



JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' COPING MECHANISMS IN DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT IN MATHEMATICS SCORES

Lea Akila Sangkala Kadang*, Mulia Putra, Nur Azizah

Department of Mathematics Education, Singaperbangsa Karawang University, Jl. HS. Ronggo Waluyo, West Java, Indonesia

Corresponding author, Email: leaakila9@gmail.com

Abstract

Mathematics is often regarded as a key indicator of academic success; therefore, failure to achieve expected grades may lead to disappointment among students. This study aims to explore junior high school students' experiences of disappointment regarding their mathematics achievement and to identify the coping strategies they employ to restore academic resilience. This research adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method involving three ninth-grade students from SMPN 200 Jakarta, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman analytical framework. The findings indicate that student disappointment is a subjective affective phenomenon triggered by the discrepancy between personal expectations and actual achievement, extending beyond merely failing to meet the minimum competency standard (KKM). Furthermore, the results reveal that students employ a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, with physical activities functioning as a primary mechanism for maintaining emotional stability. In particular, students with high personal standards tend to transition more rapidly toward problem-focused coping compared to those who are predominantly emotionally reactive. The implications of this study highlight the importance of the teacher's role as a facilitator in fostering an error-tolerant classroom environment, enabling students to transform negative emotions into constructive academic reflection and preventing learning demotivation.

Keywords: *Academic Disappointment; Coping Mechanism; Junior High School Students*

Abstrak

Matematika sering kali dianggap sebagai indikator utama keberhasilan akademik, sehingga kegagalan mencapai nilai yang diharapkan dapat memicu kekecewaan pada siswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman kekecewaan siswa SMP terhadap nilai matematika dan mengidentifikasi strategi *coping* yang digunakan untuk memulihkan resiliensi akademik. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus terhadap tiga siswa kelas IX SMPN 200 Jakarta yang dipilih melalui teknik *purposive sampling*. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan teknik Miles dan Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekecewaan siswa merupakan fenomena afektif subjektif yang dipicu oleh kesenjangan antara ekspektasi pribadi dengan realitas pencapaian, melampaui sekadar kegagalan memenuhi KKM. Temuan pada penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa siswa menerapkan kombinasi strategi *problem-focused coping* dan *emotion-focused coping*, di mana aktivitas fisik berfungsi sebagai pertahanan primer untuk stabilitas emosional. Secara khusus, siswa dengan standar pribadi yang tinggi terbukti lebih akseleratif dalam melakukan transisi menuju *problem-focused coping* dibandingkan dengan siswa yang murni reaktif secara emosional. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya peran guru sebagai fasilitator dalam menciptakan suasana kelas yang *error-tolerant* guna mentransformasi emosi negatif menjadi evaluasi akademik konstruktif dan mencegah demotivasi belajar jangka panjang.

Kata kunci: *Coping Mechanism; Kekecewaan Akademik; Siswa SMP*

INTRODUCTION

Mathematics is a branch of science focused on calculation, and is therefore often referred to as “The Queen of Science”; this title highlights mathematics’ strategic role in the development of

intellectual abilities as well as its status as a cornerstone of technological advancement and modern knowledge (Putri et al., 2024; Siswanto & Meiliasari, 2024). Consequently, mathematics is often used as a primary indicator of academic achievement and is a subject that receives significant attention in schools (Alfatihah et al., 2022). The status of mathematics as a key indicator of academic success fosters a sense of pride. Students experience this pride when they are convinced that their academic success stems from a combination of their own abilities and efforts (Vrismaya & Primana, 2021). Psychologically, positive pride stems from recognition of genuine effort, thereby motivating self-confidence in the face of academic challenges. Intrinsic motivation is supported by high self-confidence, enabling students to self-regulate their learning and achieve results aligned with appropriate standards, thereby surpassing their academic performance (Stavropoulou et al., 2025). Feelings of pride are strengthened and enhanced as achievements increase. This constructive state is demonstrated through the setting of higher goals, greater perseverance in challenging tasks, and actively seeking learning opportunities (Qasim & Rizvi, 2024).

