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The Politics of Adolescent Stress in a Consumer Culture: Coping with Post Compulsory Schooling

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This paper is a revised version of a paper submitted to Youth Studies: Australia. It is intended that further revisions to this paper before AARE will incorporate responses by adolescents, teachers, and youth workers to the ideas presented in this paper.

There is a view that adolescence is inevitably and always a period in which psychological and biological changes associated with sexual and psychological development create 'storm and stress'. Springhall (1986) traces the emergence of this view to the work of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (whom Springhall identifies as the 'father of the child study movement' in America) and his view that 'coping with the biological changes associated with puberty and its consequent emotional effects invariably made adolescence into a traumatic experience' (p. 31). Springhall also points to the longevity of the ideas which Hall's work legitimated at the turn of the century. For instance, this idea of adolescence as a natural category which is inevitably and universally a time of storm and stress can be seen to underpin the work of Richard Eckersley (1988, 1992) when, in his observation of a culture and its youth in 'crisis', he argues that the young suffer most in such circumstances. They face the difficult metamorphosis from child into adult, deciding who they are and what they believe, and accepting responsibility for their own lives. It is a transition best made in an environment that offers stability, security and some measure of certainty (1992, p. 5 emphasis added).

This view of adolescence as a 'difficult metamorphosis' assumes that it is a universal experience, an experience which is continuous and unchanging across time. That is, it is a view which is removed from any historical or cultural context. As an historian, Springhall's (1986) aim is to critique this view of adolescence. He argues for an understanding which can distinguish between the extent to which 'adolescence' represents a stage in the life cycle of the individual with fairly distinct biological or psychological characteristics and the extent to which it also represents a purely socio-cultural construction, a phase in human growth to which certain societies in the past may or may not have attributed particular meanings and experiences. (p.8)

Brumhead et. al. (1990) also argue that adolescence is 'best not seen as a natural stage of psycho-biological development'. They suggest that adolescence is 'more accurately viewed as socially constructed within the

political, economic and cultural logic of contemporary capitalism' (p.23). Moreover, there is a growing body of work in youth and cultural studies (for instance Frith 1980, White 1990, Willis 1977, Walker 1988) which situates adolescence in particular historical and cultural settings. We want to adopt the view, then, that adolescence, as a period in which transitions occur, is not a natural, biological category. We suggest that it might be more useful to see it as a period in which boundaries, expectations, and experiences are subject to historical and cultural change. Or as Grossberg (1988) suggests, it is appropriate to 'think of youth as a field of diverse and contradictory practices, experiences, identities, and discourses' (p. 126).

Stress as an adolescent health concern can also be considered in a historical and cultural context. The influence of G.Stanley Hall's characterisation of adolescence as a time of 'storm and stress' is evident in contemporary formulations of stress as an adolescent health issue. Siddique and D'Arcy (1984) for instance point to what they call a 'rare agreement' between popular and academic thinking. Citing a variety of psychological research they claim that this convergence of thinking posits, 'adolescence as a time of major changes in all areas of functioning. Adolescence is said to involve dramatic transitions in the physical, social, sexual, and intellectual spheres, and transitions of this order must be stressful' (emphasis added p. 460).

As Springhall (1986) would argue, 'the assumption remains that the average adolescent must of necessity go through a period of turmoil and emotional upheaval' (p.36). The problem with such an understanding is that there is little room for identifying differences in the 'adolescent experience' in different times and places. Importantly, we intend to argue that this view also results in the problem of 'stress' becoming internalised and individualised. That is, stress is caused by external social relations and practices, but it is a problem that the individual must learn to cope with by drawing on some internal resources. For instance, Siddique and D'Arcy

(1984) argue that

Stress is conceptualized as occurring "where there are demands on a person which tax or exceed his [sic] adjustive resources" (Lazarus, 1966). The individual under stress is said to manifest his/her stressful experience by expressing a lack of satisfaction with the existing social relations or the social environment in which he/she functions. This notion that stress occurs largely within individuals as a result of some cognitive appraisal leading to a feeling of dissatisfaction or of being threatened has been widely investigated (p. 463, emphasis added).

