

Social Support and the Psychological Well-being of Academically Stressed Students in the University of Buea

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author JLL conceived and designed the study, wrote the protocol, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author EBAA managed the literature searches and the analyses of the study. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to investigate the effect of social support on the psychological well-being of academically stressed students in the University of Buea. The study was based on the premise that university students often come with a replete of academically stressed circumstances that often also lead to psychological breakdown. A major contention was that social support could serve as a major framework for the psychological wellbeing of such academically stressed students. We hypothesized that social support systems such as parent/family support, peer acceptance, teachers' support and the availability of learning resources could lead to the psychological wellbeing of academically stressed students. The purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 374 academically stressed students. The instrument used to collect data was the questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using the Spearman's correlation test. The findings revealed that parent/family support ($r=0.160$; $P=0.000$), peer acceptance ($r=0.140$; $P=0.000$), teachers' involvement ($r= 0.205$; $P=0.000$), and the availability of learning resources $r= 0.417$; $P=0.000$) affected the psychological well being of academically stressed students in the university of

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Buea. It was concluded that social support has a significant explanatory power over the psychological well-being of academically stressed students. In that case parents and significant others ought to spend time listening to students' concerns and giving advice to those currently dealing with difficult issues.

Keywords: Social support; psychological wellbeing; academically stressed students; university students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic related stress coupled with poor interpersonal relationships with friends and family is a crucial factor in the psychological wellbeing of students especially those in institutions of higher learning. Frustrations and pressures to achieve in school, are substantially mitigated by social support from significant others, which consequently has a positive implication on the psychological wellbeing of affected persons [1]. Long-term interpersonal difficulties such as simple misunderstandings may affect an individual's health and wellbeing by promoting a sense of hopelessness and socio-emotional stress. Students become increasingly aware of the reciprocity involved in socially supportive relationships through social experiences in the learning process [2,3]. When students are dissatisfied with their social support networks, the likelihood of developing anxiety, depression, or sleep problems increases substantially [4]. Again academic stress coupled with absence of social support from family, friends and significant others could have negative effects on the health of students, inevitably affecting performance scores in school; and supportive actions provided by significant others are thought to buffer the effect of stress by increasing the effectiveness of coping efforts thereby reducing distress [5].

Barnes [6] was the first to describe patterns of social relationships that were not explained by families or work groups. To him, social support served as a "protective" factor to people's vulnerability on the effects of stress on health. Social networks are closely related to social support. Social support and social networks are concepts that describe the structure, processes and functions of social relationships and the web of social relationships that surround individuals [7]. Moreover, by social processes we mean those ways in which individuals and groups interact and establish social relationships. It also has to do with the ways in which individuals and groups interact, adjust and readjust and establish relationships and patterns of behaviour which are again modified through social interactions. As

such, man is a social animal so it is difficult for him to live in isolation. They always live in groups as members of these groups they act in certain manners and their behaviour is mutually affected. As such deficits in social support have been linked to many psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety and the presence of it is a buffer against life stressors as well as an agent of productive health and wellness [8].

According to [9], social support refers to the experience of being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one's life. It may come from different sources such as parents, family, friends, teachers, community, or any social groups to which one is affiliated. Social support can come in the form of tangible assistance provided by others when needed which includes appraisal of different situations, effective coping strategies, and emotional support. Furthermore, a social support system does not need to be extensive to be beneficial. Most important is having at least one confidante to whom one can turn. In fact, in some cases, advice or support from too many people may actually increase one's stress. Sometimes people who are trying to be helpful may even provide the wrong kind of support. For example, you are trying to decide on which graduate school to attend. In an effort to help, relatives may offer facts and opinions about the schools, but their information may conflict, making your decision process even more confusing and stressful.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gurung [10] noted that social support refers to the experience of being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one's life. It may come from different sources such as family, friends, teachers, community, or any social groups to which one is affiliated. Social support can come in the form of tangible assistance provided by others when needed which includes 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 individual cope better in dealing with stressful situations [5]. Several studies indicate that supportive contacts correlate negatively with symptoms and psychological disorders such as stress, depression and other psychiatric disorders; and positively correlate with physical and mental health.

Fan and Chen [11] maintained that parental involvement is any of the activities or actions that parents may take to support their child's development and/or academic achievement at school. This involvement may be in the form of academic monitoring, financial support and the formation of a strong support base for the child. Broadly speaking measures of parental and family support may include the quality and frequency of communication with teachers as well as participation in school functions and activities [12].

