

# How do young people cope with climate change? Implications for engagement, mental wellbeing, and climate education

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# The climate-change problem is not only an environmental problem:

- Existential questions
- Moral questions
- Political questions



# Learning about climate change is an emotional process

Learning about climate change often evokes difficult emotions like worry, anxiety, grief, anger and sometimes even hopelessness

Educators/teachers need to take account of these emotions when teaching about climate change

Why?



# Why is it important to focus on emotions when it comes to climate-change education?

Three main arguments in the ESD literature:

- (1) That the complexity and seriousness of sustainability challenges can evoke negative emotions of worry anxiety -- prevent feelings of hopelessness and promote hope and agency (Gardiner & Rieckmann, 2015; Hicks, 2014; Ojala, 2012, 2015; Stevenson & Peterson, 2015).
  - In worst cases education about global issues can increase feelings of hopelessness (Hicks, 2014).



# Why is it important to focus on emotions when it comes to CC-education?

Three main arguments in the ESD literature:

- (2) Pluralistic approaches that emphasize complexity and value conflict have become popular among ESD researchers during later years – take account of passions, anger, dissonance and so on, to prevent deadlocks and to promote constructive learning (Lundegård & Wickman, 2012; Sund & Öhman, 2014; Wals, 2010)



# Why is it important to focus on emotions when it comes to CC-education?

## (3) An overarching view:

- Emotional aspects and cognitions are not separate and therefore emotions are always a part of the learning process and this need to be acknowledge by ESD educators (Eliaam & Trop, 2010; Garrison, 2014; Ojala, 2013; Manni et al., 2016).



# Emotion regulation/coping

- I am interested in what young people **do** with their emotions - they are not victims of whatever emotions that are evoked in them, but actively cope and deal with them
- How young people cope at an individual level, in interaction, and how educators/teachers react to these emotions. How they communicate about emotional aspects



# Emotion regulation/coping

- One important thought in my research is that how young people deal with emotions are very *important for* if they are going to feel that they can influence, for their engagement concerning these issues and also for *learning processes* at large



## **Empirical studies in a Swedish context**

- Three groups of young people - 11 to 12 year olds, late teenagers, and young adults
- In a study these three age-groups wrote about how they cope with worry and how they go about promoting hope
- The transactional model of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

# Two main coping strategies

- Emotion-focused coping
  - strategies to regulate or get rid of negative emotions that are evoked by the problem/stressor
- Problem-focused coping
  - Strategies to deal with the stressor directly



# Emotion-focused coping

- **De-emphasizing the threat (denial and “here-and-now” thinking)**
- I think it would be great if it gets warmer and warmer – upper secondary student
- My advice to my friend is that there’s nothing to worry about, I don’t think it’s going to happen – intermediate school pupil
  - It feels like a media thing to make us buy more papers. We always have to have something to be afraid of, because then society sticks together – university student
- Then I try to tell myself that there won’t be any major disasters during my lifetime – university student
- I’d tell my friend that nothing is going to happen because Sweden is a safe country - intermediate school pupil
- I don’t care that much. If it’s going to happen, it will happen after we’re dead and then who gives a crap - upper secondary student

# Emotion-focused coping

## – **Distancing (distraction and avoidance)**

- I usually sing because when I do I really calm down, and then I try to think about something else - intermediate school pupil
- I try to calm down by listening to music or watching TV - upper secondary student
- I get worried because there are so many cars. They let out a lot of exhaust fumes and it's getting hotter on earth. So, if there is a lot of traffic, I look in the other direction - intermediate school pupil

# Emotion-focused coping

## – Social support

- Sometimes I lay in bed at night and worry. Then I go down and see my mom and dad - intermediate school pupil
- I don't feel I can do anything except talk about it to get my feelings out - university student
- My advice is that I think he or she should talk to somebody who knows a lot about the climate. That might make my friend relax a little - upper secondary student

## – Hyperactivation

- I think we pretty much deserve it because we ignore the environment for the sake of economic growth - university student
- I feel powerless; there's nothing I can do. Even though I recycle a lot, it feels like the coal-fired power plants just spew out carbon dioxide and then everything seems pointless - university student
- Try to accept the truth and become more bitter about humanity - university student

