Social Support and Academic Achievement: Exploring the link in A Developing Country

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Abstract. *The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of social support on academic achievement of university of Ghana students. The sample size consisted of 15 undergraduate students drawn from three halls of residence at the University of Ghana. The sample was made of 5 level 100, 5 level 200 and 5 level 300 students. The age range of participants was between 19 and 23 years. Qualitative data was collected using semi structured interviews and the data was analysed using content analysis. The findings of this study suggest that social support contribute significantly to students' academic achievement through three categories which include; social support enhances good mental state or wellbeing which boost students' cognitive engagement in learning and academic activities. The findings also suggest that social support is a motivator which drives students towards academic success, and also, the findings suggest that social support enhances academic achievement through self-belief and self-confidence. This study implies that as part of making educational reforms to improve student's academics, all stakeholders involved such as lecturers, policy makers and the government should consider the psychosocial needs of students that can enhance their academic performance.*

Keywords*: social support; learning; academic achievement.*

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INTRODUCTION

Academic institutions and educators are increasingly conscious of the potential relationship that exist between academic achievement and social support (Elliot et al., 2001; Zins et al., 2004). Research indicates that social interactions and the quality of these interactions offer the basis for future developmental mile-stones (Vygotsky et at., 1987). Academic institutions i.e., teachers/lecturers and environmental setting becomes increasingly important in facilitating student's development and achievement once they step into these academic institutions (Scharps & Solomon, 2003). Research studies has begun to shed more insight on the role of social and emotional regulation and associated social-emotional skills in effective social interaction and academic achievement (Saarni, 2007). These skill set can be key target for interventions designed to facilitate positive interactions and also enhance academic achievement (Elias & Arnold, 2006).

Improving students' learning ability and academic achievement has long been an extremely complicated and vexing problem for school systems and education policy makers (Lee et al., 1999). Researches have been attempting to come out with ways of increasing or improving students learning, motivation and academic achievement levels for years. As a result of these attempts, a common approach has been adopted that feedback, guidance and support improved students' interest in learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These ensured their active involvement and participation in the learning process (Lumsdeen, 1994). In this respect, it can be stated that students should be supported from multiple sources in order to improve their interest and ability towards achieving academic excellence (Chambers & Schreiber, 2006; Rusli, 2007). Among the many efforts aimed to improve student's learning ability and achievement are several quite different approaches, each with deep historical roots. One of these approaches emphasize the importance of social support in improving student learning. This approach focuses on strengthening social ties and relationships among students, teachers and peers in and out of school (Lee et al., 1999).

The psychological needs of individuals play a critical role in their quality of learning and academic success. Social support has been found to be associated with greater wellbeing thus leading to better learning condition (Steptoe et al., 1996). Several studies have demonstrated that social support has a positive effect on an individual's learning and academic success (Azmitia et al., 2009). Some studies suggest that these various sources of social support (teachers, family, peer, institution) have an independent and direct effect (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997) on students learning, motivation and engagement. Other studies found that teacher support is the most relevant source (Goodnow, 1993; Wentzel, 1998). However, no study has investigated simultaneously the impact of these four sources of support on motivational outcomes. For example, higher levels of social support from family, friends, teachers and significant others have a positive effect on Mathematics grades (Azmitia et al., 2009), reading tests (Park & Bonner, 2008), school meaningfulness (Brewster & Bowen, 2004), and school belonging (Adelabu, 2007). Less social support on the other hand has been reported to influence school failure and poor academic performance (Domagała-Zyśk, 2006).

A study by Lee and Smith (1999) found out that there was a positive relationship between social support and learning among students. Song et al. (2014) emphasized that social support perceived by the middle school students predicted their achievement. Legault et al. (2006) identified that there was a positive relationship between the social support perceived by students aged between 12 and 19 and their achievement, and Mattanah et al. (2012) proved that social support had positive effects on the performance of university students. Hence literature shows that social support has positive effect on the quality of learning process and academic achievement (Song et al., 2014).