According to [13] peer acceptance is the degree to which a child or adolescent is socially accepted by peers. It includes the level of peer popularity and the ease with which a child or adolescent can initiate and maintain satisfactory peer relationships. Peer acceptance and relationships are important to children's social and emotional development. Peer acceptance and friendship provide a wide range of learning and development opportunities for children [14]. These include companionship, recreation, building social skills, participating in group problem solving, and managing competition and conflict. They also allow for self-exploration, emotional growth, and moral and ethical development. Parents, teachers, and other adults are a good source of social support for children, but it is among other children that kids learn how to interact with each other.

Eschenmann [15] suggests that if teachers take the time to build relationships then they can motivate their students to learn. In this light, [5] maintain that a student wants to feel connected to people and feel as though they ought to be loved and respected. They add that the more teacher-student relationship is perceived to be weakened, the more they lag behind academically. Further research also suggests that teachers need to have a strong belief that building relationships are important to the motivation process in teaching-learning contexts

[16]. There is a need to capitalize on these beliefs for the child's benefit. It is important that educators recognize the impact they have on their students, and consider strongly their students' perceptions of them. Teachers have to ensure that they are meeting student needs, both academically and emotionally. Creating classroom environments that promote positive cultures with healthy interactions can motivate students to channel their energies and desires to reach their goals.

Chiriswa [17] noted that effective teaching and learning depends on the availability of suitable adequate resources such as books, laboratories, library materials and host of other visual and audio teaching aids which enhance good performance in national examination. Other studies have maintained that both material and human resources were practically inadequate and where they were adequate they were not well utilized in those two types of schools [e.g. 18,19]. Furthermore, inadequate physical facilities like laboratories, libraries, classrooms as well as material resources like textbooks, charts, maps, will adversely affect students' performance inadvertently leading to academic stress experiences [20]. Some research also shows that learning resources don not only facilitate effective learning for students but also supports and improves on the teacher's quality of teaching, the outcome being effective teaching that yields higher academic achievement and reduces stress [21].

According to [22] ecological theory, it is in the Microsystems that most of the direct interactions with social agents take place e.g., parents, peers, and teachers. The individual is viewed not as a passive recipient of experiences in these settings, but as one who helps construct the setting. This is to say that the recipient (student) should make necessary use of the available resources being given to him. Meanwhile [3] in his theory of social constructivism, believes that learning and development is a collaborative activity and that children are cognitively developed in the context of socialization and education. The perceptual, attention, and memory capacities of children are transformed by vital cognitive tools provided by culture, such as history, social context, traditions, language, and religion. For learning to occur, the child first makes contact with the social environment on an interpersonal level and then internalizes this experience.

The cognitive theory of stress by Richard Lazarus contends that it is not the stressor that causes stress but the person's perception of it. According to him, when people are confronted with a potentially stressful event, they engage in a cognitive process that involves a primary and a secondary appraisal. A primary appraisal is an evaluation of the meaning and significance of the situation-whether its effect on one's well-being is positive, irrelevant or negative. During the secondary appraisal, if people judge the situation to be within their control, they make an evaluation of the available resources.

3. METHODS

The study was a survey and was made up of 374 participants who were university students purposively and randomly selected from the University of Buea, Cameroon. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to include participants who demonstrated a range of characteristics of academic stress; meanwhile random sampling was further used to select a number that was demographically representative and also sizable enough for the study. The instrument used was a questionnaire which was designed to collect data on academic stress, social support and psychological wellbeing. It was self-constructed and referred to as Questionnaire for Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing of Academically Stressed Students in the University. Since social support was the independent variable it was further operationalized as constituting parent or family support, peer acceptance, teacher involvement and availability of learning resources ($X^2=0.17$, $P=0.982$). Quality of family support was measured by items such as parental involvement in school activities, parental attitude towards the student's performance in academic courses at school, parental support during examinations, provision of basic needs at school, parental indifference towards student's academic work, parental indifference towards student's school attendance, etc.

Some measures of peer acceptance as a variable of social support belonging to a groups as a way of facilitating learning, feeling loved by friends who support when faced with academic difficulties, having classmates who accept one for whom she/he is, sharing ideas in the company of friends, having friends take away school related stress, and so on. On teacher involvement as social support, participants rated their opinion against teachers' provision of

guidance in completing academic assignments, provision of feedback to facilitate learning and do away with stress, provision of compliments to encourage students and help them deal with academic related stress, pleasantly correcting the student in the face of mistakes, making the student feels important among others. Furthermore learning resources as social support indicator was defined by availability of academic reading materials, library materials, necessary school requirements, comfortable classrooms and lecture halls, useful materials for course work, internet access and so on. Finally the dependent variable psychological wellbeing was defined by among others feeling happy about one's studies, feeling bad with low grades, being satisfied with one's academic standing, happy with one's friends, always able to overcome one's difficult moments, being able to adapt to situations, being proud of one, and so on.

