

## Malay Secondary School Students' Social Support Preferences: Implications for Support Network Interventions

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### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan mengenalpasti persepsi pelajar Melayu sekolah menengah bandar mengenai kepentingan 12 jenis sokongan sosial (SS) dan kepentingan 6 sumber SS yang signifikan dalam membantu mereka menghadapi masalah akademik. Usaha juga telah dibuat untuk meneliti perbezaan jantina mengenai persepsi tersebut. 164 orang responden (71 lelaki dan 93 perempuan) telah melibatkan diri secara sukarela. Data diperolehi melalui soalselidik. Kategori SS yang digunakan dalam kajian adalah berdasarkan instrumen Personal Support System Survey (Pearson, R.E., 1986). Keputusan kajian menunjukkan para responden inginkan pelbagai jenis SS sekiranya menghadapi masalah akademik. Mereka inginkan satu kombinasi sokongan berbentuk maklumat, emosi dan maklumbalas daripada orang lain. Bimbingan dikenalpasti sebagai SS yang terpenting. Persepsi pelajar mengenai tahap kepentingan setiap jenis SS turut berbeza mengikut jantina. Ibubapa dianggap sumber SS paling penting dalam menghadapi masalah akademik. Ibu pula didapati lebih penting daripada bapa. Dapatan kajian memberi implikasi berikut untuk membantu pelajar Melayu remaja menghadapi masalah akademik: intervensi berfokuskan SS perlu dipelbagaikan; para guru dan kaunselor perlu dilatih berunding dengan ibubapa mengenai masalah pelajaran anak mereka; sokongan daripada ibubapa lebih diinginkan oleh remaja Melayu berbanding sokongan dari individu lain; komunikasi di antara guru dan pelajar perlu dipertingkatkan; kajian lanjut perlu dijalankan untuk meneliti perbezaan keutamaan SS mengikut jantina.

### ABSTRACT

This exploratory study seeks to identify urban-Malay secondary school students' perceptions regarding the degrees of importance of twelve common social support (SS) types and six salient individual SS sources, in relation to an academic problem. The levels of importance/preference ascribed to the SS types and sources of SS were also examined for gender differences. 164 respondents (71 males and 93 females) voluntarily participated in the study. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire. The twelve categories of SS were derived from Richard E. Pearson's (1986) Personal Support System Survey. Results showed that subjects' preferences with respect to SS for academic problems are multifaceted. They desire a combination of informational, emotional and appraisal supports from others. Subjects rated 'guidance' as the most important supportive response should they experience academic problems. Perceptions regarding the levels of importance attached to each SS type also differed between gender. Students perceived their parents as the most important source of SS. Of their parents, mothers were regarded as more important. The findings suggest that to help Malay students with academic problems, SS-focused interventions need to be multifaceted, teachers and counselors need training in collaborating with parents regarding their children's academic difficulties, parental support is more preferred than support from others, student-teacher communication needs improvement. Gender differences in SS type preferences need further examination.

### INTRODUCTION

Studies focusing on upper secondary school students' (USS) concerns have revealed that the concerns or problems most commonly experienced by students are related to their school work and academic performance. For

example, Mustapa (1985) found that the four most frequently reported concerns in her study were: worrying about exams; not knowing effective study techniques; not spending enough time studying; and experiencing difficulty with mathematics. An earlier study by Zubir (1974)

also reported that most students are worried about exams and failure in school work. Both findings are supported by a more recent preliminary study conducted by Baba (1989).

Several other studies have been conducted to identify USS concerns (e.g. Mashur, 1987; Yuen, 1985; Leong, 1982). However, most of these studies were repetitious in that they stopped short at identifying problems. A few examined secondary school students' preferred sources of help in times of difficulties. Identification of areas of students' concerns does not generate much information regarding how school guidance personnel and concerned individuals can be more responsive to students' needs. It is logical that the next step forward is to identify the kinds of support students want and from whom they prefer to receive it.

An area of theory and research that can lead to a greater understanding of USS preferences regarding "support and help from others" is social support (SS) which can guide school personnel to develop psychoeducational programmes to support preferences and needs of students.

