DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL SUPPORT BETWEEN LOW AND HIGH ACHIEVING STUDENTS

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Abstrak

Social support is an important element in students’ life. The support from family and friends were found to be one of the factors that can influence students’ academic achievement. This study was conducted to examine the differences between low and high achieving students in their social support. 120 undergraduate students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) were involved in this study. The Social Support Behavior (SSB) scale was used to measure the level of social support among students. Independent Sample T-test was used to differentiate the level of social support between low and high achieving students. The findings of this study revealed that there were significant differences between low and high achieving students in their social support. High achieving students received more support from family and friends compared to low achieving students. The findings of the study will be useful in assisting educators, counselors, psychologist, and researchers to develop strategies to enhance students’ academic achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Since independence, Malaysia has gone through a lot of development in its social aspects. One of them is the education system. The education system has grown and developed rapidly to cater to the demands and needs of the developing nation. Although the education system has developed across the time, the aim of the national education remains the same that is to produce high quality and professionally well-trained students. The students are equipped with a wholesome personality and
strong leadership qualities so that they are capable of dealing with current and future challenges. To achieve this objective, various aspects of the students should be taken into consideration including their social life.

As far as academic is concerned, it is important to look at the roles played by the social support since it is described as both a buffer against life stressors as well as an agent promoting health and wellness (Dollete, Steese, Phillips, & Matthews, 2004. Social support from family, peers, and teacher has been recognized as a protective factor for children and teens. Studies have shown the increased risk of adolescent problems in the absence of parental supports or decreased levels of parental support, and the buffering effects of parental support on student stress (Quomma & Greenberg, 1994).

Another research on social support has shown that social support is an important factor in predicting several positive outcomes in children and adolescents. Steinberg and Darling (1994), in their study found that there exist a relationship between social support and academic achievement of the students. They explained that social support from both family and friends influence youngsters’ educational achievement and long-term educational plan. A study by Wentzel (1998) on 167 middle school students in a predominantly middle class community, social support of parents, teachers, and peers were examined for their motivational influence on students’ academic and pro-social goals. Support from parents had predictive value related to academic goals, especially in early adolescence, while peer-related support showed more of a significant role in later middle school years. According to Eskin (2003), at this age, the balance of influence on social development of adolescence shifts progressively from parents to peers.

Support from peers is also important. Studies have shown that adolescents’ motivation for involvement in activities and programs is influenced by peers support. In a study by Dollete et al. (2004) on the role of peers in the motivation of teens to stay involved in students’ activities and program, it was found that when teens had positive peer interactions within the context of the extra-curricular activities, they reported greater commitment and motivation toward these activities. These activities were also reported to have reduced the psychological distress faced by the
students. Conversely, results indicated that teens whose activities did not include strong or positive peer relationships or teens whose activities were apart from their peer groups showed lower levels of commitment and motivation toward their talent and sport activities.

In short, social support has been found to help elevate students’ achievement. Thus, this study focuses on students with good academic performance that differ from those who perform poorly in academic life and how this relates to the level of social support that they receive. The findings from this study could benefit educators by providing necessary support to enhance academic performance among students.

**SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Social support refers to the experience of being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one’s life (Gurung, 2006). It may come from different sources such as family, friends, teachers, community, or any social groups to which one is affiliated to. Social support can come in the form of tangible assistance provided by others when needed which include appraisal of different situations, effective coping strategies, and emotional support.

Social support is an element that can help individuals to reduce the amount of stress experienced as well as to help individuals cope better in dealing with stressful situations. Several studies indicated that supportive contacts correlate negatively with symptoms and psychological disorder such as stress, depression and other psychiatric disorder, and positively correlate with physical and mental health. A study by Nahid & Sarkis (1994) for example, found that social support protects people in life crisis such as bereavement, illness, and other major stress, and moderates the effect of stressors on psychological well being.

It has long been recognized that the characteristics and quality of social support are central to the individual’s adjustment. The quality of social support perceived and received has been reported by several studies to correlate more positively with mental health than the quantity of support received (Nahid & Sarkis, 1994; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). To understand the role of perceived and received social support in dealing
with mental health, we have to look into the research on the stress-buffering effect, which focuses on both types of social support. The former refers to the belief that helps are available if needed whereas the latter refers to the actual helps obtained. Both of these are thought to protect against stress by decreasing the extent to which situations are perceived as a threat to well-being and increasing the belief that necessary resources are available. Investigation of mechanisms underlying the stress-buffering effect of social support has focused on how social support influences stress-related appraisals and coping (Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

Social support was found to be one of the most important protective factors for students (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000). This is because social support includes social resources that individuals perceived to be available or that are actually offered to them which could help protect against psychological problems. According to Teoh and Rose (2001), lower level of social support is one of the predictors of psychological problems. It is associated with higher level of depression, anxiety, attention problems, thought problems, social problems, somatic complaints, and lower self esteem. These notions are supported by the study of Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) on 128 first year undergraduate students. It was found that students who perceived that their social resources increased had lower level of psychological problems. This shows that the impact of a stressful situation, for example, can lessen if students have good social support. Advice and encouragement from sources of support may also increase the likelihood of an individual to rely on active problem solving and information seeking. These may assist students in dealing with various stressors in the environment and facilitate a positive adjustment process.