However, the opposite occurs when students' scores fall short of expectations, leading to disappointment. Disappointment is a response to situations that fail to meet expectations, such as failing to achieve a goal, conflicts with peers, or dissatisfaction with academic performance (Marsela et al., 2024). This phenomenon is often experienced by students who feel they have studied to the best of their ability before an exam but receive results that do not match their efforts. Students' psychological stability is disrupted when they repeatedly face disappointment regarding their grades, particularly affecting their academic self-efficacy. The feelings of distress triggered by this decline in self-efficacy require students to employ various methods to manage these emotions, known as coping strategies. Frustration, confusion, and disappointment are frequently experienced by students as they cope with challenges and failures (Corwin et al., 2022).

The coping mechanism theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman explains how individuals cope with stress and problems in their lives. Coping strategies are the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals make to cope with external or internal stressors that exceed their available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Nur 'Ashifa & Humaedi, 2025; Pambudhi et al., 2022). Stress coping is divided into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies (Komara & Irawaty, 2024). Problem-focused coping manifests as planning, time management, and consultation. Meanwhile, emotion-focused coping manifests as mindfulness, journaling, and social support. These strategies effectively reduce the impact of stressors by altering the situation or regulating emotions, thereby enhancing students' psychological resilience. Through the application of appropriate strategies, individual performance can be maintained, and pressures originating from both internal and external sources can be managed (Zulvi & Abidin, 2025). Therefore, students' psychological recovery following disappointment can be determined by the coping strategies employed.

Previous research has validated the Consequences of Academic Disappointment Inventory (CADI) among Hungarian college students, finding that disappointment resulting from poor grades affects motivation and engagement in learning through professional attitudes and negative emotions (Çopur & Kökönyei, 2025). However, that study focused on a university student population and did not address the dynamics of junior high school students' coping strategies in responding to academic disappointment regarding grades—a group psychologically in early adolescence with distinct emotional regulation characteristics. Additionally, another study found that academic stress can be reduced through students' understanding of coping strategies supported by psychoeducation (Nadia & Andriany, 2025). However, an in-depth exploration of how coping strategies emerge naturally as a direct response to disappointment with math grades has not yet been a primary focus of this research.

Based on gaps in previous research, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring the experiences of grade-related disappointment and the coping mechanisms employed by junior high

school students in their efforts to recover after experiencing disappointment with their mathematics grades. This study is expected to address the research question of how students describe their experiences of disappointment when their mathematics grades do not meet expectations and to identify the coping mechanisms they use to deal with this disappointment.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is an approach used to accurately explore and understand the meaning of reality regarding social or human issues, supported by relevant data collection and analysis techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sutrisno et al., 2023). The method used in this study is the case study. The case study method is used to examine a specific case and provide a clear description of its nature, characteristics, and background, which can then be generalized (Roosinda et al., 2021). This study is an exploratory case study with three junior high school students from SMP 200 Jakarta as research subjects. The subjects were selected based on the following criteria: (1) ninth-grade students at SMPN 200 Jakarta; (2) had experienced disappointment with their mathematics grades during the past semester; (3) were able to describe their emotional experiences and the coping mechanisms they used; and (4) were willing to participate in an interview. Three subjects were selected because this study employs an exploratory qualitative approach that prioritizes data depth and the richness of information from key informants. Therefore, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon among specific subjects; consequently, the results cannot be generalized to a broader population but are intended to elucidate the meaning of the subjects' experiences.

The data collection technique used in this study was a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews fall under the category of in-depth interviews, which are more flexible compared to structured interviews (Sugiyono, 2022). The interviews were conducted using an interview guide and focused on exploring students' experiences and reactions to grade disappointment, as well as the natural coping mechanisms students employed after receiving grades that fell short of their expectations. The data collection process was carried out through the following stages: (1) preparation of instruments; (2) selection of participants based on research criteria; (3) conducting interviews with selected participants; and (4) recording and transcribing interview results to ensure data accuracy.