Academic failure and dropout are pervasive challenges at all levels of the education system in most countries (OCDE, 2013). Re-

search so far pointed out different aspects of this large phenomenon. Scholars have argued that social support is a key factor to foster learning and persistence; indeed, these authors have found that when students perceive support from peers, family, institution, and teachers, they tend to display higher motivation and achieve good academic accomplishments more easily (Fass & Tubman, 2002; Feldman, 2007; Mattanah, Lopez, et al., 2011; Robbins, et al., 2009).

Data from the global school-based health survey in Ghana indicates that over 80% of adolescents report experiences such as feeling worried, feeling sad and lonely which in turn had a negative effect on their daily life activities which transform into their academic performance (Owusu, 2008). In responding to such concerns about the falling academic standard and students learning abilities in Ghana, most interventions largely have been about policy formulations. Policy makers in Ghana placed considerable emphasis on several factors such as programmes modification, educational reforms, school feeding programmes, free basic and high school education and infrastructural reforms (Ghana Ministry of education, 2003). Although these interventions and school related factors has higher chance or may be positive for students learning and academic success, the psychosocial needs of students also play a major role in improving student learning and academic success.

These psychosocial needs for whom these measures have been instituted has received little attention in terms of research and policy formation in Ghana. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to examine how social support as one of the psychosocial needs can influence students' learning ability and general academic performance at the university of Ghana. In this regard, the following questions (Q) were modelled:

Q1. How does the different sources of social support (family, colleague students, lecturers and school institution) enhance students' learning ability?

Q2. Which of the sources of social support (family, colleague students, lecturers

and school institution) enhances students learning ability the most?

Q3. How does the different sources of social support enhance student's general academic achievement or performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Cob (1975), perceived social support is an individual's belief that one is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations. Social support is the feeling or experience of having others who love and care for you, who you can turn to for help in times of need. According to House (1981), they are four main categories of social support, and each of this category plays a major role in an individual's wellbeing. These categories include; emotional, appraisal, informational and instrumental. Each of these categories when examined plays an important role in an individual academics' achievement.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Emotional support generally comes from family and close friends, and it is the most common form of social support. It includes empathy, concern, love and trust from family and friends. This kind of social support is very sensitive in the sense that a little bit of inadequacy could lead to poor wellbeing or mental state which affects an individual's learning ability.

APPRAISAL SUPPORT

Appraisal support involves transmission of information in the form of affirmation, feedback and social comparison. The information is often evaluative and can come from family, teachers, colleagues and friends.

INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT

Informational support includes advice, suggestions, or directives that assist the person to respond to personal or situational demands.

Instrumental support

Instrumental support is the most concrete direct form of social support, encompassing help in the form of money, time, in kind assistance, and other explicit interventions on the persons behalf.

Social support can emanate from different sources, this present study will look at four of these sources of social support that influence students' academic performance. These include; family, lecturers, peers and institutional support.

Family support

Family support includes love, concern, empathy, guidance and trust. According to Sarason and Pierce (1990), perceived family support provides a secure context that allows active participation, exploration, and experimentation in a wide range of life experiences, including learning experiences, resulting in the acquisition of skills and self-confidence.

Teacher/Lecturer support

The teacher's support includes behaviours such as positive feedbacks, the provision of structure, and dedication of resources. Previous studies conducted at both high school and university level showed that perceived support from the teacher foster students' engagement in learning activities (Dupont et al., 2014; Roeser et al., 1996; Williams & Deci, 1996)

Peer support

Students may also receive support from their peers. According to Richardson and Skinner (1992), this support is provided when student belong to informal groups of study, when they share notes and experiences, and exchange advices and opinions about options to take, strategies to use, and so on. Studies have shown that perceived peer support was associated with students' engagement in learning activities and their performance (Robbins et al., 2004; Torres & Solberg, 2001).