Social or interpersonal support is a multi-faceted construct which refers to those resources or socially supportive behaviors that a person, usually one who is in distress or facing difficulties, can obtain from others (Pearson, 1990). Alternatively, SS can be viewed as the ways by which others can express, verbally or in action, their support for those in distress.

Pearson (1986) has developed a comprehensive typology of socially supportive behaviours. The typology consists of 12 SS categories described as follows: Love (the care and attention from others); Encouragement (the positive expressions of confidence, positive reinforcement, and affirmation of your ability by others); Example (the model or example of how to handle situations set by others); Doing tasks (assistance in carrying out your responsibilities, for example, child care and doing errands); Companionship (the sharing of activities and sense of belongingness/togetherness); Acceptance (sense of being respected and understood); Guidance (advice, direction, spiritual guidance from others); Comfort (the reassurance, comfort, soothing of your concerns from those upon whom you can lean); Giving or loaning something that you need; Knowledge (the information, expertise or instruction on

how to do things or overcome a problem ); Honesty (honest feedback from others as they see and feel about you); Advocacy (defend or speak out for you or stand up for your interest/s). Research by Braunlich, Boeshaar, and Esperon (1985), and Baba (1989) have established the discreteness and comprehensiveness of these SS categories.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT AND STRESS COPING

Research has also shown that SS reduces or buffers the adverse psychological impact of exposure to stressful life events and ongoing life strains (Cohen and Wills 1985; Matheny *et al.* 1987; Thoits, 1986); enhances wellbeing and reduces hardship during stressful life transitions (Burke and Weir, 1978; Gottlieb, 1983); and enhances coping with major life changes and stressful conditions (Lakey and Heller, 1988). Aware of this impact on the stress-wellbeing relationship, experts in the helping professions have recognised SS as an important coping resource and a goal of formal and informal helping/supportive relationships.

SS theorists (e.g. Cohen and Wills, 1985; Pearson, 1990; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984) postulate that there are two ways in which SS operates as an interpersonal coping resource. Firstly, SS sustains an individual's health by gratifying basic affiliative needs, maintaining self-identity and enhancing self esteem. These health sustaining factors immunize and protect the individual from the ill effects of stress by influencing the individual's perception of confidence and personal control over stressful situations. Since the individual is already enmeshed in a network of supportive relationships s/he will be able to enlist network support to help overcome stressful situations. This overall beneficial effect of SS has been termed its "main effects". Even if individuals are not already enmeshed in supportive relationships, network members can be alerted, trained and mobilised to help "moderate" negative stress effects – hence the term "moderating" effects. These effects make SS network intervention strategies even more promising as an alternative to individual/group counseling with a professional helper – which may not be prevalent or considered opprobrious in our culture.

However, SS theorists consider that findings generated by the research to date are inconclusive and do not warrant the specific application of SS network intervention. They

claim that a crucial first step toward alliancing with and/or training network members to provide support is to identify those actions perceived as supportive in respect to specific stressful situations. They further recommend that SS be studied among subjects experiencing similar life concerns or problems. They suggest this approach because different situations call for different kinds of support from different persons.

The implication derived from SS theories is that by focusing on a homogeneous sample of persons with a similar life situation/s, more specific information regarding SS network intervention strategies could be generated. The decision to apply SS theory and research on USS problems is also in tandem with the emerging role of school counselors. The literature on secondary school students' problems using a situation-specific strategy as recommended by SS theorists is virtually nonexistent. Therefore, this study takes off from this premise. It begins by identifying a problem situation most commonly faced by the majority of USS and examines SS preferences within that stressful situation. Focus on academic problems is consistent with previous findings which have revealed that most USS are worried about performance in exams and have difficulties with school work.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

This study was designed to answer the following questions: (i) What is the perceived relative importance that urban Malay USS attach to the twelve common social support types when they are faced with an academic concern? (ii) Are male and female students different with respect to the degree of importance that they attach to each SS type? (iii) What is the perceived relative importance of salient persons such as father, mother, siblings, friends, guidance teachers and other teachers as sources of support? and (iv) Do male and female students differ regarding the degree of importance that they attach to each supporter? These perceptions of importance levels will indicate USS preferences for such SS types and supporters.