This study employs the data analysis technique proposed by Miles & Huberman (2014), which consists of three main stages: (1) data reduction; (2) data presentation; and (3) drawing conclusions/verification. To ensure the validity of the data, this study utilizes source triangulation. Source triangulation involves collecting data from different sources using the same technique (Sugiyono, 2022). Source triangulation is conducted by comparing interview data across the three research subjects to identify similar patterns of experience. This process involves comparing the interview transcripts of each research subject based on the same unit of analysis. Subsequently, themes are categorized for each research subject, and their response patterns are compared to identify consistency in the information and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the disappointment regarding values from the informants' various perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data from semi-structured interviews with three research subjects yielded two main themes that address the research question. These themes include students' experiences of disappointment with mathematics grades that fell short of their expectations and the coping mechanisms students used to deal with this disappointment. The primary data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews conducted on May 4, 2025. The entire data collection process for the three research

subjects was completed in a single workday to maintain a consistent psychological environment for each subject. The interview sessions lasted approximately 20–30 minutes per subject. The timing was chosen for after-school hours to ensure that subjects could freely articulate their affective experiences without distractions.

Students' experiences of disappointment with math grades that fall short of expectations

Student disappointment is a common phenomenon that arises when learning outcomes fail to meet personal expectations and minimum competency standards. Disappointment is an individual's dissatisfaction resulting from unmet expectations or desires, leading to feelings of discouragement (Nurfauziah et al., 2023; Fauziah & Tenripada, 2021; Azmiati & Nuryani, 2021). In this context, many students view mathematics grades as a symbol of self-esteem and academic identity. A positive mathematical identity is demonstrated when students are confident of success in mathematics through experiences of achievement, whereas a negative identity holds the opposite view (Astuti et al., 2022). This topic is important to discuss because experiences of disappointment not only affect students' feelings in the moment but can also impact their motivation, self-confidence, and future learning patterns.

The interview results revealed variations in the subjects' experiences of disappointment. The first research subject, DA, felt deep disappointment because their score did not meet the minimum passing grade, even though, objectively, their score was not lower than that of their classmates. This indicates that personal expectations play a dominant role in shaping feelings of disappointment. If reality does not match expectations, the individual will experience disappointment (Dewi et al., 2023).

Researcher : "How did you feel when you first saw a math grade that didn't meet your expectations?"

DA : "I felt a little sad about my math grade, even though there might be others who scored lower. But since my expectations were high, when I got that grade. Sometimes I feel like I'm not grateful enough, and I get sad, you know."

Researcher : "What score would make you disappointed?"

DA : "Yesterday, I took a test on probability and got a 72, even though the passing score was 76."

Researcher : "Before receiving that score, what score did you hope to get?"

DA : "For math, I don't need it to be super high; I think 80 or above is already good."

Researcher : "Did this affect your motivation to study?"

DA : "It kind of did, Sis"

Analysis of the interview results indicates that DA's disappointment stems from the gap between achievement and expectations. Although DA's grades are objectively above the average of their peers and close to the passing grade, DA still feels deep sadness. This demonstrates that the intensity of a student's disappointment is not solely determined by school standards but is largely influenced by the student's personal standards. Negative emotions such as disappointment can arise when there is a discrepancy between the actual self or school standards and the ideal self or personal standards (Peng & Yi, 2025). DA's statement that he feels "ungrateful" indicates a mental burden arising from internal pressure to always excel in mathematics. The disappointment students experience regarding their grades has the potential to undermine their self-esteem. An individual's self-esteem is influenced by various factors that impact levels of social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Auliannisa et al., 2024). This is reinforced by DA's statement that such disappointment affects his motivation to learn. Long-term failure to manage emotions can trigger demotivation that hinders the learning process. Therefore, DA's experience demonstrates that teacher intervention is necessary not

only to improve grades but also to motivate students so that minor setbacks do not negatively impact their mental health and motivation to learn.

