strategies.

All these studies show both similarities and differences in coping behaviors of adolescents from different world regions. It is though noted that cross-cultural studies on adolescent coping have resulted in more similarities than differences (Frydenberg, 2008). Unfortunately, there are almost non-existent such studies involving the African Region. Though this study is not a cross cultural study, it progresses with the intent to see whether the stress perception as well as coping strategies of adolescents from Ghana will have some traces of cultural influences.

On a whole, it seems evident that stress among adolescents and children could be overlooked. This is typically the case in Ghana as is evident in the literature. Data on adolescent stress in Ghana is very scanty. Most of the studies in Ghana are concentrated on academic stress and its relationship with academic performance. For example the studies of Glozah (2013) and Affum-Osei et al (2014).

Secondly, much of the research on stress and coping in general has mainly employed quantitative measures. The same applies to research on stress and coping among adolescents and young people in particular. This is possibly as a result of getting the concepts of stress and coping clearly defined and appropriately measured, as quantitative researchers argue. However, depending on quantitative measures may lead to well defined concepts and

appropriate measures but may also lead to the undermining of contextual factors as well as the loss of the possibility of finding new information as is typical in using qualitative measures.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Various theories are relevant for the study of stress and coping in social work. Among these, the systems theory was mainly chosen as an applicable theory within which the current study on stress and coping among adolescents will be discussed. General systems theory as well as the ecological systems theory of the developmental psychologist Bronfenbrenner will be discussed in this chapter.

2.6.1 General systems theory

Systems theory is one of the major theories in social work and has been widely applied to social work practice in general and social work research in particular. In the case of practice, Friedman and Allen (2010), asserts that systems theory grants social workers the opportunity to “understand the components and dynamics of client systems in order to interpret problems and develop balanced intervention strategies, with the goal of enhancing the “goodness of fit” between individuals and their environments” (p. 3). The two types of systems theory commonly used in social work are general systems theory and ecological systems theory. Systems theory emerged partly as reaction against the psychodynamic theory in psychology (Payne, 2014). Systems theory derives from such intellectual sources as organismic biological ecology, the social survey movement in social work, human ecology in sociology, information theory and cybernetics (Siporin, 1980). The word system derives from a Greek word which means a set of connected things (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2014). The system’s perspective focuses on the relations between people rather than focusing on characteristics or qualities. It is also a focus on the environment that people create between themselves. Systems theory holds that all things are connected and that one part cannot be altered without consequences for the other parts (ibid). In other words, systems are interrelated parts constituting an ordered whole and each subsystem influences other parts of the whole.

Systems theory is deemed applicable to this study in the sense that adolescents experiences of stress and coping is considered to be situated within a system of interrelationships. These

include the school, friends, family and the community. These relationships could have effect on their experiences of stress and coping. This means that, adolescents do not experience stress and coping in a vacuum. Their experiences of stress and coping are intertwined and given meaning by their relational environment. The network of relationships together with the adolescents experiences of stress and coping forms a system where the various subsystems of interrelationships of the adolescents is considered indispensable and meaningful to the experiences of stress and coping. This is clearly supported by previous studies on adolescent stress and coping as discussed in the literature review chapter. In practice then, it becomes necessary to involve the networks of the individual when solving a problem.

2.6.2 Ecological systems theory

Ecological systems theory was expounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The developmentalist Bronfenbrenner identifies four levels of a system which are influential to the development and wellbeing of the individual. By this, Bronfenbrenner concluded that human development cannot be considered in isolation but must be viewed in relation to the context of the individual's relationship with the environment (Friedman & Allen, 2010). The four levels of the system which Bronfenbrenner describes are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macro system. The microsystem is the first and the smallest system unit of the four system levels. It comprises, for example, the family. It is seen as the closest and most influential of the four units of the system. The family is usually considered to have much influence on a child or an individual's development and wellbeing. In the case of adolescent stress and coping, it could be possible that the interrelationships between adolescents and members of the family could generate stress for the individual as is evident in the related literature discussed. Parental stress, sibling rivalry are all sources of stress for the individual adolescent. The individual adolescent experiences stress from the family. The meso level of the system involves the aspect of the environment that influences the microsystem such as the family. It comprises relationships between major groups, organizations, and institutions that affect the day to day life of the individual. These include the school, work, church, recreation and community resources. It refers to interactions between various microsystems. As the individual adolescent come into contact with these institutions and organizations they are bound to be influenced in one way or the other. It is well documented, for example, that school is a major source of stress for adolescents. Peers at school, school work load as well as teacher punishment has been found to be related to as well as been sources of stress for the individual adolescents. In addition, elements within the school as well as community

environment are seen as resources for coping with stress by the individual adolescents. Peers, teachers, resources in the school, religious leaders and significant others in the community as well as other social resources in the community are possible sources for coping with stress by the adolescents. Interrelationships or interactions between these institutions, can contribute to the stress and coping of adolescents. For example, parental involvement in the individual adolescent's school activities could impact on and can lessen adolescent's feelings of stress. Likewise, a combination of parental support and teacher support or in other words parent-teacher collaboration could go a long way to facilitate adolescent coping and wellbeing (Eccles & Harold, 1993). The exosystem involves one or more settings that do not involve the individual as a direct participant but all the same have influence on the developing individual such as a siblings school (O' Donoghue & Maidment, 2005) . This could for example be child's parent's work place also (Weems & Banks, 2015). If a parent gets too stressed out from the workplace he or she could possibly not have enough time to be involved in the lives of their children, which is considered healthy for the developing adolescent. When parents gets involved in the lives of their children they could possibly help them in difficult life challenges that they may be facing. The last among the four levels of the system is the macro level, which involves the physical, social, cultural, economic and political structures of the larger society in which the individual grow up, including technology, language, housing, laws, customs and regulations (Andreae, 1996). Culture is one of the key concepts this study seeks to discuss. It seeks to understand the influential effect on the adolescents' experiences of stress and coping. Another example could be the effects of the educational system on how schools are organized in a particular community which can in turn affect adolescents at a specific school. This shows a macrosystem's effect on an exosystem on a microsystem, that is, the individual, which in this case is the adolescent in a specific school (Melson, 2014). In other words the nature of the educational system of a particular country can influence school organization for example, which can generate stress for the student adolescent.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to explore and describe the stress and coping experiences of adolescents in secondary school in Ghana. I thus chose a qualitative approach. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is concerned with studying people in their natural environment with a focus on seeing the world through the eyes of participants and consequently making sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Choosing the qualitative approach to this study afforded me the opportunity to give respect to the contextual factors. Therefore, cultural elements which may be downplayed by using quantitative methods were paid attention to. Aside this, it created the possibility to give students a voice. Thus, the students themselves defined what are stressful to them and how they are coping and what they suggest will be other good resources that can help them cope well during stressful situations. Moreover, as stated earlier and as is evident in the literature, much of the studies on stress and coping in general have employed quantitative measures. I therefore chose the qualitative approach which I deemed appropriate for the aims of this study and also to answer the call of current stress and coping researchers for more qualitative research on stress and coping which is “extremely useful for obtaining insights into regular or problematic experiences and the meaning attached to these experiences of selected individuals” (Onwuegbuzie et al, 2007 p. 215)

3.1 Methods of data collection

The population of interest for this study was adolescents in secondary school settings. Thus the data was collected in one upper secondary school in Ghana. The secondary schools in Ghana are graded according to the performance aggregate of the entire school in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), which is the final examinations for students at the end of the three year period. Schools are graded from A through to F. This particular school chosen is a grade B school which means it is an average performing school with students from mainly middle class and lower class background. The grade A schools are usually attended by children of high class social status individuals.