The decision to focus on one ethnic group within a locality conforms with the suggestion of theorists that SS studies should be conducted in a homogeneous sample as norms considered supportive in one culture may not be so in another.

The examination of gender differences is warranted as the exploration of the relationship may have important implications for the delivery of support services. Presently, the findings by Frank (1985) and Stokes and Wilson (1984) regarding gender and social support are inconclusive.

#### *Significance of the Study*

The findings of the study are intended to help counselor educators, guidance teachers, and others in the helping professions to identify the forms of support that need to be emphasized in support network oriented interventions.

It is also hoped that the findings will enable counselor educators to develop more culturally-relevant training materials for their counselor-trainees, particularly with respect to what is considered as supportive by Malay adolescent students. As of now, they are heavily reliant on theories and practices of guidance and counseling from non-Malaysian settings.

The study is also aimed at benefitting the students themselves since the possibility remains that the guidance teacher to pupil ratio will be extremely low despite efforts to train more school counselors. With such realities, it is important to maximize the usefulness of readily available, accessible and preferred support sources.

## **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Population and Sample*

The study focused on urban Malay upper secondary school students who attend regular government funded schools within Petaling district.

The sample consisted of 164 Form Four Malay students from two secondary schools in a mostly-Malay populated town within the Petaling district. This cluster sampling method is in keeping with recommendations made by SS theorists. There were 71 (43.3%) males and 93 (56.7%) female students. 55 students (34%) were from the Arts, 60 (36.6%) from the Science and 48 (29.3%) from Commerce streams. Most of the students (80.5%) lived in nuclear family households consisting of parents and siblings. Only 6% lived in households that included grandparents. A small percentage of students (7.9%), reported living with either an older sibling or a relative while the remaining 5.4%

lived in single parent households. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary.

#### *Instrumentation*

A survey questionnaire was constructed to gather information from subjects. The questionnaire consisted of the following sections: demographic information; a problem situation; a list of 12 common SS types (developed by Pearson, 1986) with its corresponding Likert scale of importance levels; a list of six salient supporters along with a Likert scale of their importance.

The problem situation presented to the subjects in the questionnaire read as follows: Suppose that you are experiencing difficulty in one or several important school subject/s (e.g. Math, English, Chemistry, etc.). A great deal of your difficulty resulted from your lack of knowledge regarding how to study for the subject effectively. You find that you cannot take good notes. You feel that your teacher is going much too fast. In short, you do not know effective study methods for this/these subjects.

There was substantiating evidence that this problem represented a prevalent concern at this educational level. In the questionnaire pretest, students interviewed were in general agreement that the problem is very typical for students like them. Also, results of this study showed that 99.4% of the subjects reported they had experienced a situation similar to the one presented. This result lends further support that the problem selected for the present study is typical for the population.

#### *Procedure*

The study was done in two phases. Actual data collection was preceded by a pilot study. The questionnaire was administered to respondents in their classrooms. Subjects were asked to rate how important the twelve categories of SS would be if they were to experience the stated problem. The scale to indicate the level of importance attached to each SS category (SS-Importance) ranges from a value of 1 (Very Important) to 5 (Of no importance). Guidelines for translation and backtranslation procedures provided by Brislin *et al.* (1973) were stringently followed in translating the SS categories into Bahasa Malaysia.

An internal consistency coefficient of .67 (Cronbach's coefficient alpha) obtained for the SS-Importance scale used in this study indicates

that the categories were homogeneously measuring SS as a single construct.

Subjects were also requested to rate the importance of the following individuals as sources of support: father; mother; siblings; friends; guidance teachers; and other teachers. These categories of salient supporters were based on previous research.

#### *Data Analysis*

The Statistical Analysis System (SAS) computer program was used to analyze the data collected. For Questions (i) and (iii), the means, standard deviations, and range (i.e., minimum and maximum ratings) for each SS type and supporter were determined to obtain a general picture of the relative importance students attached to each SS type and supporter, irrespective of gender.