The second research subject, CN, expressed his disappointment directly by crying when he received a low grade and temporarily lost his motivation to study. However, his motivation recovered after seeing his friend's success.

- Researcher : "How did you feel when you first saw a math grade that didn't meet your expectations?"
- CN : "At school, I was fine, but once I got home, I cried. I also felt frustrated because I had studied beforehand, but the result didn't meet my expectations."
- Researcher : "What score would disappoint you?"
- CN : "I once got a 48 on a translation problem. I cried then."
- Researcher : "Before receiving that score, what score did you hope for?"
- CN : "Definitely above the passing grade; around 80, I think, is high enough."
- Researcher : "Did this incident affect your motivation to study?"
- CN : "At the time, I felt like I didn't want to study anymore. But when I saw a friend who usually gets a 7 get a 9, I thought that if they could do it, I could too. So, basically, it had a huge impact, sis."

Analysis of the interview results indicates that the disappointment experienced by CN manifested itself in the form of intense emotional responses. Unlike DA, CN tended to regulate her emotions while at school and only let them out through crying once she was at home. This indicates that for CN, failure in mathematics grades creates pressure that damages their academic self-esteem. Self-esteem determines students' motivation to achieve high academic outcomes (Oktavia et al., 2022). A significant gap between expectations and actual achievements causes psychological distress that leads to negative behaviour, marked by the emergence of intentions to give up. CN's motivation appears to be reignited through observing peers' success. This indicates the presence of a vicarious experience mechanism, in which peers' success serves as a model that reinforces students' self-efficacy. In line with Lianto's (2019) findings, a model's success increases self-efficacy, while a model's failure decreases it. These findings suggest that for students with characteristics similar to CN's, environmental support in the form of peers' success is far more effective in restoring learning motivation. CN's response transformed from an intention to give up to competitive ambition after witnessing a peer's success.

The third research subject, YC, exhibited a more relaxed response, even though YC had also previously received low grades. YC tended not to dwell on disappointment and chose to compare their grades with peers as a form of self-reassurance.

- Researcher : "How did you feel when you first saw a math grade that didn't meet your expectations?"
- YC : "I felt sad, of course, but not terribly sad...just a little sad, so I didn't cry."
- Researcher : "What grade made you disappointed?"
- YC : "I once got a 50 on the translation unit."
- Researcher : "Before receiving that grade, what score did you hope for?"
- YC : "Above the passing grade would be enough around 80."
- Researcher : "Did this experience affect your motivation to study?"
- YC : "It didn't affect me, Sir. I'm still just as motivated as usual even though I got a bad grade."

Analysis of the interview results shows that YC's experience of disappointment exhibits more stable emotional characteristics compared to the two previous subjects. Although YC experienced academic failure that was quite significant in numerical terms, YC did not display excessive affective reactions. This indicates that YC has a stronger tolerance threshold for academic failure. Unlike DA and CN, who experienced motivational barriers, low grades did not affect YC's enthusiasm for learning. This response suggests the presence of downward social comparison, where YC views such failure as normal as long as other students experience it as well. This finding aligns with the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect concept, in which Jansen et al. (2022) explain that an individual's perception of failure becomes less severe if it is similar within their social group. Thus, YC demonstrates that low grades are viewed as a minor obstacle that does not diminish their self-confidence to continue learning.

Based on these findings, junior high school students' experiences of disappointment regarding their math grades are influenced by how they perceive that failure. DA represents disappointment focused on personal standards, CN reflects emotional responses dependent on peers' success, and YC reflects a form of resilience through downward social comparison. These variations in response demonstrate that in mathematics education, teachers should not only focus on outcomes but also act as facilitators in managing students' affective dynamics. These findings reinforce the urgency of developing an error-tolerant learning environment, where mistakes in solving mathematical problems are positioned as material for healthy academic evaluation, not as a failure of identity. Appropriate emotional support from teachers and the social environment is essential so that such disappointment does not become long-term demotivation but rather serves as material for students' academic evaluation to continue developing optimally in the process of learning mathematics.