Institution support

Interventions are provided at universities in order to help students develop appropriate skills such as study habits and learning strategies. These interventions (for example seminars) are specifically oriented toward the development of skills related to the ongoing task or work (Robbins et al., 2009) and thus differ from the other forms of support that focus more on affective sustain or feed-backs on the work already done. Studies have shown that perceived institutional support is associated with students' perceived ability and task value, emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement as well as academic performance (Robbins et al., 2009).

Academic achievement

Academic achievement, which is similar to academic performance, has been defined broadly. Academic achievement is the inclusion of outcomes which are related empirically or conceptually to school achievement. These include grades, academic motivation, and behaviour problems (Mandara, 2006). On the other hand, Malecki and Demaray (2006) conceptualized academic achievement simply as the grade point average (GPA) in schools. For the purpose of this study, academic achievement would be looked at two dimensions; that is students learning ability and students' school related performance (grades). This paper would look at how social support affect the learning process and how that will reflect in students' academics i.e., grades and higher positions in school.

Review of related studies

A study by Lee and Smith (1999) examined Social Support and Achievement among Young Adolescents in Chicago: The role of school Academic Press. The sample of participants consisted of 28,318 sixth and eighth graders from 304 Chicago public elementary schools with an average of 93 students per school. The sample also consisted of 50.1% sixth graders and 49.9% eighth graders. Data

came from 1997 survey reports collected by the consortium for Chicago school Research from 30000 sixth and eighth graders in 304 Chicago public schools about the support these students receive from their teachers, their parents, peers and their neighbourhoods and from annual standardized test conducted by the Chicago Public schools. Using hierarchical linear modelling methods, they found out that, on average, social support is positively but modestly related to learning. However, both learning and the relationship between social support and learning are contingent on the academic press of the school students attend.

A study by Dupont et al. (2015) examined the impact of different sources of social support on academic performance. A total of 226 final year students consisting of 69% female) and (31% males) participated in the study. The study was a quantitative study and data was collected through the use of questionnaires. The structural equation modelling analysis revealed that institutional and supervisor support were associated with motivation which contributed to better academic performance.

Another study by Iglesia et al. (2014) examined the relationship between perceived social support and academic achievement. Perceived social support was assessed in terms of four possible sources (Parents, Teachers, Classmates and best friend). A total of 760 college students participated in the study. Academic achievement was measured using three different indicators; the rate of passed, failed and dropped classes in the time since academic career was initiated. The findings shows that a higher perception of social support was associated with better academic achievement but only for females.

Another study by Cirik, (2015) investigated the relationship between Social Support, Motivation, and Science achievement. A total sample of 1375 middle school students participated in the study. Out of these, 701 were females and 674 were males. The instrument used were the Child and Adolescent Social Scale (CASSS) which was used to measure social support, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) and students

Science achievement levels were determined through calculating the score they obtain in science courses. Data were analysed through structural equation modelling (SEM). According to the structural models obtained, the effects of social support on science achievement and motivation, as well as the effects of social support and motivation were found to be positive and significant. The mediating effect of motivation between social support and science achievement was not significant. The findings revealed that cooperation of the sources of support (parents, teachers, classmates, and close friends) was essential in increasing student's science achievement and motivation levels.

Another study by Glozah and Pevaaln, (2014) investigated the role of Social Support on stress, health, and academic success among Ghanaian adolescents. A total of 770 second year and third year students were selected randomly from senior high schools in acara, Ghana. The sample consisted of 504 boys and 266 girls between the ages of 14 to 21. The general hall questionnaire (GHQ-12) was used to measure wellbeing of students. The school success profile (SSP) was used to measure physical health and social support from teachers (SST), the 10-item version of the perceived social support from family (PSS-FA) scale and the perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-FR) scale were used to assess social support from family and friends. Academic success was measured by using students' examination grades in English, mathematics, integrated science and social studies. According the structural equation modelling obtained; perceived social support was negatively related with academic success; however, this negative relationship was weaker. It was also found that perceived social support was negatively related to stress and predictive of health and wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN
This research was conducted in the Ghanaian educational sector specifically the University of Ghana. The study made used of fifteen (15)

students five (5) from each of level 100, 200 and 300 to solicit their views on social support and their academic performance. In order to gain a holistic view and rich information the study adopted the qualitative approach. The current study employed the phenomenological study approach to allow research participants to elicit their individual feelings and perceptions on social support and academic performance through the use of a semi-structured interview guide with research questions which were open-ended, descriptive and non-directional (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