To examine Questions (ii) and (iv) that is, if gender differences existed regarding the level of importance attached to each SS type, and supporter, Hotelling's  $T^2$ , a multivariate analog of the t-test, was conducted. The SAS computer software does not produce a Hotelling's  $T^2$  statistic but automatically transforms it into an F statistic. The F statistic reported in this study is Wilks's Criterion.

Hotelling's  $T^2$  represents a preliminary step in this multivariate procedure. Following any significant F value, univariate t-tests were conducted to determine which SS type and supporter category contributed to the overall significance.

## **RESULTS**

#### *Relative Importance of the 12 SS Types*

Table 1 shows the mean ratings, ranks and standard deviations for each SS category. Generally, students' perception of most of the SS categories averaged from important to very important, thus reflecting a preference for multiple forms of support when students face an academic problem.

Supplementary analyses using correlated t-tests were conducted to determine if top-ranking "Guidance" was significantly more important than "Knowledge" and "Acceptance". The choice of comparing the three most important SS kinds was arbitrary. The difference in means between "Guidance" and "Knowledge" approached significance, that is,  $t(163) = -1.87$ ,  $p = .06$  but the difference in means between "Guidance" and

TABLE 1  
Degree of importance attached to 12 SS categories:

SS category	M	(R)	SD
Love	1.79	(5)	.98
Encouragement	1.83	(6)	.86
Example	1.87	(8)	.96
Doing tasks for you	2.56	(12)	1.31
Companionship	1.68	(4)	.93
Acceptance	1.56	(3)	.71
Guidance	1.29	(1)	.63
Comfort	2.10	(9)	1.17
Giving/loaning	2.18	(11)	1.18
Knowledge	1.40	(2)	.76
Honesty	1.86	(7)	1.05
Advocacy	2.14	(10)	1.12

Note. (R) = rank

Lower numbers indicate greater importance.

“Acceptance” (third in rank of importance) was significant,  $t(163) = -3.84, p = .0002$ .

*Gender Differences in SS Preference*

Results show that overall the responses between males and females are significantly different in the importance levels they attached to the SS types,  $F(12,151) = 3.00, p = .0009$ . Specifically, females attached significantly greater preference for all SS types except for “companionship support.”

*Importance of SS from Different Supporters*

Table 2 shows the respondents' mean importance ratings for each type of supporter. The supporters listed included father, mother, siblings, friends, guidance teachers and regular teachers.

*Supplementary Analyses*

A correlated t-test was conducted to determine if the first-ranked supporter was significantly more important than the next. Results showed that “mother” was significantly more important than “father”,  $t(161) = -2.83, p = .005$ . “Father” was also found to be significantly more important

TABLE 2  
Importance of SS from six different supporters

Supporter Category	N	Mean	SD
Father	162	1.42	.76
Mother	162	1.26	.60
Siblings	163	2.32	1.16
Friends	164	1.96	.93
Guidance Teachers	164	2.00	1.07
Other Teachers	164	2.28	1.20

than “Friends”,  $t(161) = -5.57, p = .0001$ . But “Friends” were not significantly more important than “guidance teachers”. Again, the choice of comparing the three most important supporters was arbitrary.

*Perception of Importance Attached to Each Supporter: Gender Comparison*

Table 3 displays the mean level of importance that males and females attached to each supporter.

Mean ratings for “mother” and “father” ranked first and second, respectively, for both genders. The mean importance levels attached to the six supporters fell within the range of important to very important.

TABLE 3  
Importance attached to each supporter

Supporter	Mean	
	Females	Males
Father	1.32	1.56
Mother	1.22	1.33
Siblings	2.24	2.43
Friends	1.85	2.11
Guidance teachers	2.11	1.86
Other teachers	2.32	2.22

Results of the Hotelling's  $T^2$  showed that overall responses of males and females were not significantly different with respect to the importance attached to each supporter,  $F(6,152) = 1.68, p = .13$ .