# Problem-focused coping

## – Individual (cognitive and behavioral)

- I usually read about things like how the ice is melting and what measures can be taken, meaning what I can do personally – upper secondary student
- I usually think a little more carefully about the good things I can do for the environment, try to see the small actions as important and not only focus on the huge problem, because then it gets overwhelming and you can't deal with it – university student
- I read in my climate book, where there are a bunch of suggestions about what kids can do for the environment – intermediate school pupil
- When I am scared, I try to get mom and dad to take the bus to work and buy the right products – upper secondary student

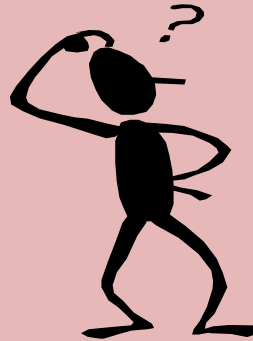
## – Collective

- I think if everybody helps out, we can stop the climate changes – intermediate school pupil
- I try to think positively and convince myself that if everybody does something, it will help. Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do a little – university student
- I would tell my friend to take it easy, we can all help out so that things get better on our planet – intermediate school pupil

# Quantitative survey/questionnaire studies

- Young people's **emotion-focused** coping in relation to climate change (de-emphasizing the threat) is associated with a lower degree of environmental engagement, knowledge, and efficacy (Ojala, 2012, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2018)
- Young people's **cognitive problem-focused** coping in relation to climate change is related to a higher degree of environmental engagement and efficacy but also to lower subjective well-being (general negative affect)

Is there any other way to cope with climate change that is related to both well-being and engagement?



# Today: Three main coping strategies

- Problem-focused coping
  - Strategies to deal with the stressor directly
- Emotion-focused coping
  - strategies to regulate or get rid of negative emotions that are evoked by the problem/stressor
- Meaning-focused coping
  - more closely related to the activation of positive emotions than to the reduction of negative emotions.
  - could help people live actively with difficult emotions (broaden perspectives, buffer)

# Meaning-focused coping

- **Meaning-focused coping**
  - is especially important when the stressor cannot be removed and solved at once (or at all) but still demands active involvement, such as when one has to care for a terminally ill partner (Folkman, 2008; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Problem-focused coping is not enough!
  - I have argued (Ojala, 2012) there are some similarities with climate change

# Meaning-focused coping

## – Positive re-appraisal/Cognitive restructuring

- Because more and more people are starting to understand more about the climate and how it is hurting the animals - intermediate school pupil
- Because people are becoming more and more aware and concern for the environment is starting to become part of everyday life in the things we buy or do - upper secondary student
- I hope the changes that need to be made happen. That might not happen until the situation is absolutely urgent, but still. Change is going to happen because it is necessary - university student

## – Defiant hope

- I don't believe in living my life as a pessimist - university student
- No hope, no reason to live – intermediate school pupil
- You have to feel hope to make things any better. If no one felt hope, then you might as well give up. And then everything will come crashing down. - upper secondary student



# Meaning-focused coping

## – Trust in different social actors

- Because I think people are going to figure out new stuff, like cars that do not let out exhaust fumes - intermediate school pupil
- Because scientists and other people are working really hard to find a solution - intermediate school pupil
- You'll have to trust the politicians – upper secondary student
- You can see that businesses of all kinds are thinking a bit more about acting in environmentally friendly ways – university student
- It feels like the environmental movement is having more impact on those with power. They dare not resist anymore. - university student

# Quantitative survey/questionnaire studies

- Young people's **meaning-focused coping** in relation to climate change is positively related to environmental engagement and efficacy as well as subjective well-being (Ojala, 2012a, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2018; Ojala & Wullenkord, 2023)
  - For young people who use a high degree of problem-focused coping, meaning-focused coping also works as a buffer, preventing low subjective wellbeing (Ojala, 2012)
  - Meaning-focused coping moderates (buffer) the relation between worry and pessimism (Wullenkord & Ojala, 2023)

## **To take account of coping/emotion regulation - Is this really a task for educators and teachers?**

- Students want to learn more about how to handle worry in a constructive way and how to evoke hope (Gardiner & Rieckmann, 2015).
- Educators/teachers are important role models for their students when it comes to emotional aspects (Kristijansson, 2000).
- Teachers more or less consciously create emotional norms/emotional rules in the classroom (Cekaite, 2013; Zembylas et al. 2014).