To recruit participants for the study, I visited the chosen secondary school in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. I then contacted the headmistress of the school. After a meeting with her, briefing her about the study, she consented to it and assigned a teacher to help me get in contact with the students. The students were informed about my study and the group of students I am interested in. Those who were interested came to me. I then purposively selected from those who came and showed interest in my study. Since it was meant to be an in-depth discussion, I selected 20 students. These were middle and late adolescents, aged between 14- 18. In Ghana, this age group is the range for students found in upper secondary schools generally. The sample characteristics is described below:

Fig. 1.2

Sex	Females	10
	Males	10
Age range	14-18 years	
Age distribution	14	1
	15	5
	16	6
	17	5
	18	3
Year Group	Year two	

The sampling technique is purposive based on the assumption that stress and coping is a common theme in adolescent experiences and the likelihood that most adolescents have stress and coping experiences to share. Of course those who showed interest in the study and came

to me came because they had experiences to share. After getting in contact with the students, I briefed them once again about the study after which we together scheduled the days for the discussions.

3.1.1 The focus group method

It has been shown that focus groups are an effective method to obtain in-depth information about a concept or issue and to describe and explain people's experiences in practical and efficient ways (Madriz, 2000; Krueger, 1994). Rather than being predetermined or controlled by hypotheses and existing measures of stress-coping (which are often criticized as based on male normative standards), the use of a qualitative method such as focus groups provides an opportunity to better understand people's perspectives about their experiences and meanings of stress-coping. Openness and flexibility in discovery expressed by actual words of individuals are strengths of such methods. Edmunds (1999) states that "a focus group brings together eight to ten qualified people for a face to face discussion of a particular topic.' (p. 1). Dawson, Manderson and Tallo (1993) have defined the focus group as a group discussion that gathers people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest to the researcher. The group of participants is guided by a moderator (or group facilitator) who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves.

3.1.2 The discussion session

I divided the students into two groups. In this case the focus group discussions were in two sessions, using ten students for each session on two separate days. The sample or groups for focus group discussion can be naturally occurring or drawn together for a study (Kitzinger, 1995). The sample or groups for this study is "naturally occurring". Students were from the same school and most of the participants were from the same year group of study. That was year two students. I favoured the choice of homogeneity of sample for focus group discussions since it fosters familiarity and comfortability. Thus I used students from the same year group. In this case they were familiar with each other. This was confirmed during the course of the discussions as the students felt comfortable to discuss their experiences of stress and coping. It made the discussions progress with ease. This is not meant to overlook the fact that using students from different year groups may bring to bear varied opinions and views. The rationale for this sample selection is that I had in mind the effect of using different year

groups in the Ghanaian secondary school setting. In the Ghanaian secondary school context, there is influence of power relations among the various three year groups, where seniority means exertion of power over lower year groups. Students of the lower classes may be intimidated by the presence of their seniors. This hierarchical relationship and its associated power relation makes using mixed year groups inappropriate. .

The discussions were held in one of the classrooms of the school on days when most students were not present because they had finished with their exams. The location for the discussions was a serene atmosphere making it a conducive atmosphere for the discussions. I was the moderator for the discussions and used a semi-structured and open-ended interview guide that captured questions around the research questions generally (see appendix). Participants were asked about their perceptions or definitions of stress, what they perceive as their sources of stress, how they cope with stress, and their suggestions for resources that they perceive will be helpful during stressful times. Questioning was done with flexibility so as not to interrupt the natural flow of the discussion. . I also had to follow up responses with probe questions. I made sure at least everyone got the opportunity to contribute to the discussions since it is possible for a few people to dominate (Hennink, 2014). The two discussion sessions lasted for one and half and two hours, after which refreshment was offered as incentive. With the consent of the participants, all the discussions were audio-taped and transcribed afterwards.

3.2 Data management

After the discussion session, as the moderator, I transcribed the data manually which gave me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the data as a starting point for analysis as argued by Davidson (2009). I made sure data was stored safely without any other person having access to it. The transcribed data had no name references and was locked with a password on my personal computer. Thus I was the only one with access to the data. Likewise, the audio recordings were all discarded after the transcription.

3.3 Methods of data analysis

According to Polit and Hungler (1993;p. 444) qualitative analysis is “the organization and interpretation of non-numerical, narrative data for the purpose of discovering important underlying dimensions and patterns of relationships”. To analyze the data, I first immersed

myself in the transcribed data to understand the responses of the participants. The choice of method for the data analysis was thematic analysis. Thus data was analyzed by drawing out the themes through the creation of categories. To start with, I read through the data thoroughly, and began the analysis manually with open coding line by line. In this case descriptive codes were created. By this similar codes were then put together to create categories. Further analysis, moving from a descriptive level to a conceptual level resulted in themes.

3.4 Power issues when researching young people's lives

The current propagation of the new childhood studies or the sociology of childhood which emphasises the consideration of children and young people as social actors have brought to the fore the need to reconsider approaches to not only childhood studies but also research involving children and youth. This has resulted in a more child and youth centred research (Best, 2007).

According to Best (2007), there are certain concerns when adults study youth and their social and symbolic worlds. This concerns raises questions such as “how can investigators successfully negotiate the role of adult researcher as they work to gain access to youth worlds, break through fronts and develop meaningful rapport? ... How can adults interpret and write about youth realities given the distance that exists between their worlds and our own? How can researchers develop more sensitive and empowering ways to study youth and children while also addressing key ethical considerations? (p.8)”. Another major concern Best discusses is the issue of power in the research process. In my study, this was one of my ethical dilemmas. I was introduced to the students as a student studying abroad who had come to collect data for my master's thesis. The idea of me coming from abroad to conduct the research positioned me to be seen by these students as a person with a higher status. Me being a masters student compared to their level as secondary school students also poses some power relation problem. This requires me to consider “stepping down”. In Ghana, to have the opportunity to study to masters level is often reckoned prestigious among students at the secondary school level. This was obvious when they inquired a lot about Norway and how I got the opportunity to study in Europe and how they can also get that opportunity. One student even asked whether I eat the local food. This showed how they perceived me; as a person of higher status. During my interactions with them, I made sure they see me as one of

them by considering the fact that I have been like them before. Making them aware that they can also be like me, I tried to answer their questions about how they can also have the opportunity to study in Europe.

In his exposition on power relations, Gallagher (2008) makes reference to the suggestion of Leslie Groves, a freelance social development/child rights consultant of the need for the use of much eye contact, smiles, warm heart, fun and smiles to mediate the effects of power relations. One teacher was assigned to help me get in touch with the possible student participants. As Masson (2004) emphasises, researchers need to be sensitive to the position of gatekeepers and to understand the source and limit of their power. I realised that the teacher's involvement creates a power relation problem. It could be possible some students may choose to participate because of the involvement of the teacher. In Ghana, the teacher wields a lot of 'power' over the students. To bridge this gap, before the interviews I emphasised that they could withdraw at any time if they desired.

3.5 Trustworthiness.

In qualitative research the criterion for determining rigor of a study is trustworthiness which is otherwise referred to as the validity and reliability in quantitative studies. Further, four criteria describe the trustworthiness of research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify these as credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability corresponding to internal validity, reliability, objectivity, and external validity, respectively, related to quantitative research. Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the findings. To ensure credibility, I have to mention that a study by a student always requires a supervisor to guide the student to ensure she conducts a credible study. In my case, I was supervised by one who is well vexed in research with young people. Her expertise and experience was invaluable to the promotion of credibility in this study. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied in other contexts. This can be ensured by providing what is called thick description. The report of this study involved a thorough description of the research context and related assumptions. Dependability on the other hand refers to the consistency and repeatability of findings. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study derive from respondents and not based on, for example, researcher biases. Padgett (1998b) identifies three threats to trustworthiness of qualitative research. These are reactivity,

researcher biases and respondent biases (cited by Rubin and Babbie, 2009). Reactivity occurs when the presence of the researcher on the field distorts the natural status of the setting as well as the things under observation there. Researcher biases are the things which distort the way a researcher perceives and how he selectively observe. Respondent bias on the other hand refers to the need to appear socially desirable. These were considered in the course of the study.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Social research involves the use of human participants and for this reason it becomes necessary to adhere to specific ethical considerations. First of all, every ethical research must make sure participants are protected from physical harm or psychological suffering as a result of manipulations. This study in no way involved any manipulations of such nature. There were also no immediately identifiable possible risks for the study. Any implicit harm which could be, for example, psychological is far outweighed by the benefits of the research. This research has the potential of adding to knowledge of what is known about adolescent stress and coping which is relevant for several disciplines and professionals who work with adolescents. There was no monetary benefits for this study. I found it necessary though to provide some snacks after the long discussion sessions. In this study, I made sure to adhere to the necessary ethical considerations in relations to research with human subjects. The other thing to consider is informed consent. By this researchers must inform would-be participants all about the research and also provide information about issues that can influence their decision to participate (Hardwick & Worsley, 2010). I informed participants all about the study and made sure they willingly decided to partake or withdraw. In this case written consent was sought. I also made them aware that they have the freedom to withdraw at any point in the study. Another major ethical issue to consider in research with human participants is anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity refers to the fact that participants should not be identifiable in the output of the research whereas confidentiality refers to not exposing research data where participants can be identified to a third party. This can be done by protecting storage of research data, for example with a password (Gallagher, 2008). As stated earlier, the transcribed data was stored on my personal computer, locked with a password.