Coping mechanisms used by students when facing disappointment with their math grades

Coping mechanisms or coping strategies aim to address situations and demands that are perceived as stressful, burdensome, and exceeding an individual's available resources (Maryam, 2017). In this study, this stress stems from disappointment resulting from unsatisfactory mathematics grades. Coping mechanisms are important because unsatisfactory grades lead to feelings of disappointment, stress, and reduced motivation to learn. One way to address students' stress regarding mathematics learning is through the application of coping strategies (Simamora & Rahma, 2022). This study will explore various strategies students employ to regulate academic disappointment in order to maintain optimal learning progress.

Interview results indicate that each research subject has their own coping strategy for dealing with academic disappointment resulting from mathematics grades that fall short of expectations. First, DA tends to compare grades with peers in similar situations, motivate themselves to improve, and play on their phones.

- Researcher : "Who or what do you turn to when dealing with disappointment over your grades?"
- DA : "For me, maybe by looking at my friends' grades. Because sometimes a friend gets a similar grade, so I feel like I have a friend in the same situation."
- Researcher : "What do you do to calm yourself down or reduce your sadness when facing bad grades?"
- DA : "I immediately try to study so I can get better results on the next material. Usually, I just play on my phone so I don't keep thinking about those grades all the time."

An analysis of DA's coping strategies reveals an integration of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. First, DA seeks social support by sharing experiences with peers facing similar

circumstances. This serves to reduce psychological distress through emotional validation, confirming that the failure is not experienced in isolation (Suryana, 2022; Maryam, 2017). Second, DA demonstrates planful problem-solving by committing to immediately studying the next material to prevent a recurrence of academic failure (Afriyani & Karneli, 2022). Third, DA engages in escape avoidance by using a cell phone as a temporary escape to manage emotional tension, allowing DA's anxiety to subside before refocusing on academic goals.

The second research subject, CN, uses food and playing on their phone to distract themselves after experiencing academic disappointment. Additionally, CN engages in social activities such as going for walks with family or friends to calm down.

- Researcher : "Who or what do you turn to when you're disappointed with your grades?"
CN : "I eat. I don't know why, but whenever I'm sad, I just get hungry."
Researcher : "What do you do to calm yourself down or ease your sadness when you get bad grades?"
CN : "I eat, watch YouTube, and scroll through social media, sis."

The coping strategy CN uses is emotion-focused coping. First, CN employs escape avoidance to avoid disappointment by eating and playing on their phone in order to reduce their emotional stress, even though this does not resolve the root of the problem. Escape avoidance is an attempt to avoid a problem entirely by refusing to think about it (Suryana, 2022; Maryam, 2017). Second, CN uses distancing by going on vacation to create psychological distance so as not to be shackled by negative emotions caused by their math grades. Through all these strategies, CN strives to restore his psychological well-being before eventually returning to his school routine. Distancing is an effort to create personal space from the problems faced to avoid being overwhelmed by them (Suryana, 2022; Maryam, 2017).

The research subject, YC, chose physical activities such as futsal and jogging as his primary coping mechanisms. YC felt that exercise could improve his mood and divert his thoughts from the academic disappointment he was experiencing. Additionally, YC also used playing video games as an extra form of entertainment to alleviate emotional stress.

- Researcher : "Who or what do you turn to when you're dealing with disappointment over your grades?"
YC : "I play futsal or go jogging, ma'am. So, instead of dwelling on my bad grades, I'd rather just work out."
Researcher : "What do you do to calm yourself down or ease the sadness when facing bad grades?"
YC : "Exercise and play video games, sis."