Open-ended questions were analyzed using the process of thematic analysis whereby concepts or ideas were grouped under umbrella terms or key words. As for the quantitative data, a pre-designed EpiData Version 3.1 (EpiData Association, Odense Denmark, 2008) database which had 111 in-built consistency and validation checks was used to enter the data. To further check for consistency, data range and validation checks were also performed in SPSS version 21.0 (IBM Inc., 2012) to identify invalid codes. Data were made essentially of categorical variables and they were analyzed using frequencies and Multiple Response Analysis. Reliability test was performed to assess the internal consistency of responses using Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis and was calculated at 0.719. Here, social support indicators were measured at parent or family support (0.652), peer acceptance (0.258), teachers' involvement (0.470), availability of learning resources (0.701) and psychological wellbeing was tested at 0.686. All statistics were presented at 95% Confidence interval with Alpha=0.05.

The Spearman rho correlation test was used to compare proportions in order to establish the predictive power of social support over the psychological wellbeing of academically stressed students.

4. FINDINGS

Findings showed that parent/family support ($r=0.160$; $P=0.000$), peer acceptance ($r=0.140$;

P=0.000), teachers' involvement (r= 0.205; P=0.000), and the availability of learning resources r= 0.417; P=0.000) affected the psychological wellbeing of academically stressed students in the university of Buea. The explanatory power over psychological wellbeing showed that parent/family support (r=0.160; P=0.000) was the highest whereas peer acceptance (r=0.140; P=0.000) had the lowest effect. Descriptively, the findings revealed that students perceived the help they get from their parents and friends in academics to be essential in their lives as this gave a feeling of belonging and being recognized and accepted. Praise and encouragement also served as a source of motivation for the students. But they also felt that when the student is being reprimanded and punished all the time for academic related problems, the student generally feels hated and not wanted by teachers, parents, and friends. It also found that when learning resources are available, it becomes easier for effective learning to take place. But if they are not available, learning becomes a difficult task to accomplish, making the entire process a stressful one.

and wellbeing. This is because parents provide their children with the support they need. The more supportive parents tend out to be, the better their psychological wellbeing. They accepted the fact that the advice they get from their parents is enough for them to know that they care for them. This will enable them feel loved and cared for thus, having a positive effect on their learning outcome. This is supported by [22] ecological theory which involves the relationships between the Microsystems in one's life. This means that your family experience may be related to your school experience. For example, if a child is neglected by his parents, he may have a low chance of developing positive attitude towards his teachers. Also, this child may feel awkward in the presence of peers and may resort to withdrawal from a group of classmates. Therefore a weak support system might influence the relation of the student and the teacher in such a way that the student will always want to keep to him or herself even if he/she does not know anything especially in the classroom context and this will eventually lead low performance in school since a disturb mind cannot work.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Parent/Family Support and the Psychological Well-being of Academically Stressed Students

Findings from this hypothesis revealed that students perceive parental/family support as useful and very important in their academic life

The issue of parental involvement correlating with student academic achievement is often a main focus of research. Findings from the studies in this review show that parental involvement as reported by the students consistently had positive effects on students across all developmental levels of education. Higher parental involvement correlated with overall higher academic achievement in most studies.