Research with children and youth requires negotiation with adult gate keepers before seeking the consent of children (Morrow, 2008). In research with children and young people, it is deemed necessary to seek both the consent of the child as well as that of parents. In some cases the use of in loco parentis is acceptable. These are people who stand in the gap for parents. In my study, I sought approval of the ethics committee in Norway. In Ghana, time constraint could not allow me to apply for ethical approval from the ethics committee in Ghana. As regard parental consent the teachers and the headmistress whom I contacted and sought permission from acted as in loco parentis or gatekeepers since they were in charge of the students. They familiarized themselves with the nature of my study, making sure the study involved no possible harm to the students. This was necessary since children are mostly considered as more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse compared to adults (Gallagher, 2008). There is exception for example in cases where it is only minimal risk involved in participation and where the rights and wellbeing of participants will not be affected (Tarling , 2006).

3.7 Limitations of the study

The use of the focus group may downplay on the significance and effect of individual differences. Individual difference play a major role in stress and coping and this is evident in the literature. Notwithstanding, it is not inappropriate to assume that there are also typical collective experiences in the case of stress and coping. This study is more interested in the general experience of stress and coping in the adolescent population. Nonetheless, it doesn't overlook the differences in the responses of the individual participants. Qualitative research in general places more focus on thick description of phenomena as experienced by research participants. This study follows that cause and faces the challenge of generalisability. The purpose of this study is to describe the stress and coping experiences of adolescents or young people in Ghana.

In this study, I could be considered as an insider researcher. An insider researcher is a researcher who is either a member of the same group he is affiliated to culturally, biologically, by work relation, or one who have a priori intimate knowledge of the community and its members (cited by Unluer, 2012). According to Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) there are mainly three advantages of being an insider researcher. First is the possession of greater understanding of the culture understudy. Second, the ability to negotiate social interaction

naturally, and having an established intimacy which favours the establishment and judging of truth (cited by Unluer). Being a Ghanaian and having been in the position of the participants before was an asset in the sense that I easily understood their experiences and identified with them. This can also create a challenge because it raises questions of what is called insider researcher bias. Unluer (2012) stresses that being an insider researcher is challenging since there is the possibility of loss of objectivity. Their experiences may definitely be different from mine on a historical basis. Although this bias is almost inevitable, I took steps to reduce it by being sensitive to new information.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study seeks to explore and describe the experiences of stress and coping among secondary school adolescents in Ghana. The study aimed to answer the research questions; how do Ghanaian adolescents perceive and define stress, what are the sources of stress for these adolescents and how are they coping with stress? After subjecting the raw data to analysis to draw out the main themes from the data, four major categories of themes emerged with their various subthemes. These are understandings on stress (definitions and perceptions of stress), sources of stress, coping, and the way forward (adolescents' recommendations).

4.1 Understandings on stress

Stress can be defined in various ways. Adolescents in this study defined stress mainly in terms of the daily usage of the word in the Ghanaian context, that is, as tiredness or exhaustion after work done.

They further defined it as a stimulus as well as a physical and emotional reaction or response. In their words:

Stress is referred to as how one's body responds to challenges and makes him or her ready to face them with strength, power, energy and attention.

Stress is that which makes you feel unable to relax

It is a pressure or tension exerted on a person

It is a reaction to a stimulus that disturbs our mental state.

It can also be referred to as worried, tired, under tension, pressure, being nervous.

They had a narrow understanding of the stress construct compared to the literature and academic definition of stress, where the meaning of stress goes beyond the narrow definition of exhaustion or tiredness. However, during the main discussion, their inputs on the specific aspects of stress clearly showed in-depth understandings on stress in practicality.

Ghanaian adolescents have a wide range of perceptions about stress. They answered questions about their understandings of stress and compared the stress experience for children and adults. To these adolescents, there are differences in the stress experience for adults, young people as well as very small children. For them, due to the many responsibilities adults hold, they can be more stressed than young people. One student says:

I think then adults feel more stressed than we, young people, because they have a lot to think about. They have to think about their children, their work, etc. They think about the bills to pay at the end of the month and their children's school fees. For us, young people, our stress is related to too much house chores and workload at school.

They also perceive small children as experiencing some stress. However, their stress is peculiar from that of adults and youth. The stress very young children experience is for example in relation to occurrences in the family setting. In the words of one student:

Using my younger brother as an example, he can have stress only when something goes wrong in the family. For example, when there is a problem in the family or someone is not well in the family. But for my parents, they always have stress because they have a lot to think about.

Students of this study also perceive differences in coping with stress for adults, youth and very young children. To them, adults can cope better with stress than young people. Stress is most challenging for very young children because the way they express their stressful feelings and behaviours may not be easily understood or noticed by parents or other adults. To students of this study then, this makes the stress experience very dangerous for very young children. Stress and coping in different age groups is known to be determined by various factors. For example, differences in coping between younger people and older people have been attributed to person-centered factors like biological, intellectual and emotional make-up, situation-centered factors like social context, type of stressor, and controllability of stressor (Amirkhan & Auyeung, 2007). Adolescents further identified that stress can be both negative and positive. Good stress to them is necessary for healthy adolescent developments.

4.2 Sources of stress

One major theme discussed by adolescents is their sources of stress or the stressors in their lives. In this study, students identified various sources of stress which I have grouped into five categories; self-generated stress, societal generated stress, family related stress, peer related stress and school related stress. Some of the self-generated stress include sexual desires. As one student expressed, at this stage of the individual's development, sexual desires is one of their challenges. They therefore desire to indulge in romantic relationships. This is usually often influenced by pressure from peers; an example of microsystem influences as described by Ecological systems theory. Another self-generated stress for young people as discussed by students is what they called 'false identity portrayal'. This they explained as an attempt by some adolescents to portray themselves differently from who they really are in order to be accepted and respected by their peers. In their words:

Most of the adolescents are fond of portraying a false identity. Sometimes for those from poor homes, they try to present themselves as coming from rich homes and force themselves to live like they are from rich homes. If they can't continue living lavishly to show off, they may become stressed.

This is closely related to Ervin Goffman's presentation of the self. Goffman (1978). Likened how we present ourselves in society to dramaturgy or theatrical performance where we are all performers on stage. In this regard, an individual exhibits a character that is usually influenced by our social interactions which are metaphorically stages on which we perform or

portray our character. The impression one gives to others is a means through which an individual develops a sense of self (de Graaf, 2011). This is typical with adolescents. Goffman (1963) further defined stigma as an attribute that is socially discrediting. Poverty could be one such stigmatizing conditions. It is obvious at this point, in view of Goffman's theory that the social environment is very influential in the choices of behaviour an individual makes. These students who, as students claimed maybe coming from poor homes seek to present themselves in a way that they will feel a sense of acceptance and respect by their peers. This is in line with ecological theory which highlights the importance of the social environment in human development.