In this context we would argue that those who speak of stress from within what might be termed a bio-medical discourse effectively medicalise a problem which has its roots in what can be considered to be non-medical, non-scientific, social and cultural relations. Here we understand the term discourse to refer to a way of thinking and talking about, and acting upon particular social concerns (Haug, 1987). A bio-medical discourse represents a view of health which emphasises the role of health professionals

(doctors, psychologists and other specialists) in ways which promote medical, scientific or technological intervention into these health concerns (Combes, 1989, Naidoo, 1986). From this standpoint stress can be constructed as something which individuals, in a dependent relationship, can learn to cope with under the guidance of health professionals. Pollock (1988) argues that medicalising and individualising 'reactions' to social processes and relations serves particular sectional (ideological and political) interests. Stress, and its proposed relationship to illness is seen to be an individual reaction to modern lifestyles, and hence a question of individual capacity (or measure of weakness) to meet the 'demands of everyday living'. Such a view also has a tendency to gloss over the limitations of medical practice and technology. Pollock argues that in this view responsibility for health and well being is invested in the relationship between the individual and the social, a relationship which health professionals can only influence, not dictate.

Situating adolescence and stress in specific historical and social processes creates a space in which we can introduce the main concerns of this paper. Our intent is to examine the problem of student (adolescent) stress in post-compulsory schooling. It is a problem that we have encountered in working with a group of young people who have, as members of the Bellarine Youth Network (BYN), spoken often of the stress involved in working through the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).When these students speak of stress they talk of being anxious, of being tired and irritable, of conflict in family, peer, and teacher/student relationships. Our view is that despite arguments about the physical or psychological symptoms of stress these experiences have consequences for how individuals and groups negotiate, in this instance, their place in post-compulsory schooling. Stress is something which may be hard to pin down or define (Pollock 1988), yet it is something which is experienced as real.

Our examination, then, will adopt an approach which seeks to fill some of the gaps which Jamrozik and Boland (1991) have identified in the area of research into adolescent health. They suggest that research in this area contains a relative absence of social analysis. Moreover, there is often a tendency to medicalise issues which could more appropriately be considered to be social, economic, and cultural in nature (1991, p. 26). It is our belief that exploring adolescent stress in the context of post compulsory schooling can be a starting point for thinking about wider issues related to consumer culture(s), work and unemployment, and credentialism and schooling. It is also our intention to introduce Stuart Hall's (1988) notion of a 'politics of position' in rethinking what coping may mean in this context.

Consumer Culture(s)/'Life is Short Play Hard' (Reebok Ad.)
In thinking of adolescence as a changing and diverse set of experiences we can, nevertheless, identify some common experiences which enable us to make connections between adolescence, work and consumption, and the manner in which these connections become evident in the collective experience of post compulsory schooling (an experience often characterised as stressful). More specifically we are able to discuss how western consumer cultures (such as Australia) organise social processes and relations around consumption and

how this organization is played out in the experience of schooling and adolescence.

Langman (1991) argues that 'mass consumption society manipulates desire and transforms self and social interaction in everyday life', where this everyday life 'is situated in consumption based routines and lifestyles' (p. 108). We are suggesting here that, how, why, and where you work (or, increasingly, don't work), where you live and play, how families interact, and why increasing numbers of adolescents remain in some form of schooling is patterned by 'a consumer society where everything is commodified, including selfhood and interaction' (Langman, 1991, p. 114, original emphasis).