**To take account of coping/emotion regulation - Is this really a task for educators and teachers?**

A questionnaire study with senior high-school students showed that how they perceived that their teachers would react to negative emotions in relation to societal problems was related to their coping strategies (Ojala, 2015)

**Teachers do matter!! 😊**

# How do teachers/educators view the role of emotions in the learning process when it comes to ESD?

- Small study indicates (Cross, 1998):
- Teachers are aware that these issues can evoke strong worries among their students, and they get worried about their students' worry, **and this have direct didactical/ pedagogical consequences, because they avoid talking about certain issues in the classroom**
- Instead one could argue that: These emotional aspects need to be dealt with educationally in a way that helps students, dare to go through transformation and confront worry/anxiety

# The importance of critical emotional awareness

- To be aware of and think about emotional aspects in a reflective and critical way
  - To learn about psychological research about emotions, coping, wellbeing, engagement and learning
  - To acknowledge that emotional reactions are related to power, discourses about emotions, emotion rules, culture and structures (Ojala, 2016; Ojala, 2017; Ojala, 2023)
- It is a kind of ESD-competence that both teacher students, educators and students could benefit from achieving



# What components does CEA consist of?

- (1) Become aware of and sometimes challenge our own pre-existing meta-emotion philosophies
  - Personal and social-psychological
  - Socially shared discourses
    - (a) Irrationality discourse
    - (b) Medicalization of normal everyday difficult emotions (like anxiety and worry)
- (2) We need to be given opportunities to learn about emotions and their role in everyday life and learning processes (a multidisciplinary perspective)
  - Important to not primarily rely on research in clinical psychology where maladaptive anxiety and depression have been in focus, but to learn from research about emotions in a general population
  - Non-clinical worry/anxiety positively associated with information seeking, critical thinking (worry is not fear), feelings of efficacy, climate-change engagement
  - But is also to a certain extent associated with general low wellbeing and hopelessness

# What components does CEA consist of?

- (3) Acquire research-based knowledge about how best to live with and respond to difficult, “negative”, emotions
  - Validate negative emotions – do not dismiss them – also if aiming for hope
    - Is associated with better coping on an individual level
  - Give room to and put words to emotions
    - Control
    - Better understanding of stressful and problematic situations
    - Values – for example, affective injustice

# What components does CEA consist of?

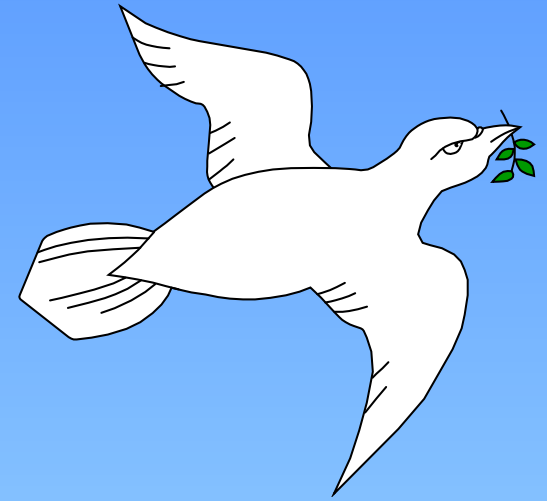
- (4) Take into account coping and emotion regulation - Constructive and less constructive strategies
  - Prevent distancing, rumination, black-and-white thinking, and de-emphasizing – Lift up to the surface, disrupt, and critically discuss different defensive coping strategies
  - Promote meaning-focused coping (cognitive restructuring, trust, defiant hope) and problem-focused coping (what can I do individually but also collectively)



# What components does CEA consist of?

- (5) Promote an awareness of how larger societal emotion norms influence emotions and coping/emotion regulation
  - Inter-individual
  - Cultural
  - Structural





Thank You!  
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