Students also suggested that some students in a bid to be accepted by their peers try to please them. One way a student tries to please their friends is for example through academic achievements:

For example trying to please your friends to be accepted by them. Maybe your friends see you as academically good but you know you are not as academically strong as they think so you try to stress yourself to prove them right. And you will be feeling the pains.

In addition, cravings for material possessions can make adolescents end up being stressed. Some students, especially the girls, may want to have, for example, outfits that their friends have. They may therefore go to every extent to have these things. According to students, some girls may even go to the extent of indulging in prostitution in order to get money to acquire these belongings. Alternatively, some girls may indulge in some economic activities in order to get the money to purchase whatever things they have the cravings for. Our current world is described as materialistic. This has been widely promoted by information technology and the media. Teens of today are exposed to goods through the mass media as well as the internet. Consequently, the taste for varied goods have widened.

The young participants identified several instances where the family can be a source of stress for them. One major source of stress from the family unit that students discussed and described as challenging was domestic demands. These include house chores and running errands. According to these adolescents, they always have to run errands for adults, that is, their own parents, neighbours and other relatives in case they live close by. This, they complained, goes a long way to affect their studies since they do not get enough time to attend to their books. It is expected to run errands for not only your parents but also for neighbours

and other relations due to the nature of community living in Ghana, which promotes traditional communal living where members are dependent on each other. According to students, refusal to provide little informal services such as running errands for a neighbour or a relative comes with certain consequences; they may also refuse to provide help if one's family need their help or services. In order to avoid conflicts between neighbours or relatives and one's family, the individual must succumb to such demands. Such interdependence is characteristic of family and communities in African societies, where members, including children, have roles and responsibilities (). Also, as day students, they become exhausted after travelling home from school. This notwithstanding, parents still have expectations that they will give a hand in the house chores such as helping with younger siblings, cooking, and cleaning. This often affects their academics:

Sometimes too, after school, when we get home we are tired but our parents, they know you are tired but will give you some work to do, that is house chores. At the end of the day you become too tired to read your books after school.

Another student also described his ordeal:

In my case, sometimes when I am preparing to learn at home, my uncle will send me to run errands for him. At the end of the day I am not able to read, and the notes will be piling. And if you don't do well in school too they will talk.

As day students, these students have to do part of their school work like home work and assignments at home. If students then have to spend the rest of their time after school attending excessively to domestic demands, they may definitely not have enough time for their books at home. In this case, for example, homework may not be completed.

As one student further stressed, not only does house chores and other demands at home affect their academics but also affects making time for themselves as individuals:

I don't get time for myself because I have a lot of things to do at home after school.

Things like what?

I mean house chores. They are too much.

Other home demands include pressure from parents and close relations on adolescents to be serious with their studies. According to students this is a major source of stress for young people. Family relations are fond of comparing young people's academics with other young people in the family and this can make a young person stressed. As students argued, there are differences in academic capacities of each individual. It is therefore wrong to compare individual young people. As one student stressed, parents want to go every length to get their children to excel in their education because they themselves might have been failures in life because they did not get the opportunity to attain formal education. Due to this, perceiving education as the key to success, parents want their children to excel in their education so as to be successful in their lives.

I think some of our parents did not attain higher education. Because of that they are going through some hardships in life so because of that they don't want their children to go through this same hardship.

According to students, not only do parents go every length to get their wards to succeed in their academics in order to be successful in life but also their success is also an exhibition of status:

When parents gather and they are talking among themselves, they tend to talk about how well their children are doing in school. In other words he or she will use you to boast of herself.

As has been stated in the introductory chapter, formal education is highly cherished in the Ghanaian society. The above mirrors how education is valued in Ghana. Every parent desires to support his child to attain formal education, at least to the university level. Unfortunately though, many parents struggle to bear the cost involved in this quest, in the face of almost no financial support by the state. Secondly, the overemphasis on formal education is also linked to the globalized idea that formal education is the key to success and partly a way out of poverty. An idea which downplays the value of other non-formal training to some extent.

Another home related issue that young people named as generating stress for them is parental disciplinary and regulatory structures. An example of this is punishment. In most cases, punishment is physical, leaving the adolescent emotionally disturbed. Adolescents described a very negative feeling after physical punishment by parents. In some cases, parents justify physical punishment on religious grounds:

Sometimes my father will use Biblical scripture to justify why he beats us. According to him, the Bible supports it.

Some adolescents, being Christians themselves, become helpless because they themselves believe in the Bible. This does not rule out the fact that physical punishment leaves a dent on their feelings as young people. It seems though that Christian parents forget that the good old book also talks about love. If parents could also take the love factor into consideration I believe this would make them look out for and stay open to other means of instilling discipline; means which would make them discipline children in a more loving manner. For in as much as parents need to ensure discipline in their children, no parent desire their children to interpret disciplinary measures as an act of hatred or wickedness.

Familial scuffles is also another source of stress emanating from the family environment. Adolescents stressed that quarrels, misunderstandings and tensions in the family can make them stressed. Examples are parental and sibling conflicts:

When there is fight between your parents all the time or when there is fight and misunderstanding between you and your siblings it can make you become stressed. Troublesome younger siblings can make you feel stressed. Misunderstandings from home in sibling relationships can make you feel stressed.

In reference to Juan and colleagues (2012), moderate parent adolescent conflicts, for example, promotes the development of autonomy, relationships and identity. As these students have stated, such conflicts are also a source of stress for them and as Auerbach and Ho (2012) finds could lead to depression. It becomes necessary then that even if such conflicts occur it should be in moderation.

In some parts of the country like northern Ghana, it is common to marry off young girls to older suitors. This could be as a result of financial constraint on one's family. In most cases, the young girls are not willing to allow themselves to be married off without their will to such suitors. Adolescents in this study identified this scenario as a major stressor to adolescent girls. Generally, in other parts of the country, it is also not uncommon for parents with financial constraints to allow their daughters to engage in similar unhealthy relationships in order to get some money to ease the economic hardships on the family. As some of the interviewees elaborated:

Sometimes too financial constraint can make parents give improper guidance. When they don't have money they can push their daughters to sleep with other men in order to get some money.

Some parents too fail to provide our needs so in a way they force you to find other means to get what you need.

In addition, adolescents identified the occurrence of sexual abuse in the family context as a stressor. As they discussed, sometimes one may be under pressure and forced by a family member to have sex. This could be a parent, a sibling or other relation. In such a case, the adolescent becomes stressed.

In line with the wider literature on adolescent stress and coping (e.g. Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008; Chiang, 1995), students named stress induced instances from the school environment. Some of these instances revolved around general academics, peers, teacher-student relationships and teaching mode. In the area of academics, students identified academic competition as a phenomenon that generates stress.

Sometimes too, it is influence from our peers. For example when you are in the same class and you realise that somebody is academically good and is first in class all the time you might also want to study harder to be first in class. This can make you become stressed.

Those who suffer the most in this case are students who are generally poor academically. They experience much more pressure to do well since it can be embarrassing to be academically below the ladder. Students further reiterated that as students, they do their best to study but sometimes even though they play their part in studying as much as they can they are still pressurized by parents and other relations as well as teachers to study harder. This leaves them under pressure to deliver beyond their limits. Aside the academic demands, students discussed extensively challenges with teacher student relationships which goes a long way to impound on their stress. The most pressing topic students pinpointed was about teacher punishment which is common in the Ghanaian educational system. According to students, punishment by teachers in school comes in different forms and can be disadvantageous or detrimental:

For example, when you come to school late and a teacher sees you he can punish you by giving you some area to weed, and you will not get the opportunity to be in class. You will be weeding while your friends will be studying.

As one student stressed, this is usually not in the best interest of the punished student since he or she will end up taking the same exams as those in class studying.

For some of the teachers too, sometimes when they see you wearing unprescribed dress or shoes they will not ask you why you are wearing such but will immediately punish you. Some of the punishment too you may be unable to finish on time and this can make you feel stressed.

Even right now some of our mates are weeding as their punishment and because of that they will miss classes when their colleagues are learning in class. And they will write the same exams with their colleagues. This is not fair. Their parents know that they are learning but they are here weeding.