**Social Support and Academic Achievement**

Support from family and friends have been found to influence students' achievement and can be regarded as one of the indicators of academic competence and psychological well-being (Steinberg & Darling, 1994). Support from family and friends are known to positively effect student achievement. Social support has also been recognized to have significant impact on the achievement of the students. Since family and friends are the individuals’ first source of reference, supports from these two sources.
have been found to give a significant influence on academic achievement (Steinberg & Darling, 1994; Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994).

There are three dimensions of support provided by family and friend and they are warmth, behavioral control, and psychological autonomy-granting. These three dimensions facilitate the development of positive self-conceptions and social skills, responsibility and competence, and impulse control and deterrence of deviance which in turn lead to high level of academic achievement of the students. This support has also been found necessary for healthy level of development (Oswald & Suss, 1994). For example, these two sources of social support; family and friends are the predictor of an individual’s psychological well-being. The combination of family and friends’ support with acceptance and emotional warmth has been associated with higher grades in schools and colleges, less misconduct, less psychological distress, and less delinquency among students of all social classes which would produce significant effects on adolescence academic achievement (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994).

Other studies have also indicated the importance of social support from family and friends. One such study conducted by Steinberg and Darling (1994), found that both parents and friends influence youngsters’ educational achievement and long-term educational plan.

In a cross-sectional study, Holahan et al. (1995) found first-year students with higher levels of perceived parental support were better adjusted (i.e., higher well-being and happiness) and less distressed (i.e., less depression and anxiety) than those with lower levels of perceived parental support. Cutrona et al. (1994) examined perceived social support from parents and peers at the beginning of the first semester and GPA at the end of the following semester. Perceived parental and peer social support predicted academic adjustment after controlling the academic aptitude (i.e., college admissions test). Consistent with previous researches, social support has been found to be an important protective factor that assisted students in making the transition to university level. These studies support the general argument that family support contributes high academic achievement.
It could also be concluded from previous studies, that the presence of social support from family and friends could affect students’ academic achievement. Supports provided by family and friends could enhance students’ academic achievement. Students with high social support are perceived to have better academic achievement compared to those with lower social support. The support received by the students could help them to perform well in academic life. The knowledge on how social support could help students to excel in their studies and to cope with any psychological disturbances, will help educators to decide the amount of support needed by students to ensure their academic achievement.

**METHODOLOGY**

a. Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used for this study. A sample of 120 undergraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) comprised of 50% female and 50% male was obtained. For the purpose of this study, the participants were divided into two groups, low and high achieving groups. Low achieving group refers to students who obtained CGPA of 2.0 and below, and high achieving group refers to students who obtained CGPA of 3.5 and above. The age range of the participants was 20 – 25 (mean = 2.5 (SD = 1.32).

Fifty percent of the samples had CGPA of 3.50 and above, while the other 50% had CGPA of 2.00 and below. The participants were selected from various Kulliyyahs. 30 (25.5%) participants were from Kulliyyah of Engineering (ENGIN), 25 (20.8%) participants from Kulliyyah of Economics and Management Sciences (KENMS), 23 (19.2%) participants were from Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyyah of Laws (AIKOL), 21 (17.5%) participants were from Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS), 12 (10.0%) participants were from Kulliyyah of Information and Technology (KICT), and 9 (7.5%) participants were from Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design (KAED). In terms of the year of study, 24 (20.1%) of the participants were first year students, 40 (33.3%) participants were second year students, 34 (28.3%) participants were third year students and 22 (18.3%) participants were fourth year students.
b. Measures

Social Support

The Social Support Behaviors Scale (SSB) was used to measure social support. The SSB is a 45-item instrument designed to measure social support; emotional, socializing, financial assistance, practical assistance, and advice/guidance. The SSB is designed to assess available supportive behaviors from the perspective of family and friends. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where, the scale options are: 1 = no one would do this, 2 = someone might do this, 3 = some family member/friend would probably do this, 4 = some family member/friend would certainly do this and 5 = most family members/friends would certainly do this. The higher scores indicate higher social support. In this study, the internal consistency values were 0.89 for the social support from family and 0.79 for the social support from friends.

c. Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics used in this study were frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Independent sample t-tests were used to measure differences between low and high achieving groups in social support.