The coping strategy YC employed was emotion-focused coping. First, YC practiced distancing by redirecting his attention to sports activities so he wouldn't constantly dwell on his poor grades. Distancing is an effort to create personal distance from the problems one faces so as not to become overwhelmed by them (Suryana, 2022; Maryam, 2017). Second, YC also employs self-control by choosing to play games and engage in sports as a form of regulating their activities to avoid reacting impulsively to their disappointment, thereby maintaining emotional stability. Self-control is the regulation of feelings or actions to prevent impulsive responses when facing and resolving problems (Suryana, 2022; Maryam, 2017).

Based on the previous findings, it can be concluded that junior high school students implement varied coping mechanisms, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. This aligns with the research by Ikhsan et al. (2024), in which junior high school students applied problem-focused

and emotion-focused coping in varied ways to manage academic stress. The diversity of strategies used demonstrates that students are not passive in the face of academic failure. Each individual's coping strategies will vary depending on the type and source of stress (Ananda et al., 2022). Overall, students use strategies that best align with their personal preferences to reduce stress and maintain resilience, ensuring they remain optimal in the learning process. In general, the coping strategies of students at SMPN 200 Jakarta tend to involve emotion-focused coping, such as eating, playing on their phones, and exercising as a first line of defence. This phenomenon indicates that for students in early adolescence, restoring their emotional well-being is a top priority to protect their self-esteem from academic failure. Various distracting activities serve as emotional outlets that provide temporary comfort and prevent students from experiencing more severe stress. The most commonly used coping strategy among adolescents when experiencing stress is engaging in activities aimed at calming themselves (Pradipta & Hanami, 2024).

There are differences in the speed of transition between coping strategies among research subjects. The study found that students with high personal standards tend to shift more quickly from emotion-focused coping to problem-focused coping compared to research subjects who are purely emotionally reactive. This aligns with the research by Tuasikal & Retnowati (2018), which showed that emotional maturity and emotion-focused coping play a significant role, with problem-focused coping being more dominant in emotionally mature individuals. This indicates that a sense of responsibility toward personal goals drives students to immediately engage in evaluation and planned problem-solving.

Conversely, students who focus solely on emotional regulation without clear achievement goals risk becoming trapped in a prolonged cycle of avoidance. Reactions that rely purely on emotion-focused coping have the potential to prolong and exacerbate the negative effects of the situation at hand (Tuasikal & Retnowati, 2018). Therefore, this study demonstrates that the maturity of students' coping strategies is determined not only by external factors such as teacher support but also by the strength of the students' goals. The ability to balance emotional expression with corrective actions will be the key to students' academic resilience when facing mathematics lessons. Practically, these findings provide strategic implications for mathematics teachers to integrate affective aspects into classroom instruction. Teachers need to take on the role of facilitators who provide emotional support through the delivery of feedback. Mathematics teachers' strategies in creating an error-tolerant classroom atmosphere where mistakes in solving mathematical problems are positioned as evaluation material rather than a failure of identity are crucial for transforming disappointment into concrete academic action plans. Through the optimization of pedagogical interventions that consider students' affective states, teachers can build mathematical resilience, ensuring that disappointment over grades does not turn into mathematical anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Junior high school students' experiences of disappointment regarding their math grades constitute a subjective affective phenomenon primarily triggered by the gap between personal expectations and actual achievement, extending beyond mere failure to meet the minimum passing grade. To regulate this condition, students implement various coping strategies, in which the use of emotion-focused coping, such as hobbies and seeking social support, serves as a primary defence mechanism for emotional stability. The findings of this study indicate that students with high personal standards tend to transition more quickly from emotion-focused coping to problem-focused coping. Therefore, the teacher's role in providing psychological support and fostering an error-tolerant classroom environment is a crucial instrument for transforming negative emotions into constructive academic evaluation, thereby preventing disappointment from becoming long-term demotivation.

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