The data for this study was collected using a flexible and well-designed interview guide by the researcher. The interview guide was divided into two sections A and B. Section A consisting of questions on demographic details whiles section B consisting of questions on social support and academic performance. The demographic data for the study constituted 15 students. Five (5) students in level 100, five (5) students from level 200 and five (5) students from level 300. The age ranges from 19-23 years. Section B consisted 9 questions designed based on literature themes surrounding the topic area.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Participants of this study were recruited from three halls of residents at the University of Ghana. five students each from Akuofo, Mensah Sarbah and Legon hall participated in the study. Convenience sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Verbal consent was sought from the participants and they were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Participants were made known that there was no anticipated risk in the study, and that participation was entirely voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. Participants were also made known that their responses will be treated with the greatest level of confidentiality and that responses were only for academic purposes. Participants who willingly accepted to take part in the study were then interviewed in-

dividually. Each interview lasted between 10-15 minutes and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full and copies of transcribed interviews sent to the interviewees to check and resolve discrepancies.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed employing the use of content analysis. Content analysis is a technique used to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual materials. It requires a systematic and objective evaluating of documents, oral communication and graphics, and the data can be converted into strings of text and quantitative data (Boateng, 2016). First the interviews were transcribed personally by the researcher. The transcribed data was sent to the participants to ensure that data was accurate. Then these data were then analysed to form various themes based on the content of the responses given by the students. The themes that emanated from the content includes; social support as a predictor of students' wellbeing, social support as a motivator which drive students towards academic success, social support enhance academic performance through self believe and self-confidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, responses given by students who participated in the study were positive and detailed. Students responded well to all the questions asked during the interview, majority of students gave their thought and perceptions on how social support had influence their learning ability and overall academic performance.

The first question measures Students' perceptions on how the various sources of social support affect their learning ability.

This theme was selected to capture students' perception on how the various sources of social support (family, lecturers, peers and school institution) enhances their ability to learn and understand what is been taught in school. The various response given by the students were categorised into positive and negative although all participants' responses were

mainly positive. The positive perceptions of students indicated that indeed the support (love, concern, empathy, guidance, positive feedback, advice, opinion sharing and learning strategies) students received ensures ease and flexibility (wellbeing) in how they learn. The various response students gave on this theme are stated below:

"The love, care and guidance I got from my parents gives me peace of mind to learn, and when lecturers give positive feedback, it helps me to know that am in the right direction there by making learning and understanding easier".

(Level 100 female student, 20 years)

"When I receive advice and useful information from lecturers and share opinion with my peers it gives me comfort and facilitate my learning. It feels like it takes some burden away from me which boost my ability to learn effectively."

(Level 100 male student, 19 years)

"I think when I receive the necessary attention from lecturers and get support from other students in terms of lecture notes it motivate and enhances my ability to learn."

(Level 200 female student)

"Learning become easy and simple when I get support from lecturers and parents, positive feedbacks, advices and guidance set me on the right mood and path to learn."

(Level 300 male student, 22 years)

Some positive thought students indicated was the fact that social support makes them feel appreciated and at ease.

"The various support I receive shows that am acknowledged as a person in the society which makes me feel at home and at peace to learn effectively. Especially when I share ideas and opinions with my colleague students concerning academics."

(Level 200 male student)

"Social support from peers like welcoming and accepting me in their midst, sharing ideas and reading materials with me makes me feel at ease and know that I have people to rely

on when am in need, this gives me a positive mind and enhance my ability to learn."