In Australian society, then, work and schooling can be seen as a consequence of being born into a culture where basic needs (food/clothing/shelter) must be purchased and a range of desires satisfied by participating in various markets (schooling/job/ housing/ 'niche'). It is important to emphasise that these markets are not natural phenomena. They are social, cultural, and historical constructs which, at this time, continue to encroach on or commodify human experiences. When we speak of niche markets we are talking about the marketing of products and services to specific market researched and identified groups. For instance, stress management industries profit from selling advice on how to 'cope' (be successful) in a consumer culture. As another example, phone sex services sell sex, as a market researched product, in ways which further transform human experiences into profitable products. In a more relevant example, schooling, and the qualifications obtained by participating in schooling, can be thought of in terms of these markets. School qualifications, as products to be exchanged in job markets, can go a long way towards determining the life choices, and chances, of those who hope to exchange their years at school for a degree of material well being.

Taking this line of thinking further, we can argue (as do Langman 1991 and Finklestein 1991) that western consumer cultures depend on the construction of desires, the partial, never complete satisfaction of these desires and a continued ongoing attempt to satisfy the demands of these desires. 'Success' or 'well being' is often defined by an ability to consume - to wear/display/purchase/use 'the latest'..whatever. Our culture, in part, depends on a degree of structured (dys)stress. Langman (1991) has claimed that the possession, use and display 'of the objects of everyday life' can be seen to provide 'gratifications and meanings to the person and exteriorized statements about his/her personal identity' (p.116). Langman further argues that

many of the products and experiences of consumption society are laded[sic] with affective symbolic value..presentations of self have themselves become..commodified spectacles to provide the recognition that confirms existence, to feel good and to ward off deeper anxieties (p.116)

In an effort to make these understandings more explicit, shifting them from an abstract level of observation to a position more intimately connected with the work of this paper, we want to suggest that adolescence (youth cultures), as a distinct period between childhood and adulthood, emerged in the context of a consumer culture. Frith (1984), for instance, suggests

that the 'first influential sociological study' of 'youth culture' in
Britain was a 1959 market research survey of a 'new consumer group', which
identified a new creature, the 'teenage consumer' (p.9). This
identification, argues Frith, focussed not on 'delinquent youth behaviour'
but on a 'new teenage culture', a culture which was
defined in terms of leisure and leisure goods - coffee and milk bars,
fashion clothes and hairstyles, cosmetics, rock'n'roll records, films and
magazines, scooters and motorbikes, dancing and dance halls (p.9).
This classic, popular image of adolescence as a time defined by leisure and
consumption must, if we are to get beyond a rather crass generalization, be
understood in the context of its time: a time in Australia of apparently
limitless economic growth, a time when most students did not complete more
than four years of secondary schooling (Connell et al, 1982, McGaw and
Hannan, 1985, The Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Schooling, 1985), a
time when youth unemployment was not an issue, a time when the 'relative
affluence' (Frith 1984) of working youth translated into leisure based
consumption.

In the 1990's the issue of adolescent stress in post compulsory schooling
must be understood in the context of changed times. Global markets and
networks of exchange have increasingly commodified human experiences
(Giddens 1990), and hence increased the importance of obtaining access to
income ('spending money'). Yet, these global networks have shifted
investment in employing industries into new, cheap labour, countries.
Further, the implementation of micro electronic based information and
manufacturing technologies has resulted in dramatic structural changes in
Australian employment markets. High, long term levels of unemployment and
youth unemployment are prominent issues in the 1990's. The nature of work,
who is working/not working (women, part-timers, young people?), and the
educational qualifications that are considered necessary for school leavers
to obtain work, are some of the elements of these changed times which must
be considered when we examine the social relations and the social
environment which pattern the experiences of adolescents.
Work, unemployment and school.
In making connections between adolescent stress in post compulsory
schooling, and the historical and cultural construction of these
experiences we can look at the concept of work at a number of levels.
Firstly, we can examine the experience of adolescents who are both students
and workers. Secondly, we can explore the experience of adolescents who are
students, but whose experience of schooling is increasingly defined in the
context of long term, high levels of youth unemployment, competition for
limited places in tertiary schooling and increased expectations related to
minimum schooling requirements for employment.
In the first instance Yap (1991) refers to evidence, from Australia and the
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which
suggests that more and more school-attending young people are involved in
paid and unpaid work. This paid work, in the Australian context, is
concentrated in service and retail sectors - the 'Big Mac jobs', the
'McWorker'. Studies suggest that there are both diverse, and often

contradictory reasons for students engaging in paid work whilst still at school, as well as diverse outcomes and experiences as a result of this practice. However, in reporting on these studies and her own research Yap (1991) concludes, in part, that