RESULTS

Two analyses were performed to identify different social support received between high and low achieving students. First, the means and standard deviations were obtained to determine the extent to which these two groups reported their level of social support. Second, t-tests were conducted to evaluate whether the two groups differ in their level of social support.

The mean score for social support from the family of low achieving students was 3.43 (SD = 0.34), and for high achieving students 4.52 (SD = 0.29). Independent sample t-test analysis showed that this difference was significant, t (118) = 18.90, p < 0.01. The result indicates that low and high
achieving students differed in the level of social support they received from their family.

Meanwhile, the mean score for social support from friends for low achieving students is 3.37 (SD = 0.43) and for high achieving students was 4.23 (SD = 0.51). Independent sample t-test yielded a significant difference in social support from friends between low and high achieving students, $t(118) = 10.04$, $p < 0.01$. This result suggests that low and high achieving students differed in their level of social support from friends, in that low achieving students received less support from friends compared to high achieving students.

The above analyses on social support from family and friends showed that the low and high achieving groups differed in the level of social support given to them. The level of social support from family and friends in low achieving group is lower compared to those in high achieving group. Table 1 summarizes the result of the differences in social support between low and high achieving students.

Table 1: Differences in Social Support between Low and High Achieving Students.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Low Achieving Students</th>
<th>High Achieving Students</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>3.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>3.37</td>
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DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to examine the differences in social support between low and high achieving students. 120 undergraduate students, both males and females were selected as participants in this study. The variables tested were gender, age, CGPA, kulliyyah, and level of study for demographic characteristics, while social support was tested
for psychological construct. It was hypothesized that high achieving students received more social support compared to low achieving students.

The result of the study confirmed the research hypothesis. A significant difference was found in the level of social support between the two groups of student. Low achieving students reported lower level of social support compared to high achieving students. This finding provides evidence consistent with literatures related to social support. For instance, high achieving students received more social support as compared to low achieving students (e.g. Selbereisen & Todt, 1994; Stainberg & Darling, 1994). This means that students with higher social support from family and friends can perform better in academic life. This is because the existence of social support was found to increase the perception and belief of the students that necessary resources, such as advice and encouragement are there to assist them in their academic life (Cutrona, 1994). Also, students with high social support were better adjusted compared to those with lower level of social support, thus leading to high academic achievement (Holahan et al., 1995). Based on these, social support can be regarded as one of the indicators of academic achievement, whereby students with high level social support will perform better.

Therefore, the findings of the present study provided evidence for the difference between low and high achieving students on their psychological problems and social support. The differences between these two variables were expected as the two constructs were found significantly different in the previous studies.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The present study provides significant information pertaining to the importance of maximizing social support received by the students. The findings of the study clearly indicate that low and high achieving students differ in their level of support that they receive from family and friends. This finding further supports the importance of social support in students’ academic performances. Students and educators need to realize how essential it is to ensure the availability of sufficient social support, which in turn will result in a better performing student.
The awareness of the importance of the impact of social support academic achievement will also assist educators, counselors, and psychologists to understand the extent of the role played by social support that could help manage students’ performance in academic life. Efforts must be made to increase the amount of social support available to the students. Awareness and understanding of this fact, could help many parties, such as educators, counselors, and psychologists to design and develop proper intervention program in enhancing social support among students. The students also could benefit from this study. Information and ideas gained from this research could help them to understand social support and its importance. Therefore, enhancing knowledge and strategies in promoting the role of family and friends as agents of social support among students may help to increase academic achievement.

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

The current study is however limited in terms of size of the sample. Only Malaysian undergraduate students who were in Gombak campus participated in this study. In addition, there was no representative for international students. Thus, the sample of the study is not representative of the real population of IIUM thus the results cannot be generalized to the real population of this university. For future research, the researcher suggests having more samples that include students from other campuses as well as international students. In addition, this study involves only low and high achieving students. No data was obtained from students with moderate academic performance (i.e. those with CGPA between 2.00 and 3.49) and comparison could not be made for this group. It is also suggested by the researcher for the moderate group of students to be included to show a clearer picture of the comparisons.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the differences in social support between low and high achieving students. The results of the study were consistent with previous studies. The findings of this study indicated that students with low academic achievement reported lower level of social support compared to students with high achievement. Therefore, it can be concluded that the
support received by the students either from the family and/or friends can contribute to the academic performance of the university students. It is indeed important to realize that students' excellence in academic life is determined not only by academic-related matters but also the social support that they get from people around them.
REFERENCES