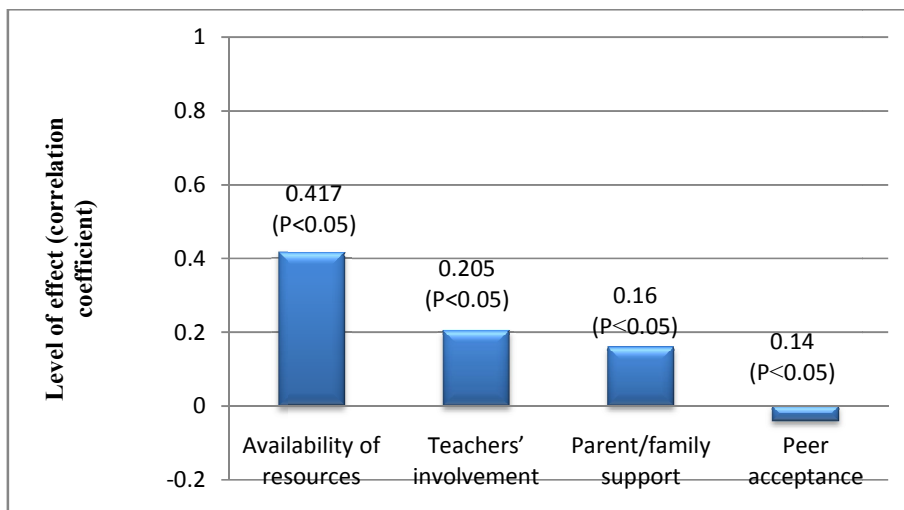


Fig. 1. Comparing the effect of predictors of psychological well-being to students' psychological wellbeing

Table 1. Summary of findings

Hypotheses	Spearman's rho	Comments
Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between parent/family support and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students	r=0.160 P=0.000	There was statistically enough evidence that parents/family support has a significant positive effect on the psychological well-being of the students (r=0.160; P=0.000), therefore implying that the better the parents/family support, the better the psychological well-being of the students.
Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between peer acceptance and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students	r=0.140 P=0.000	There was statistically enough evidence that peer acceptance has a significant positive effect on the psychological well-being of the students (r=0.140; P=0.000), therefore implying that the better the peer acceptance, the better the psychological well-being.
Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between teacher's involvement and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students	r=0.205 P=0.000	There was statistically enough evidence that teachers' involvement has a significant positive effect on the psychological well-being of the students (r= 0.205; P=0.000), therefore implying that the more the teachers' show concern for the students education, the better their psychological well-being.
Ho₄: There is no significant relationship between the availability of learning resources and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students	r=0.417 P=0.000	There was statistically enough evidence that availability of resources has a significant positive effect on the psychological well-being of the students (r= 0.417; P=0.000), therefore implying that the more the availability of learning resources, the better their psychological well-being.

Note that research conducted from a variety of perspectives all show a positive correlation between involvement and achievement. In one study of younger children, parental involvement did not correlate with higher academic achievement, but with better social skills and fewer problem behaviours, which may later associate with higher academic achievement [12].

The study further revealed that parental support is an essential tool in students' academic pursuit because these students feel less troubled knowing that their parents are always there to help them out when they need them. Moreover, parental involvement is often considered a pathway through which schools enhance the achievement of underperforming children [23]. Consequently, parent involvement is encouraged by teachers, policy makers, parents, and researchers. Parental involvement is a key component of early childhood education programs. These programs encourage parent involvement by inviting parents to participate in activities at school and facilitating parent-teacher communication.

5.2 Peer Acceptance and the Psychological Well-being of Academically Stressed Students

The findings related to this hypothesis are that there is a significant relationship between peer

acceptance and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students in the University of Buea. This is because the students perceive the help they get from their friends in the academic milieu to be essential in their lives, as this gives them a feeling of belonging and being accepted by the friends. They agreed that they can easily overcome their stressful moments because of their friends, as they are able to share their worries and problems with their friends and advice being given and helped by friends when need arises. This prevents the students from having the feeling that they are not important and as such can actively participate in all school activities. This finding is in line with that of [24,1] who found that when examining peer acceptance among students, researchers usually look at two areas that are related to a child's psychological and social development. The first area is the child's social standing in the peer group as a whole and is indicated by the child's level of social acceptance by other members in the group, usually classmates. The second area is the child's individual friendships, characterized by both the quantity and quality of these friendships.

Moreover [24] noted the quality of the relations (including support, companionship and low level of conflict or the type of support (academic, emotional, social are also considered. Some authors have been studying peer culture in an

even broader sense, referring to school colleagues with whom there is no proximity relation but who still contribute to school climate. Research on these variables also attends to the polarity of the relations, positive, such as support or negative, such as association with problematic peers bullying experiences having the potential to encourage or conversely representing obstacles to personal and academic success. This is seen in this study where a few were of the opinion that their friends add to the stress they already have 9.4% (35) while others they agreed that their friends act as a source of support towards their school success.

This study equally revealed that these students feel loved because they have friends to support them when faced with learning difficulties such that they can advise them on what to do or propose a solution to their problem or even going as far as solving the problem for their friends. This view is in line with the motivational perspective, which according to it, positive peer relations are promoters of school engagement as they will up the necessities of belonging and attachment, consequently transporting positive feelings, essential for adaptive functioning, both global and in school context. The perceptions of peer support appear related to academic performance, school adjustment academic motivation. On the contrary, negative relations with peers come out associated with disengagement and anti-social behaviours [13].