These teenagers are learning about work; they are richer and they may be more confident and more organised. But they are also pressured, tired, too busy, only fitting in study where they can, withdrawing from family activities and hobbies and, perhaps, are developing attitudes of acquisitiveness and selfishness (p.38).

In drawing out some of the complexities of the issue of students as workers Yap (1991) is able to highlight the pressures which a number of students, apparently willingly, create for themselves and others in their desire to make money and to enter a cycle of work, consume, work... a cycle which promotes a form of dependency. What we find interesting are the ways in which a consumer culture works to structure the desires which motivate young people to do this. It is the question of dependence which we find most challenging. In a culture which seeks to define individuals and groups by what they are able to consume, a process which works to make consumers dependent on participation in various markets, a process enhanced by technologies of mass communication (The media), how is it possible to do things differently?

This unresolved question of dependence also provides a bridge to the links which must be made between work, unemployment, school and, more specifically, the experience of post compulsory schooling. Danielle Talbot (1992), for instance, in discussing the 'frustration and despair' of some young people suggests that

Long dependent on the fortunes of local manufacturers, young people throughout Melbourne's north-west have been particularly hard hit by the two r's - recession and restructuring. And if present trends are any indication, they will be among the last to share in the spoils of an economic recovery (p. 5, emphasis added).

This acceptance of dependence works to block discussion or questioning of alternative ways of addressing the problem, a problem which has seen traditional youth jobs disappear as a result of the 'two r's'. Instead attention remains focused on providing individuals with 'skills they can

use when they do eventually get jobs' (p. 5): jobs which may disappear in the next 'inevitable' downswing of market activity. For large numbers of young people then, their experience as adolescents is increasingly defined by periods of unemployment, an experience which also constrains participation in those markets which come to define and shape culturally sanctioned identities and sense(s) of self. Moreover, for many young people the spectre of unemployment, and the possibility of not finding purposeful, fulfilling work is often played out in the experience of post compulsory schooling . For, as Ian Whitehead (1992) suggests

current employment trends indicate that those who opt out of school will have minimal opportunity for gainful long term employment. Completion of the new VCE may become the minimum requirement for many jobs formerly taken by 15 year olds who chose to leave school (p. 20).

This observation is a powerful explanation of why, in 1992 and in the foreseeable future, 86% of Victorian students will complete 13 years of schooling (Whitehead, 1992). The 'Uncertain Country' or the 'Worried Country' are probably more accurate descriptors of this phenomenon than a belief in the rhetoric of the 'Clever Country'.

Maas (1990) develops a number of similar themes in his investigation of changes in dependence and independence transitions for young people. In pointing to the ways in which this transition from dependence to independence changes over time and how the shift may also be influenced by gender or class or ethnic background, Maas is able to suggest that for increasing numbers of young people, schools are the sites where this transition occurs, is contested, or causes tension. Maas also suggests that the actual length of time of this transition is increasing. Changes in youth labour markets, in school retention rates, and in expectations that young people 'need' to stay at school longer, may be 'extending dependence' and 'deferring independence' into the early 20's.

It is in this sort of framework that adolescent stress in post compulsory schooling needs to be located. This framework opens up the possibilities for rethinking the notion of how to 'cope' with these experiences. Importantly it does so in ways which seek to move beyond the internalised and individualised view of stress management which appears to dominate both 'popular and academic' understandings of stress.