Ensuring discipline is very vital to school management. However, when the measures of discipline are not managed well breakdown of order in the school might occur. If students have to spend a chunk of their school hours in fulfilling punishments this does not auger well for their academics in the sense that they miss classes and thus miss lessons which would otherwise be examinable during the examinations.

According to students, complaining about punishment in school comes with certain consequences. One is at his or her own risk complaining to their parents about the situation since it is usually not taken seriously. It may even affect the individual's grades, students reported, since a teacher may indirectly punish a student who complains to the parent by giving them poor grades. Other issues involving the teaching process was also discussed. Teacher absenteeism was mentioned by students as a major challenge since it affects the academic process. Some teachers will just come to the school and sign the attendance sheet and then leave, leaving the students to study on their own. Some teachers also seem not to be competent since students struggle to understand their teaching material and they on the other hand do not show any obligation to give extra attention to students, as exemplified by one of the students:

For some of the teachers too they don't have any care for us. They don't mind whether we understand what they are teaching or not. They just don't care.

In this case, students are left with the option to depend on the textbooks on their own and this, students mentioned, can make the learning process a tough one. Students, as already said, complain at their own risk since they may not be taken seriously and may also be a target for the particular teacher in question. Moreover, some of the characteristics of teachers makes it difficult for students to go to them for extra help with their academics. Other aspects of teaching such as the mode of delivery, for example notes giving and taking, students mentioned, as a cumbersome process that contributes to their stress. Other easier means like using recorders are also prohibited. Thus one risks being punished should one be caught using any such gadgets. Students also avoid to seek help by teachers because of the domestic demands they might ask:

Some of the teachers when you go to them they will be sending you on errands. You run one errand another teacher will also send you to buy this or that for him.

As for me when I see a teacher coming I just want to take the other way because of how he will treat you.

Not only do school activities and demands generate stress for young people in this study but also the type of school attended itself can generate stress for young people. Young people in this study stressed that their status as day students is stressful:

Because of financial constraints some of our parents are not able to afford to take us to boarding school but rather opt for day schools. And as you can see it is stressful to be a day student. You have to wake up very early in the morning, do your house chores and take public transport to school and back home. By the time you get home you are so tired you can't even learn.

As one student further emphasised, this is not favourable to their academics.

The worst aspect is that we have to compete with the boarders in the final exams. We will all be writing the same exams.

Adolescents are fond of being with their peer group just as one student stated; ‘You know, as youth you always want to be with your peers’. Notwithstanding, the peer relationship comes with various challenges as was mentioned by adolescents in this study. In this study, adolescents mentioned their peers as a source of stress. Peer relations can generate stress. These could be in the form of conflicts, peer competition in terms of academics, as well as pressure to conform to their standards and behaviours such as drinking alcohol and smoking.

For example peer groups can exert pressure on a member. Among your peers if they smoke and drink and you don’t do same they will be forcing you to engage in what they do. Sometimes you are forced to do the same because you want to be accepted.

Such demands from peers can drain the individual. Other examples of peer relations demands, as students discussed, were involvement in entertainment activities and the choice to indulge in romantic relationships.

Yes. Sometimes it is not about you but it is because you see your friends having one.

Sometimes when you and your friends are going somewhere with their girlfriends and you don’t have they will be teasing you.

This clearly shows that adolescents may want to engage in such relationships not because they necessarily so desires but it is mainly because their peers are involved in such relationships or may pick on them for not having a romantic relationship partner.

As is usually the case at least in the Ghanaian setting, such romantic relationships comes with certain challenges and responsibilities. In these relationships, it is usually required that the boy provides the girl with gifts. The situation is even worse if the girl comes from a poor home. This means that the boy may have to provide for some of her needs. The boys described this as straining since they live on their meagre resources their parents provide them.

Sometimes too when your friends have girlfriends you will be tempted to also have. But when you don’t have the means to provide for the girl it can make you feel stressed.

Other emotional challenges that comes with romantic relationships were also discussed by teens. For example, the heartache associated with one not receiving attention by another who one feel emotionally passionate about was mentioned as a stress causing factor by students.

For example, maybe you fall for somebody in your class and the person is not admiring you. Sometimes you tend to think about it too much and it can make you become stressed.

In addition, breakups are also a major source of stress for the adolescents who may be indulging in romantic relationships.

Also, if you are there with your guy and he comes to say 'let's break up'. You will feel some pain and that pain can make you feel stressed. It happens all the time.

On the societal front, students named socioeconomic status or the economic standing of a student and his or her family as a major source of stress for young people. Financial constraint was a major theme running through students narratives on the stress experience. According to students, financial constraint is a factor underlining the reason why some parents take their children to day schools instead of boarding schools which are considered to produce academically good students. This is due to the fact that they are able to make more time for their studies. However, not all parents can afford the extra cost of sending their wards to boarding schools. According to students, some of their parents are not able to provide for their needs and school demands. This results in some of the students having to engage in various economic activities in order to get their needs provided. As students informed, some of their colleagues do not even have parents to support them financially with their education. Such students have no choice than to engage in economic activities aside their studies to get means to support themselves.

Yes. Some of our mates work to take care of their needs. There are some who don't have parents at all and take care of themselves.

Some of the girls, as mentioned above, may also indulge in prostitution to get their needs met. Getting help from extended family members in the Ghanaian context is typical. However, according to students this may not always be possible since extended family members may also have their own economic demands. Students mentioned the current general economic

hardships in the country as having its toll on young people. This includes the increments in fuel prices:

They have recently increased the transport fares and some of our parents are not able to afford it so it means that some of us have to walk some of the distance to school and back, and this can make us stressed.

This evidences the fact that the stress adolescents experience are not only individually or family related but also related to structural problems. In some advanced countries secondary school students have access to scholarship and loan schemes as well as provision of state provided financial support. The situation is different in Ghana. Though most of the secondary schools are state owned and fees subsidised. The average Ghanaian parent still feel the pinch of having to provide the needs of their wards aside paying fees.

The youth of every society are considered its backbone in terms of workforce and the responsibility to carry it values to the next generation. Students in this study, however, raised concerns as to the level of acceptance of the youth in society as not been encouraging. Adolescents admitted that it is typical of them to expect some level of acceptance by their peers as well as from the wider society. If this desire for acceptance is not met adolescents are likely to be emotionally affected:

Socially, one can get stressed. As adolescents, when we get to some stage we always want to be accepted by our peers and people in society. In this case, when we realise that society is not accepting us we become stressed and we feel some pain within us.

For example, coming from a low socioeconomic background could also mean losing respect among your peers. According to students, being a less privileged student could make you lose respect among your peers as well as in the wider society. This can be challenging for such students.

To adolescents, sometimes there is prejudice as regards their position and status in the society. The youth are usually likened to social vices and unacceptable behaviour. In Ghana, convicted criminals are mostly made up of young people. It is shocking to see teenagers involved in armed robbery and contract killing. This has resulted in the youth being likened to a group likely to be involved in criminal acts and social vices. This students discussed as making the acceptance of young people as peaceful people in society challenging.

Adolescents also raised concerns as regards other social practices and demands in the Ghanaian society linked to their position in the generational order which can generate stress for the youth. Examples of these include the running of errands for adults, the belief that the adult is always right, young people's ideas being ignored in decision making in society. These among others are a few things that makes the youth experience not an enjoyable one.

4.3 Coping

This study did not only examine the stressors adolescents in Ghana encounter but also sought to uncover how they cope with these challenges. For example, this study sought to answer the questions on who adolescents talk to about their stressful experiences, where do they go for help or to ease their stress when they feel stressed, and what kind of resources they utilise during stressful times.