(Level 300 male student, 23 years)

Students also perceived social support as means of enhancing self-confidence and making learning effective

"The kind of support I get from these sources of social support especially from lecturers gives me self-belief and confidence to participate during class discussions, this makes learning and understanding easier."

(Level 300 female student, 21 years)

"It (social support) boosts my self-esteem and also reduces inferiority complex; this gives me confidence and boldness to interact well and learn effectively. It (social support) also helps in decision making knowing what to do or learn at the right time."

(Level 200 male student, 22yearys)

One other student alluded to social support providing enabling environment for learning

"The different sources of support provide good and enjoyable environment making learning pleasant".

(Level 300 male student, 21 years)

Response to the second question about the source of social support that enhances learning the most was quite proportionate for family and lecturers, four students each indicated that family and lecturers contribute more in enhancing their ability to learn effectively Whiles a student each opted for peers and school institution as the source that influence their learning ability and academic achievement the most. Some of the response's students gave are stated below:

"I think family support enables me learn better because they are the first line of people I contact when am in need."

(Level 100 female student)

"My family support (love, care, and guidance) makes me happy and at ease thus enhances my ability to learn effectively than the other sources."

(Level 100 female student, 20 years)

"I think positive feedback and advice from lecturers is the source of support that impact my learning greatly. This is because in the academic institution lecturers are the main source of authority that one can get knowledge from, so when they give you feedback that is positive it makes you feel comfortable and course to achieve academic excellence."

(Level 300 male student, 22 years)

Also, the perception of students with regard to how the various sources of social support (family, lecturers. Peer and school institution) affect their general academic achievement had to do with improvement in grades and all activities concerning academic performance. Students were to indicate whether the social support they received which they indicated earlier as an enhancer of their ability to learn affect their entire academic performance on campus. Responses given by students were positive indicating that clearly there was improvement in their academic achievement.

Some students indicted that social support serves as a motivator that derive them towards success.

"The support I received from these sources encouraged me to work hard towards achieving academic success, the perception that support is available from these institutions motivate me to put more effort in learning and this enhances my performance (grades)."

(Level 300 male student, 23 years)

"Social support from these entities affect my general academic performance through motivation, the kind of support I received from family, lecturers and peers drives me to learn effectively which has significance impact on the grades I get."

(Level 200 male students, 22 years)

Students in responding to these questions also indicated how social support from these sources affect them psychological and gives them sound mind to learn.

"When I received support (love, care, guidance and encouragement) from family and

friends, I am psychological stable which ensures effectively learning and understanding."

(Level 100 male student, 20 years)

"Support from family such as love and care, and financially gives me a sound mind to attend to studies effectively. Advice and opinion sharing with friends adds to my knowledge about what is happening around and keeps me abreast with useful information. This together affect my entire academic performance positively."

(Level 200 female student)

"Through the support I received that is from family (love and care), lecturers given me positive feedback and advices from peers, it gives me good focus and peace of mind to learn effectively, and this improves my grades and entire performance in school."

(Level 300 female student, 21 years)

A student gave a scenario where she failed a paper and had to re-sit, she mentioned that the reason why she failed the paper was as a result of inadequate or lack of information concerning the paper as she could not share notes and opinions with her friends.

"I think social support especially from friends and colleagues on campus is very important when it comes to academic grades, I failed a paper because I could not associate myself well with my colleagues to share notes and ideas which I was lacking. From then, I learnt the importance of peer support especially during discussions. This is one of the major sources of support that help improve my performance."

(*Level* 200 female students, 19 years)

The study intends to enhance knowledge about the role of social support among university students. The goal here was to describe how the various sources of social support (family, lecturers, peer and school institution) can impact or predict students' academic achievement. The overall comments made by students on social support as a predictor of academic performance were positive, all the students who participated in the study alluded

to the fact that social support from at least one of the sources mentioned above contribute significantly to their academic performance.