The BYN and the VCE: Our Entry Point

At this stage it is appropriate to place these understandings in the context in which they first arose. The members of the Bellarine Youth Network (BYN), who meet on a fortnightly basis, are drawn from three secondary colleges in the Geelong (Victoria) area. The adolescent members are in year's 10 - 12 at school and come from a wide range of social backgrounds. During May of 1992, in the context of the NH&MRC funded project, BYN members were asked to write down their understandings of what BYN was, and what the project was. We use the following extracts in this context to give some indication of how the BYN works and to identify some of the issues that the young members see as being important to them.

Prue: BYN is an organization which focuses on the problems etc of the young adults in the Bellarine area. BYN is a place where young people get their say, where they are able to say what concerns them, what they are going to do about it and then do it. The main focus of BYN is the youth and there is little interference from adults. They are only there to guide us. BYN is a place where our problems get taken seriously. But it also helps us to improve ourselves and to improve the Bellarine area for teenagers.

Linda: BYN is short for the Bellarine Youth Network. We are a group of teenagers from Geelong East Tech, Newcomb Secondary College and Queenscliff High, as well as a youth worker from the Bellarine Rural City Council. For the past 1 year and next 2 years some ..[researchers] from Deakin University are assisting us with a 'Health and Environment' project. Our aim is to find out what young people in the community think about these issues. We also get feedback about other issues such as VCE stress and local entertainment.

This group of adolescents speak often of the 'stress' involved in working through, at years 11 and 12, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

For this group of young people the issue of student (adolescent) stress has arisen in the context of the first full year of implementation of the VCE. There has been wide media coverage associated with the certificate's

implementation. The debate initially centred around differing views of what post-compulsory education in Victorian schools should be concerned with. More recently the debate has focused on issues of implementation such as expectations related to Common Assessment Tasks (CATs). These CATs are the common tasks which students in VCE undertake to obtain an external score for university entrance. The concerns most frequently expressed relate to the nature of particular tasks and expectations regarding the achievement of satisfactory standards. As early as July 1991 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) were aware of these concerns. In a letter to principals VCAB expressed an understanding of these concerns by suggesting that teachers may be feeling uncertain about the level required to achieve high grades in CATs and to secure entry to tertiary institutions and that, in consequence, in order to "play safe", they are asking for additional drafts of work and encouraging students to aim at an unrealistic level of performance (VCAB correspondence, 25 July 1991, p. 5).
It should be noted that it is possible to successfully complete the VCE without doing CATs. Satisfactory completion of work requirements will ensure success at this level. However, members of BYN have suggested that the uncertain nature of the employment market and the increasing competition for limited university places, means that students will choose to do the CATs in order to maximise their future options. It is in this context that members of the BYN, in common with large numbers of other adolescents, teachers, health professionals, and various interest groups (See referenced articles The Age 6/6/92 - 18/6/92) had identified stress as a major adolescent health issue. It is also within this context that we have encountered the conventional bio-medical approach to stress management which tends to internalise and individualise the problem of stress.
Recent media responses to this issue have focused on, and emphasised, the things that students as individuals can do to relieve stress. In a general sense these articles suggest that if students can manage their time better, engage in regular exercise, eat well, refrain from drug and alcohol use then they should be able to cope better with stress regardless of its source.
As a psychologist Dr Bob Montgomery (1992), in one of a series of articles targeting students, teachers, and school welfare officers, suggests, 'stress is a process of coping with the demands in your life, so it's a normal part of being alive' (p. 18, emphasis added). Coping, within dominant stress management discourses, can be understood
Coping becomes an adolescent health issue within these discourses when it is characterised in terms of negative or positive coping strategies, that is, it is presented as an either/or, good/bad duality. In the more specific context of student stress Liz Green (1992), a student counsellor, makes this 'good/bad' duality more explicit when she suggests that
When getting on with study, we can remain unaware that there may be a battle of attitudes going on inside us. A classic war can be that between