In summary, several, rather than one particular SS type, were perceived as important by respondents. Females attached greater importance to all the SS types except for the

category “companionship”. Parents were regarded as the most important sources of preferred SS types. However, “mothers” were perceived as more important than “fathers” as a source of support.

## DISCUSSION

### *Students' Preference for Multifaceted Support*

The results indicate that when experiencing difficulties with their studies, urban Malay USS perceive it is important that they receive several SS types from others, leading us to conclude that their preference for support is multifaceted. This finding is consistent with the preliminary study conducted by Baba, (1989) in which it was found that most students facing particular problem/s reported receiving multiple rather than just one SS type, that is, students reported receiving varying combinations of emotional, appraisal, informational and material support types from others.

The above finding regarding a multifaceted support preference is also consistent with Pearlin's (1985) postulation that the type of SS or help needed may shift between the onset of a problem and its final resolution. Hence, a single problem could evoke the need for different kinds of support. In addition, study problems may be multifaceted or even intertwined with other problems such that students need various kinds of support from several persons.

The results also show that some SS types are more preferred than others. Specifically, students rated guidance and knowledge most important of all. In a broader sense, guidance and knowledge are forms of cognitive or informational support. The greater preference for these two SS types is consistent with the task required of individuals who are experiencing difficulties with their studies due to lack of knowledge regarding effective study techniques.

### *Gender Comparisons of SS Preferences*

Malay female USS are generally found to attach greater importance than males to all the SS types except “companionship”. This finding seems to reflect a general societal pattern, found across many cultures, in which males are socialized to be more self-reliant than females. The significant gender difference in regard to importance ascribed to each SS type in this study reflects the pattern of male and female socialization among

many Malays. Female children tend to be more restricted in terms of their freedom outside the house compared to males. Males generally have more freedom and use that freedom to be with male peers, engaging in informal play and recreation. Perhaps this is why companionship support is less preferred by females compared to males – it is a supportive exchange that requires some degree of social activities outside the house.

### *Parents as Most Preferred Supporter*

Students view their parents as the most important source of SS in handling an academic problem that would logically require specific technical information. And of their parents, mothers are preferred. Given that Guidance was described as “advice, direction, and spiritual guidance” in the present study, then, this supporter preference may reflect important elements specific to the Malay culture. Generally, “advice” or “nasihat” is an important and common form of support among Malays. Related to this, parents are important sources of advice, opinions, suggestions, and spiritual guidance in the Malay family. This cultural factor may explain this finding, and needs consideration in SS intervention programmes.

Nevertheless, the preference for mothers as supporters could also be explained by additional data gathered from the sample which indicate that less than thirty percent of subjects' mothers worked outside the home. Their apparent availability to children may explain the above pattern of supporter preference.

### *Importance of Other Supporters*

#### Friends

The literature on adolescence mostly states that this stage is marked by the importance of same age peers. Perhaps friends or peers are not rated as most important because the problem presented had important consequences for the students' future.

Adolescents usually prefer adults over peers when the problems experienced are more serious because they perceive adult helpers as more competent and helpful (O'Neil, 1980).

The results also show that a very high percentage of the respondents were either experiencing or had experienced the problem. Students may have perceived that since their peers are “in the same boat”, none is more experienced than the other in handling the

situation, and thus, could not be of much assistance.

#### Guidance Teachers

Unlike Frank's (1985) finding that formal helpers are least preferred, this study showed that guidance teachers are as important as friends for support with academic problems. Guidance teachers are also perceived as a more important source of support than other teachers and siblings. Although guidance and counselling as a helping modality is still very new in Malaysia, guidance teachers apparently are viewed as a relatively desirable source of advice, suggestions and opinions – perhaps by virtue of their job title.

#### Other Teachers

Students in the sample perceived their teachers as a relatively unimportant source of SS for the problem situation examined. Logically, one would expect that teachers would be more preferred sources of guidance and knowledge with respect to academic problems. Perhaps, the low preference for support with academic problems from teachers is because in urban areas, parents usually send their child to private tutorial centres after school hours. Hence, there are alternatives to sources of knowledge apart from school teachers. This low level of importance ascribed to teachers could also be related to problems in the current education system such as inadequate numbers of trained teachers, resulting in a high students'-teacher ratio. Determination of the specific basis for the relatively low preference attached to teachers' assistance regarding academic problems awaits future study.