From the responses given by students, we realised that's social support could enhance academic achievement either directly or indirectly. With respect to the findings of this study, social support as a predictor of academic achievement has been put into three categories. The first category is social support as a predictor of students' wellbeing (good mental state). We evaluated students' positive responses and realise that social support does not directly affect students' grades but gives them a good mental state, peace of mind and a good focus. Social support boost students' cognitive engagement to engage in effective learn which result in good academic grades. This finding is consistent with literature on social support conducted among university students. Vansteenkistel et al. (2009) stated in their paper that perceived social support from the supervisor is linked with the attribution of value to task, which in turn boost students' cognitive engagement.

Another line of category emanating from the findings was that social support as a motivator which drives students towards academic success. Motivation is seen as playing a mediating role in predicting social support and academic achievement. The various sources of social support and types of support they provide to students serve as a strong motivator to engage in learning thus leading to better performance and grades. Studies conducted on social support and academic achievement established the fact that motivation is a mediator between social support and academic achievement (Skinner et al., 2008). Fieldman (2007), stated that when students perceived social support from peers, family, institution and teachers, they tend to display higher motivation and achieve good academic accomplishment more easily. Skinner et al., (2008) also stated that the provision of social support nurtures students' motivation and engagement which in turn facilitate academic performance.

In addition, the findings also established that social support enhances academic achievement through self-belief and self-confidence. Our analysis of the results show that social support boosts students' self-confidence and self believe when it comes to learning and engagement. Students who receive social support especially from family and lecturers improved their curiosity, encouraged meaningful learning and ensures that students perceived learning as significant and beneficial, this improves student's self-efficacy, decrease their test anxiety and increase their level of achievement with the result obtained in various studies in the literature (Legault et al., 2006; Matana et.al., 2012; Songet et al., 2014).

IMPLICATION

Overall, the results of the present study clearly indicated that the various sources of social support contribute to students' academic performance, but then some of the sources are more important and contribute significantly towards students' academic achievement than others. The findings suggest that the development of supervisor and family support could be a way to foster university student achievement. Moreover, it shows that perceived social support from these two sources is related to a higher level of motivation and engagement, which partially explain their effects on performance but is also valuable in itself as educational goals (self-confidence, higher order thinking).

These findings have some implication for university counsellors, lecturers, family and friends, co-workers, health professionals, policy makers and the government. In the light of these findings, university counselling centres might provide various programmes and strategies that will enhance students' social network. For instance, students can be taught effective interpersonal skills to enhance their social relationship with families, peers/friends, and school institution and also with lecturers and other authority figures in the university. Students could also be taught to be proactive, that is being able to get the most out of their social relationship by making time and effort for peer/friends and family. Students could

also take advantage of technology; technology makes it easier than ever before to stay connected with love ones faraway. This ensures that students are continually motivated to engage in academic related activities.

Family members especially parents should provide the necessary good and healthy conditions to make sure that students feel a sense of belonging, love and being appreciated in the family. When students feel a sense of recognition, and that they can get help or support from family members at any point in time in their life it makes them appreciate themselves and life experiences positively, thus leading to better academic engagement and achievement.

In addition, the government of the day and all policy makers should also ensure that the psychological needs of students are considered when it comes to policy formulation to regulate academic performance at the various levels. This would ensure that students have a positive and better academic engagement.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study contributes to existing literature on social support and academic achievement. The results of this study provide insight to how social and emotional development of students affect school achievement. Findings of this study are in line with the notion that social-emotional competence and school related perceived social support are crucial in student's success. The findings show that social support as one of the psychosocial needs of students contribute significantly to students' academic achievement through good wellbeing, serving as a motivator that drive students towards academic success and boost student's self believe and self-confidence. The findings also show that family and lecturer support have higher chances of improving students' academic achievement that the other sources of social support. The development of social-emotional competence in academic institutions is very necessary because it gives students wo do not possess these skills from home the chance to develop them in school

(Baker, 1999). The findings inform the various stakeholders such as family, lecturers, policy makers and the government to consider social support when it comes to academic policies and educational reforms. Basically, this study found out the exact aim it was intended to address, that is the impact of social support on students' academic achievement.

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