Coping is the strategies an individual utilizes to deal with the stressors he or she encounters (Frydenberg, 1997). In this study, students named various strategies for coping with their day to day stressors. These were in broad terms both problem-focused and emotion- focused coping strategies, which are the two main categories of coping identified by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). One major problem-focused coping strategy that adolescents utilised was seeking social support, for example by talking to a significant person. These included family members, peers, teachers, religious leaders, other elderly people and, very rarely, professionals. As regards family members, one could talk to parents or older siblings when one has something weighing down on him or her. One student commented 'Sometimes I discuss issues with my elder brother to give me advice'. Other students also commented that they talk to their parents about their issues. However, all students acknowledged that it is somewhat challenging to share your problems with your parents. At least, some things can be discussed with parents but not all issues can be told to them. For example, it is challenging to discuss issues about one's romantic relationship with one's parents:

How about your parents one more time. Are you able to talk to them?

Yes. But we cannot tell them everything

Which are some of the things you cannot tell them?

When you lose your boyfriend.

Another student also commented that parental reactions makes it difficult to share your challenges such as issues with romantic relationships with them:

I think it is not easy because for example you cannot discuss problems in your romantic relationship with your parents because you may think they will be mad at you. In this case you will rather prefer to tell your peer. So how parents handle situations makes it difficult for us to tell them our problems.

This could well be the case because in Ghana, as it also is in some parts of the world, young people's engagement in romantic relationships is frowned upon and not something that is encouraged. This could be partly due to the risks involved. However, as it seems, desire to engage in romantic relationships is part of the process of adolescent and young people's development.

Another student also has a peculiar reason why he can't talk to his parents about his problems.

It is not easy for me. I can't tell my parents my problems because if I have a problem with my father and tell my mother she will support him and when I have a problem too with my mother and tell my father he will support her.

The situation is likely so due to the general belief that the adult is almost always right in the Ghanaian cultural setting. This is exemplified in a proverb 'abofra ne opanyin nya asem a opanyin nde fo'. This literally means that if there is an issue involving an adult and a child, the adult cannot be judged wrong. For this reason it is appropriate to side with the adult if there is an issue involving the child or young person and an adult. It is somehow inappropriate to query an adult in the presence of a child in Ghana. Although the use of such beliefs are waning due to the emphasis on children's rights, it still influences judgement involving adults and young people or children in Ghana. This among others are some of our cultural practices and beliefs that are subtly robbing children and young people of their freedom of speech, independence and self-esteem.

Teachers were the next significant adults adolescents confirmed they consult when they find themselves in stressful circumstances. According to students, teachers can be a great resource in difficult times. In one student's words, 'I try to find one good teacher whom I can talk to and discuss things with him'. This could be seen as challenging since, as stated above, students also find it a challenge to approach teachers for help

As another student also narrated, teachers could help students solve their pressing problems.

I have a friend whose parents are struggling to give her money for her transportation to school. She discussed it with me and we talked it over with a teacher and the teacher gave her money for her transport.

Notwithstanding, students admitted that just as it is with parents, it is challenging to share problems with teachers. According to students, the main issue is about trust. Students commented that they cannot easily trust teachers because the teacher-student relationship is mainly based on academics and for lack of proximity it becomes difficult to trust them to share your problems with them:

It is not all people that I trust.

You may not know the person very well. Just as a teacher. So it is difficult to share your challenges with him.

Also, according to students, for fear of information transference among teachers, it becomes difficult to trust teachers and seek help from them.

Madam, it is true because you might think that when I talk to this teacher, when they meet in a group he will also go and tell the rest. And the issue will spread. By the time you realise, your name is everywhere.

Some of the teachers are particularly assigned to specific classes as advisors and counsellors, students informed. This means that every class has a particular teacher assigned as a supervisor. Even these students don't feel the urge to trust enough to go to them for help. This clearly shows some level of complexity in the teacher student relationship. Students complained they cannot easily approach teachers for help, neither do they trust them, yet they consider them helpful.

In the Ghanaian society, religious leaders play a vital role in the lives of individuals who are members of their religious groups. They perform functions such as counselling, and play advisory roles. Students named some religious leaders such as pastors, and in one student's case the youth leader of his church, as significant persons they talk to in difficult times. Interestingly, unlike parents or teachers, adolescents admitted they trust religious leaders the most and find no reason to hesitate approaching them for help in challenging times.

Peers are an inevitable support resource during stressful situations. Adolescents in this study informed that the main people they mostly depend on for support in difficult times are their peers. This is in conformity with research which supports the fact that adolescents feel comfortable to talk to their peers than their parents about their problems (Smollar & Youniss, 1987). For example, as is evident in this study, adolescents admitted that issues such as romantic relationships, which cannot be discussed with parents easily can be discussed with friends. Adolescents dependence on mostly peers could well be understood from the context of developmental psychology, which highlight the fact that in a bid to find their own identity and also develop autonomy adolescent intimacy and dependence shifts from parents to peers (Christie & Viner, 2005). Dependence on peers is considered helpful. However, Zimmerman-Gemberg and Skinner (2008) raise concern that peers are also in the process of developing skills to provide good advice and help. The involvement of parents in helping adolescents with their challenges can be an added resource to adolescents' coping.

Just as it is in the case of parents, it is not everything that can be discussed with peers though. Private home related issues cannot easily be discussed with peers since it is possible they may make a joke with certain embarrassing circumstances one may find himself in. As one student commented:

For example when there is financial constraint at home. If you tell your friend maybe he will tell other friends and they will be teasing you when they see you, saying, look at that poor boy.

This clearly shows that although peers are a great resource for adolescents, there is a down side on reliance on them. One needs to be selective as regards what to share with peers or whom to trust. To some students, although it seems useful to trust significant others with one's stressful challenges, the best option is to trust oneself, 'I trust God and myself', one student admitted. As adolescents suggested, it is possible to consult a health professional such as a doctor when one feels stressed out. However, most teens commented that they rarely utilise this option. Although students did not give a reason for this, it is quite common to seek help from health professionals for medical help. However, it is not common to seek the help of social workers or psychologists because they seem to be invisible in the health system. The use of health professionals' especially mental health professionals is seen as a thing for those with severe mental health disorders. Meanwhile, it has been estimated by a recent study that

Ghana had 41% prevalence rate of psychological distress. This implied that as many as 47 out of 100 admitted were under negative stress which affected them mentally.

Other problem-focused approaches adolescents identified as helpful in the coping process was, for example, first identifying the type of stressor one is encountering:

By identifying whatever is creating stress for you, you can understand it and find an appropriate solution to it. Maybe it is academic or from home or romantic relationship.

After identifying the type of stressor one is faced with, the next thing one can do is to make efforts to find a solution to the problem:

As she said, after identifying the source, you have to take steps to curb it. That is, put measures in place to manage the stress.

Seeking information about the stressor is another problem-focused approach students suggested was necessary in the effort made in coping with stress:

Also, you have to research about the kind of stress you have. You have to read about it and know how to manage it.

The use of the internet is a resource in this information seeking venture:

Sometimes we use the internet and we can get a lot of information about some of the issues that weigh us down.

Students also employed other means of coping which were mainly emotion-focused. Emotion-focused coping is that type of coping which is employed to offset the emotional distress that comes with stressful experiences. They include various strategies that may reduce or take away the emotional distress that comes with stressful situations and experiences. Emotion-focused coping strategies may not provide long term solution to the problem (Flanagan, 2008). In this study, students utilised various emotion-focused coping strategies to offset the emotional distress that comes with their stressful experiences. These included the use of certain community-based resources and engagement in various activities. For example, according to students, engagement in certain sporting activities were helpful to lessen the distressful impact of stressful situations and experiences. For one student, some problems are difficult to forget and it is worth necessary to engage in some activity to offset the distress of such circumstances:

It is not easy to forget. But if I feel like am getting too worried I just join my friends to play football. By the time I come back, I will be a bit ok.

Students named other physical activities they indulge in during stressful circumstances. These include swimming, doing exercise, playing basketball. Other activities included watching TV, reading stories, listening to music, going for a walk and visiting the library. Other emotion-focused coping approaches included visiting recreational centres like shopping malls and beaches.

Coping also involved making certain life choices and practices to offset the burden of distress that comes with stressful situations. These included sleeping, cutting down on friends, eating well, taking time to relax, and thinking positively.