#### Siblings

Siblings were the least preferred of the supporters listed. A closer examination of the data showed that many of the students sampled were either first born (52.4%) or few had an older brother (25%) or older sister (26.8%). Since most siblings were younger than the subjects in the study, they had not gone through the educational ladder, and thus were perceived as not being able to help, particularly with respect to academic concerns.

#### Implications

The finding that urban Malay students' SS type preference is multifaceted even with respect to a

single problem suggests that focussing solely on providing informational support will leave some of their preferences unmet. Casual observations and informal discussions held with guidance teachers from the subjects' schools reveal that usually students are given more homework and practice, special tutorial classes, extra classes on weekends, and seminars on methods of answering examination questions for certain school subjects to help them with exams. Although these responses are viewed as consistent with the major need of students facing academic difficulties, the importance of other kinds of support have not been simultaneously emphasized. Hence, school personnel, parents and other members of students' support network need to booster students' self confidence in overcoming academic stress by also providing emotional and appraisal support.

That female Malay USS preference for SS types is much greater than males' implies that school personnel and other network members (e.g., parents) should recognize the greater need of females, compared to males, for supportive interactions when they face difficulties with their studies. School personnel, in coeducational schools particularly, need to be sensitive to this difference so that the SS preferences of Malay female students are not regarded as equal, or similar, to those of their male counter parts.

Students' greater preference for parents as their source of important SS types suggests that school personnel need to collaborate with and, perhaps, train parents to help students overcome academic-related problems. This suggestion harmonises with Melnick and Fiene's (1990) finding that increased parental involvement in the education of their children directly improves their academic performance. Hence, instead of viewing parents as barriers in the educational and guidance process, school personnel can increase the quality of support available to students by enlisting parental help. Parental encouragement, advice, spiritual guidance and advocacy are much needed.

The teachers' role with regard to SS provision is also important since they are an appropriate source of knowledge. In this respect, teachers need to communicate to students that their support is available if students need help with academic problems. Perhaps teacher-student communication could be boosted by having one-

to-one teacher-student conferences frequently. Essential feedback, guidance, encouragement and other kinds of support from teachers can be given to students at such meetings. The success of such an effort, however, depends upon whether teachers know how to be supportive of their students. Given the kinds of support that students want for the academic problems examined in this study, efforts must be made to increase students' confidence in their teachers as being accessible, and competent sources of knowledge. Guidance teachers or counselors could play a major role as facilitators of student-teacher communication due to their training in human relations skills.

Related to the greater preference for parental support and the need to increase the teachers' role in helping students with academic problems, teacher and counselor training curricula should include developing teachers' and counselors' knowledge and skills in collaborating with parents. Guidance teachers/counselors especially need to be given such skills so that the school and parents can form a working alliance in helping students, particularly with regard to problems identified in this study.

Additionally, there need to be greater collaboration between school and family counselling departments so that counselors who work in schools can be versatile and competent in handling their clientele and vice versa. Helping professionals such as school and family counselors need such skills since research findings have indicated that increased parental involvement directly increases their child/rens' academic achievement.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study can be replicated to examine SS type and supporter preferences for other problems experienced by USS. It is probable that with more contrasting problems, greater differences due to gender would be observed concerning SS type and supporter preferences. Also, since Malaysia is a multiethnic society, the study needs to be replicated for other ethnic groups so that their needs are not overlooked by school personnel, parents, and other concerned individuals.

An effort should also be made to connect desired SS types to USS' most preferred sources of support for different problem situations. For

example, the same categories of SS could be presented to USS but in reference to what the respondents would like to receive from each parent. This information will enable parents to be more responsive to the SS needs of their children.

There are many ways to help students with academic difficulties. The main object of this study is to provide the basis for exploring how significant others can be more responsive to the SS needs of secondary school students in general, and Malay secondary school students in particular.

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