the Hopeless Study Manager and the Good Study Manager. People who don't
quite make it in developing effective study habits allow the Hopeless Study
Manager to dominate them so strongly that they remain unaware of the
rational and positive Good Study Manager locked away inside.
How do we allow this Good Study Manager to be in charge and achieve our
study goals? All that is required is to become more aware of which part we
are allowing to win. We need to challenge the control that negative and
irrational parts have taken over our study patterns. We need to use the
energy of the competent and self-managing parts (p. 2, emphasis added).
In the more general context of adolescent stress Montgomery (1992), for
example, distinguishes between eustress (good stress) that is, 'you feel
good, perform well and enjoy good health', and dystress (bad stress) 'you
feel bad, your performance suffers and you may suffer ill-health'(p. 18).
He maintains that health reducing behaviours (Rehfeldt, 1988, would call
these 'poor coping styles') such as 'smoking, unwise eating and excessive
drinking' are triggered by dystress. For Montgomery, 'the key to managing
stress and leading a healthy lifestyle is balance. When you set your goals,
make sure you set them for all important areas in your life'. Moreover if
you 'plan and run a balanced lifestyle you will be managing your stress
well, enjoying good health and giving yourself the chance to do your best'
(p. 18).

Coping: A political rather than a medical understanding.
It is apparent from this overview that coping is a concept which appears in
most discourses dealing with stress and adolescence. Stress management
industries see coping as simply (Green 1992) 'dealing with' stressors which
are often seen as a natural, inevitable, unchangeable consequence of 'being
alive'. In this approach health professionals see the problem as an
individual and internal concern. They see their role as assisting
adolescents to cope 'better'.
Throughout this paper we have argued that the problem of adolescent stress
in post compulsory schooling requires a more complex understanding of
adolescence, and of the social environment which shapes the experience of
schooling. It follows, then, that we need to understand coping in ways
which move away from an emphasis on the 'internal resources of
individuals'. The work of Konopka (1980) provides a starting point for
rethinking what coping may mean. For Konopka coping is about 'the capacity
to withstand, to resist, to live through adversity without damage to one's
own personality or to the personalities of others' (p.8). Further to this
she argues for an understanding of coping which recognises that people
 strains, and accepting them as inevitable, is the real business of life,
and the development of philosophy (p. 8).

What we see as productive in this understanding relates to the notions of
resistance, the development of new ways of confronting experiences and the
development of a philosophy in regards to these experiences. Stuart Hall
(1988) brings these understandings closer to the view which we hold in his

development of the notion of a 'politics of position'. Hall (1988) argues that we should recognise that what we, and others,
have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power. Because these positions change and alter, there is always a politics of position. This insistence on 'positioning' provides people with co-ordinates, which are specially important in the face of the enormous globalisation and trans-national character of many of the processes which now shape their lives (p.29).

In the context of this paper we believe that a politics of position enables us to question, without denying, the 'natural', 'normal', 'inevitable' notion of stress. Further, it enables us to locate stressors historically, socially, and culturally. So for increased numbers of adolescents - who occupy positions as students - changed employment opportunities, educational expectations and the intensified commercialisation (commodification) of youth culture(s), work to shape their experience of post compulsory schooling. Moreover, within this understanding we see coping as more a question of becoming aware of the social processes and relations which may shape individual and collective experiences (often as stressful experiences), and importantly seeking ways, again individually and/or collectively, to confront such processes and alter them or the experience of them.

The following example from our work with the BYN may help to make these points a little clearer. The schools that these young people attend have adopted stress management techniques as a way of helping young people cope with the expectations of the VCE. During the prolonged discussions on this issue the members of BYN have said that it is helpful to have advice on time management, diet, exercise, and drug use. However they have also suggested that it is a strategy which is of limited value in dealing with the stressful experience of 'doing the VCE'. Our view throughout this paper has been that it is an approach which is limited because it seeks to both simplify and medicalise a problem which has its origins in a complex of social, economic, and cultural relations.

In this context the question was asked 'Yeah, but what can we do?' Positioned as they are within a statewide system of schooling the students were searching for ways of confronting the problem at their school level, a level which seemed to offer possibilities for their direct involvement. Some action at this level could give students a degree of influence over the ways they experienced school life, at the same time as acknowledging the ways in which they are positioned by wider economic, political, and cultural forces.