In secondary schools in Ghana, there is what is called entertainment session, which is characterised by fun-filled activities like drama and musical shows. Students admitted that this is a good resource for offsetting their distress. However, as is typical of most emotion-focused coping strategies, students explained that this is not any much effective since their problems and woes still remain the same after attending such sessions.

Is what you have in the school enough to help you cope?

I think they are available enough. However, for example even though you go for entertainment, after it, you still go back thinking about the things that make you feel stressed.

Being a very religious society with most people being religious and mainly Christian, religious ways of coping is very common in the Ghanaian society. It is not uncommon for many to rely on spiritual or faith-based healing and treatment rather than medical treatment. This reflected in students' discussions on their coping mechanisms. As one student said, 'As for me I read the Bible and get some solutions to my problems'. To another student, religious coping is an option even when receiving harsh treatment from parents:

As for me, I believe in the Bible so I cope by where it says in the Bible that honour your parents, so whatever they do to me I just want to honour them because I am a Christian.

As to whether this is the best choice for coping or not leaves questions to be answered. One may wonder whether it is acceptable to just leave by the Bible in the face of abusive circumstances.

4.4 The way forward

This study intends to explore and describe students' experiences of stress and coping. It intends to make students experiences of stress and coping be known through students own narrations or discussions as much as possible. Therefore, it was of interest to know what students think are the best ways they can be helped with the stress experience. Students were thus asked to make recommendations .They made recommendations that cut across the family, through to the society level.

From the family level, adolescents recommended certain reformation in family life that they think would be helpful to reduce or eliminate stress or make coping with stress effective. For example, adolescents pinpointed lack of parent-child communication as a major problem in their families. They suggested parent-child communication would be a helpful tool for parents to know about the problems their children are encountering and contribute their quota in helping them find solution:

Sometimes our parents don't take our views. Because I believe that sometimes it is important that our parents gather us as children and ask us what is going on in our lives so that if we are having any challenges they will advise us. But parents don't do that.

Adolescents agreed strongly that parent-child communication is very important in the family unit. One student even commented that instead of parents' use of physical punishment on their children as a means of instilling discipline, communication could sometimes suffice better:

When it happens like that I will prefer my mother to talk to us, one on one, instead of beating us. It doesn't make you feel good.

Physical punishment is accepted in most African societies as a means of discipline. Thus, growing up in the Ghanaian society like any other African society means possibly experiencing physical punishment. For adolescents to be punished physically leaves some questions to be answered. It is considered harmful, abusive, and an infringement on the

fundamental human rights (Kyei-Gyamfi, 2011 p. 78). An array of research have evidenced the effects of the use of physical punishment, also known as corporal punishment. For example, a study by Ohene and colleagues (2006) has established a link between parents' use of corporal punishment and the risk of violent behaviour in youth. It seem to be, therefore, in the right direction that parents engage in more talks with their children as adolescents suggested. Currently in Ghana, the rise of child rights activists and the intensity of their criticism and advocacy against the use of corporal punishment have to some extent influenced its use; at least parents are aware that they could be prosecuted with the excessive use of corporal punishment.

To students, parent-child talk is beneficial in several other ways. One student opined that parent- child talk or communication can be educative. In his words, 'It gives you the opportunity to learn about life based on their advice'. Other students also added that parent child communication is so important that the absence of it can breed feelings of loneliness in an individual: 'Yes because without that it feels like you are walking alone in life'.

Parent-child talk or communication is usually absent in the family because as students claimed, some parents don't have the skills to do so. Students therefore suggested at least some parents need to be trained in order to know how to initiate communication with their children so as to make the maximum effect.

It is usually believed that every parent wants the best for his child. Thus they do everything possible to give their children what they deserve. However, according to adolescents in this study, this is not usually the case. Some parents may give wrong guidance, others maybe setting bad examples for their young people like smoking, drinking and the like. As one student opined, parents may be forced to give wrong guidance because of such factors as financial constraint.

Sometimes too financial constraint can make parents give improper guidance. When they don't have money they can push their daughters to sleep with other men in order to get some money

This according to students calls for the need for parents to be trained so as to be able to give the proper guidance to their children.

One other characteristic of good parenting is supervision of one's children. Parents must make sure they are aware of where their children go, what they do in their leisure and what kind of

people or friends they associate themselves with. Supervision is a very important part of parenting and is believed to promote healthy child development. However, sometimes parents may be overly strict with their children by putting stringent measures in place to monitor their movements. In a place like Ghana, like many African countries, parents are even stricter since they bear the cost of raising up a child solely without any state support. An individual is eligible to stay under the care and supervision of parents until one completes tertiary education. Thus unlike the situation is in Europe and other parts of the world, adolescents of all age groups, be it early, middle, and older adolescents in Ghana undergo strict supervision from parents. Girls of this study described the situation as even challenging for girls who undergo stricter supervision by parents;

Especially the girls. We are always at home. Even if someone is coming to pay you a visit they will inquire whether it is a boy or a girl.

Parents are usually strict on girls because of the fear of unwanted pregnancies that may affect their educational progress as well as the opportunity to be future brides.

Students of this study, both boys and girls, believed that as adolescents they need time with their peers and parents must allow this. In their words, 'Parents should give us time to spend with our friends and have fun'. The Ghanaian adolescent seem to have less personal time since part of their free time is also taken by engagement in house chores and other domestic demands.

In relation to the school setting, adolescents acknowledged that there are at least a few resources in the school. They were, however, of the view that it is necessary for the ministry of education to ensure that teachers brought to the school are of high quality, so as to foster quality tuition. In addition, according to students, it will be good to also have enough textbooks to use for their studies.

From the social front, students suggested ways in which society can be helpful to young people experiencing stressful situations or circumstances. In students' narrations about their coping mechanisms, they spoke about talking to significant others like family relations, teachers, religious leaders and other elderly people in the community. They also acknowledged that one challenge in doing this is, however, trust. People like teachers are in the lower continuum when it comes to trust. Even parents will favour themselves at the expense of the adolescent as one adolescent confirmed. For this reason, adolescents proposed

that there is the need to have trustworthy adults. This will make it possible for adolescents to share their problems with significant adults in society.

Adolescents further stressed in their narratives that their views seem to be neglected in society because most of them are not allowed to vote. In Ghana, the start age of voting is 18. There seem also not to be any other avenues particularly for adolescents to make their voices heard in matters affecting their lives in the various communities they find themselves. To adolescents then, there need to be avenues through which they can air their voices so that issues affecting them will be heard, as on one interviewee stated:

They don't take our views although we have good ideas. They say our minds are not developed enough. I think sometimes they must have all children's meeting and ask of our views and problems. I think this can be helpful.

Currently, the changing perspectives on children's status in society, where for example children are seen as social actors have led child work professionals to push for the recognition of children's views in matters affecting them. Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also confer on children and young people the right to be involved in issues that concern them. Notwithstanding youth participation in decision making in Ghana is still low.

In addition, to adolescents, government officials who are in the position to provide amenities and structural resources like libraries, public places for recreation, among others in communities have failed greatly in providing these resources. One student simply and poetically puts it this way:

The government representatives must also attend to us. At first when we chose leaders they serve the community, nowadays when we chose leaders it is the community that serves them.

Another student also added:

For example the assemblymen. They don't provide any services for us. But they demand our services.

According to students, structural resources like libraries and internet centres are vital and beneficial for young people and needed to be provided in communities:

For young people like us we will like for example libraries and internet cafes where we will not have to pay for. I think it will help us a lot. Not only in the school but outside the school premises, I mean in the community.

In this current world, the media is very useful for young people as an informational, educative and entertaining tool. Developmentalists have long advocated for age-appropriate programs delivered by the media. For example, there is the need to have youth centred programs on TV. Young people in this study suggested this was necessary so that the youth will not feel left out.

Some of the things they show on TV are not important. We want inspirational programs from the media.

As adolescents, we like romantic movies. When we are stressed we want to watch such movies to make us relieved. We like it.

Finally, for young people, it is necessary to feel yourself as a young person in the community one finds oneself. As young people thus suggested, there is the need for more youth centred community-based programs and social activities. In their words:

There should be enough programs for adolescents. All the programs are for matured people.

Unlike it is in the advanced world, where there are various well-structured community based youth programs, such programs are quite scanty in Ghana. A few of these programs are once in a while organized by private and non-governmental organizations and religious groups. More community-based developmental, recreational and educative youth programs are essential for the general wellbeing of young people and it is high time the public sector gets more involved.

5.0 CONCLUSION

With the employment of systems theory as a framework, this paper has provided a descriptive account of the experiences of stress and coping by adolescent secondary school students in Ghana. Students expressed their understandings on stress and discussed their stress experiences; naming what constituted sources of stress for them. In this regard family elements such as conflicts, sibling rivalry, parental control and other family related issues were named as sources of stress. School-related stressors were also mentioned. These included academics, issues with teachers and teaching mode. Self-generated stress were stressors that emanated from the adolescents own choices, ambitions and desires. In addition, societal-related stress sources were also named by adolescents as those stressors that comes about as a result of certain norms, practices in social life in the Ghanaian setting, as well as the unavailability of structural resources in the community setting. Young people in this study used both problem focused and. emotion focused coping strategies to cope with the stressors they encounter. Recommendations made by the young interviewees called for changes in the various levels of the individual's social and structural networks such as family, school, media, community and governmental bodies.

5.1 Implications for practice

The findings of this study implies that the experiences of stress occurs within a complexly woven maze of structures and networks that together influence the nature of stress experienced as well as the coping mechanisms used. In this study, family, teachers, significant other adults which form part of the , micro, meso, exo and macro systems are seen as influential in the stress and coping experience of adolescents.

Practitioners who imbibe a systems approach to practice often take these levels of the individuals system of networks into consideration although, taking the various levels of a

system is often seen as challenging. The findings of this study supports, for example, the fact that even within the school system it becomes necessary to involve the various individuals such as both students and teachers and even the principals in school support and counselling by professionals. On a whole, it becomes necessary that practitioners or professionals involved with adolescents in general consider the broad contexts within which they live. These include, among others, the sociocultural contexts. For example although the major stressors students experienced and coping strategies were in line with the broader literature it is also clear that certain cultural values and practices makes the stress experience and coping of these Ghanaian adolescents somehow unique.

Also, making adolescents discuss their sources of stress, coping strategies, and their own recommendations for subsequent support in this study seems useful and informative. For example, in their discussions, one main theme adolescents talked about was punishment, which they experience both in the home and at school. Most adults understand that punishment is always not pleasant for young people. Unlike the situation is here in Europe where major efforts are being made to educate parents on alternative ways of disciplining children, parents in Ghana still see physical punishment as a common way of instilling discipline in their children, likewise teachers. This study has clearly shown that punishment, which some parents and teachers in Ghana consider as a normal means of ensuring discipline at home and in schools may not only be unpleasant for young people but also considered stressful and consequently detrimental to the mental wellbeing of the developing young person. Some child rights activists have continuously criticised the Ghanaian government and its educational ministry for failing to ensure a total ban on the use of physical punishment by parents and teachers in schools. After several years of ratifying the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, it seems there is still a struggle as to recognizing physical punishment as a form of child abuse in the Ghanaian cultural context. This implies that there is still more work to be done by child rights activists, social educators in the social work field and other health workers to keep the work going on educating the public on the effects of physical punishment as well as education on alternative modes of instilling discipline. Religious leaders can also not be left out in this regard since this study shows the use of religious justification in the use of physical punishment.

5.2 Recommendations for future research.

This study was centred on stress and coping among adolescents in Ghana. The sample was selected from secondary schools where adolescents are readily available. Thus the sample could be considered as conveniently selected. It would be interesting though for further research to target adolescents outside the secondary school settings. It is common to find adolescents in Ghana who are either drop outs, couldn't further their education to secondary school level for various reasons such as financial incapability of parents or loss of parents and lack of responsible guardian. Some other adolescents may not have been to school at all and are working or in the labour force instead, usually common in the rural areas. The world of these group of adolescents deserve to be explored since they have a unique perspective on stress and coping. The views of these adolescents will add up to give a holistic perspective of the nature of stress and coping among adolescents in Ghana in general. Otherwise, this group would be considered as socially excluded from the general literature on stress and coping in the Ghanaian context. Researchers in the various disciplines which have interest in stress and coping like psychologists, social workers and the medical disciplines can consider this line of research.

Gender was not of interest for this study. Notwithstanding, it seemed to be inevitable in this study since the discussion to some extent took on a gender line. In the course of the discussion the line was drawn between boys and girls although the discussion didn't seek to create such trajectories. As said, it seems inevitable to avoid such a dichotomy. I thus suggest that further research can consider this line of research.

A study of this nature deserves to be conducted in the rural areas as well. This is quite necessary because it will be quite interesting to know what type of stressors adolescents in these areas are encountering and how they are coping. For example in the case of adolescents in the city as was the case in this study, they drew on various resources such as libraries and internet use and other recreational resources to help them cope with stress. It will be interesting to know how adolescents in the rural areas are coping where some of these facilities and amenities are rare or scanty.

We are looking forward to a time when the services of professionals like school psychologists and social workers will be made use of immensely in the Ghana educational system. The country at the moment is lacking in this area. This will go a long way to support adolescents in their management of stress and its related experiences and coping efforts for general wellbeing.

APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF STRESS

1. How will you define stress?

What do you think young people today relate to stress?

What do you think about stress in young people as compared to adults?

Do you perceive any differences in what is stressful to young people and adults or children?

SOURCES OF STRESS

2. What are some of the things that makes you feel stressed?

Do you remember a situation in which you felt stressed?

How was it like?

How did you feel?

Why did you feel the way you felt?

What was the cause of it?

Did anyone impose it (yourself, parents, peers, extended family, teacher, society, etc)?

What do you think causes stress for your peers or young people in general as compared to children and adults.

COPING

3. How do you cope with stress?

What are the things you do to cope with stress?

For example what activities do you engage in?

Where do you go?

Who do you talk to? For example in the school, at home or any significant others?

What resources do you draw on to cope in school, at home, etc.?

What resources do you think young people draw on to cope with stress?

What other services do you assess when you feel stressed?

4. What do you think about the availability of resources to cope with stress? In the school, at home, among peers, about the social environment, in policies etc.

Do you think there is something that can help you in stressful times that you can't find?

Do you think there is something that needs to be done to facilitate young people coping? For example by policy makers, in the school, in the home etc.

APPENDIX B:

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: A comparative study of stress and coping among secondary school students in Ghana and Norway.

Name of investigator: Priscilla Anum

Contact Information: Prisanum@yahoo.com

Study Program: Master in Social Work with a Comparative Perspective, University of Nordland Bodø, Norway.

About the project:

This study is about stress and coping among adolescent secondary school students in Ghana and Norway. It seeks to explore the adolescents' understanding and definition of stress, the sources of stress for them, and how they cope with stress.

Significance of study:

This study will be useful in the sense that it will add to the knowledge about stress and coping among young people and this will be relevant to social service workers like social workers, health professionals and researchers who engage in research related to young people.

Procedure:

This study will be conducted by interviewing young people of adolescent age between 14- 19. In addition, I will also conduct focus group discussions if necessary.

Ethics:

Social research involves the use of human participants and for this reason it becomes necessary to adhere to specific ethical guidelines and standards.

This study will comply with the necessary ethical guidelines involved with human participants such as freedom of participation and withdrawal, confidentiality, anonymity, and avoidance of physical harm. In this regard, all activities in this study are voluntary and all participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time in the course of the study without any reason. All data collected will be deleted and discarded after the analyses have been completed. All the information that I collect in this research will be kept confidential. I will anonymize participants by not including their real names and other personal information in the data. I also wish to inform that there is no physical harm associated with this study. This study will also be evaluated and approved by the Norwegian Science Data Service to ensure the quality of the research before I start the field work.

If you have read this document and agrees to participate please sign below.

Participant

.....

Investigator

.....

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