5.3 Teacher's Involvement and the Psychological Well-being of Academically Stressed Students

The finding related to this hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between teacher's involvement and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students. The findings revealed that the students agreed that their teachers support is essential for them to attain their educational objectives. This is because their praises and encouragement will serve as a source of motivation to these students. But when a student is being reprimanded and punished all the time, the students generally feel hated and not wanted by their teachers and this in turn affects them psychologically thereby having a negative effect on their learning outcomes.

This finding is in line with the view of [25], who says the main variable in the classroom is not the student, but the teacher. Great teachers have

high expectations for their students, but even higher expectations for themselves. These teachers recognize the importance of connecting with their students, that if they are unable to connect with them emotionally then influencing their minds may be impossible. Good teachers put snags in the river of children passing by, and over time, they redirect hundreds of lives. There is an innocence that conspires to hold humanity together. Teachers are the first and perhaps most important point of contact in a student's life. Despite the countless reforms, educational movements, and programs implemented to improve education, no other element can be as profound as the human element. He urges, "It's the people, not the programs. More profoundly he states that there are really two ways to improve a school significantly that is by getting better teachers and improve the teachers in the school. A fundamental question for a student is 'Does my teacher like me?' Given a rigorous, aligned curriculum, the answer to that simple question is our best predictor of student achievement. Teacher knowledge and efficacy of student motivation and achievement are crucial components to creating relationships that motivate. Both teachers and students have to value their contribution. A student has to feel worthwhile and appreciated. A teacher needs to recognize that he or she can have a positive effect on their students.

5.4 Learning Resources and the Psychological Well-being of Academically Stressed Students

The findings to this study revealed that there is a significant relationship between availability of learning resources and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students. This is because students agreed that when learning resources are made available, it is easier for effective learning to take place but when these learning facilities are lacking, learning becomes a difficult task to accomplish, making the entire process a stressful one. This finding is in line with the view of [19] who commenting on educational resources says they are important because the goal of any school depends on adequate supply and utilization of physical and material resources among others as they enhance proper teaching and learning, the reason why this study is important. Note that nothing has ever replaced the printed word as the key element in the educational process and as a result textbooks are central to schooling at all levels.

Furthermore, the findings of this study also revealed that it is not sometimes easy for students to find what they need to do their assignments. It is also very frustrating whenever learning resources are not available this makes learning a stressful process as one will begin to look for ways to get these needed resources. But when these resources are made available to students through the library, learning becomes a joyful activity to engage in thereby leaving us with peaceful mind. This is supported by the view of [26] who postulated that educational resources can be categorized into four groups that is human, material, physical and financial resources. Educational resources according to [2] are central to the educational process because they play an important role in the achievement of educational goals and objectives since they facilitate teachers' work and accelerate learning on the part of the student. the availability of relevant educational resources contribute to academic achievement and that unattractive school buildings, crowded classrooms, non availability of playing grounds and surroundings that have no aesthetic beauty can contribute to poor academic achievement.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study show that perceived social support has a significant influence on the psychological well-being of academically stressed students. The study revealed that students who are provided with their school needs perform better than those without these basic needs. That notwithstanding, there were some children who lacked some of these school needs but they did better in school. Some children are born with a high intelligent quotient (IQ). However, those who are provided with their school needs on time perform better in school all these show that social support being given during the learning process is very important and as such should be encouraged to improve on students learning outcome.

In trying to compare the basic roles of parents and teachers in the educational process, we come to the conclusion that they are complementary. Each depends on the other to be efficient. Parents cannot teach or give their children all the skills they need to survive without the assistance of the school. Likewise schools won't be able to carry out efficient teaching without the assistance of parents. Therefore, for schools to be efficient in educating children, parents, must work hand- in- gloves with

teachers so that what is taught in school is being reinforced at home, while at the same time supplying the students with material, financial and human resources.

From the research, it could be concluded that social support from family and friends plays an important role in dealing with psychological problems because supports provided by family and friend could lower down the psychological problems on students. This means that the higher the social support, the lower are the psychological problems. Otherwise, the lower the social support, the higher are the psychological problems. This study provides empirical evidence with regards to positive effects of social support in managing psychological problems among students. Specifically the findings suggested that an increase in social support may lead to decrease psychological problems among students. Thus, the findings from the field already presented above and as supported by literature that there is a significant relationship between perceived social support and the psychological well-being of academically stressed students in the University of Buea. As such, the investigator concludes that perceived social support is a correlate of the psychological well-being of academically stressed students in the University of Buea.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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