The student members of BYN suggested meeting with nominated teachers from the three schools, teachers whom these students thought they could talk with. An invitation was sent to the three schools which suggested that a meeting between teachers and BYN members could discuss; student representation at VCE planning days; ways of establishing or structuring communication between teachers and students (in this context BYN members from one school mentioned their school's use of VCE cluster groups); the work load and expectations on both students and teachers; and the transition from years 9 and 10 to years 11 and 12.

This meeting was held in early July 1992. The minutes of that meeting
suggest that agreement was reached on the need for some sort of student
participation during local school level VCE planning days. This
participation could discuss issues such as the timing of work requirements
and expectations related to CATs. It was also agreed that there was a need
to develop closer, more informal communication between groups of teachers
and students, whether these groups were called cluster groups or tutor
groups. Although outcomes of this action are not yet apparent those who
attended the meeting considered it to be a positive initial step.
Instead of seeing the VCE as an inevitable and natural stressor this action
acknowledges that the 'problem' of VCE stress needs to be viewed as an

historically specific set of practices and processes. The problem should
also be seen as a stressful experience for large numbers of young people,
that is, it is a collective experience. Coping in this instance is a matter
of confronting the problem, it is a 'politics of position' which is both
personal and collective. It is also a local action with the potential to
change the individual and collective experience of identified stressors.
Moreover, it is an understanding which is situated in our earlier
discussion of the historical, cultural, and social factors which complicate
the issue of adolescent stress in post compulsory schooling, a complication
which can not be adequately addressed at the simplified level of advice on
time management, diet, exercise, or a Good Study Manager/Hopeless Study
Manager duality. This view does not reject outright the usefulness of a
medicalised approach to stress. We argue instead for a widening of this
medical perspective to incorporate, in the practice of those who work with
adolescents, the historical and cultural factors which we have identified.
Conclusion
Our observations about how adolescents negotiate a sense of their position
in a culture dominated by consumption, and their position in a world of
global networks of exchange and production is, because of space
restrictions and the ongoing nature of our work, at a rather unsatisfactory
level of generalisation. It is a level of generalisation all too often
evident in work related to ideas such as 'consumer culture(s)', 'popular
culture', or 'youth culture(s)'. Yet it is a level of generalisation which
creates spaces for further research, research which should seek out the
contradictions, tensions, or other possibilities within these various
cultures. As Grossberg (1988) argues, we need better descriptions
of the gestures, practices, and the statements (the 'microhabits') of
contemporary youth in its everyday activities and of the ways these are
connected to its positions as agents within the world (p.124).
In arguing that coping should be understood as a politics of position we
present a view which, in essence, suggests that individuals and groups can
influence the social processes and relations which shape and, often,
constrain their lives. What forms that influence may take will depend on
the different circumstances, and the different contexts, and the different
investments which individuals and groups have in seeking to shape their own
experiences within the constraints of an unequal society. In the example
from our work with BYN coping became a curriculum issue and an issue for

teaching practice. It also became an issue related to young people thinking that they could affect the social processes which shaped their lives. Of course nothing is guaranteed in taking such action. However, we believe that individuals and groups who work with young people have a responsibility to provide space for them to make their own realities (White 1990). Even if these actions 'threaten', or 'contest', or 'confront' the present realities which shape their social environment(s).

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 Up until this point we have unquestioningly used the term post compulsory schooling to denote post year 10 schooling. Maybe it is time to suggest that the coercive effects of the points we have just raised do, in fact, make the term post compulsory redundant. If you have limited options when does coercion become compulsion?

 For further information on this project refer to Colquhoun, D. & Robottom, I. (1991), Robottom, I. & Colquhoun, D. (1991, 1992, forthcoming 1993).

 This is a debate which requires more attention than we are able to devote to it here. For an overview see Changing Curriculum, (1992) Deakin University Press, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria.