

The Longitudinal Relationship between Perceived Social Support and Academic Achievement

Introduction

School is stressful.

✓ The transition to post-secondary education involves numerous stressors, such as social isolation, academic pressure, financial difficulties and homesickness, psychological distress and health problems (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Hicks & Heastie, 2008).

Grades drop in university.

✓ The distress associated with post-secondary transition has a strong, negative effect on the academic achievement and post-secondary retention for freshman students (Hysenbegasi et al., 2005).

Social support as a protective factor.

✓ Theory suggests social support is a buffer against these stressors. Thus, perceived social support is thought to contribute to improved academic performance distally by decreasing the stress of academic life (Lahey & Cohen, 2000).

Hypotheses

H1: Grades will tend to decrease over time as students transition from high school to post-secondary education

H2: A higher level of perceived social support at age 15 will predict a less pronounced drop in grades in students transitioning to post-secondary education.

Method

Participants.

- ✓ Adolescents ($N = 10,445$) transitioning to university for the first time
- ✓ All were age 18 (60%) or age 19 (40%)
- ✓ Were randomly selected and nationally representative in terms of demographics

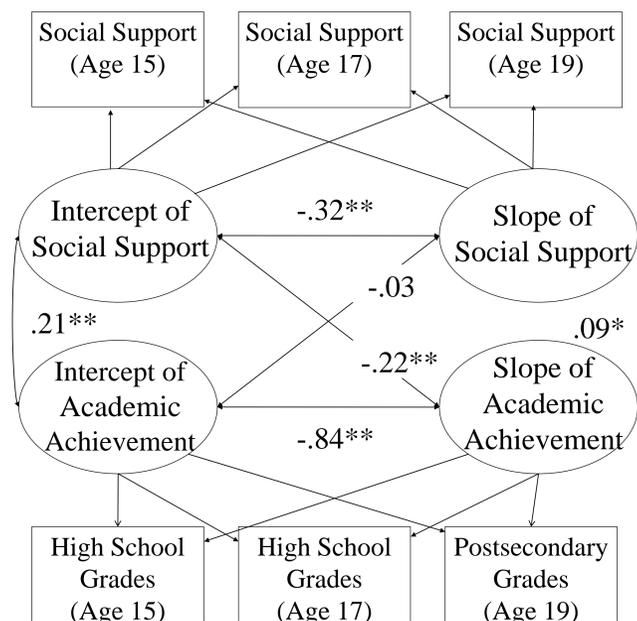
Materials.

- ✓ **Perceived Social Support.** Perceptions of how much social support one has available, if it were necessary. Used a modified 6-item short-form of the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona and Russell, 1987)
- ✓ **Self-Reported Grades.** High school grades at ages 15 and 17 were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (90% to 100%) to 7 (less than 50%). Age 19 grades were measured on a similar 6-point scale.

Procedure.

- ✓ Used an archival Statistics Canada dataset (Youth in Transition Survey).
- ✓ The survey population was created by selecting a random sample of schools in Canada, then selecting a systematic equal-probability sample of no more than 35 students from each school.
- ✓ Data were collected longitudinally across three cycles. During April and May of 2000 (age 15), 2002 (age 17) and 2004 (age 19).

Results: Bivariate Growth Curve



* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$;
 $\chi^2 = 79.33, p < .001$ CFI = .99; RMSEA = .03

Results: Key Points

- ✓ On average, individual grades decreased by about 1.3 percentage points every two years
- ✓ There is a small, positive correlation between social support & grades at age 15
- ✓ The larger high school grades at age 15 were, the greater the decline in post secondary grades 4 years later
- ✓ Change in grades was associated with change in social support over 4 years
- ✓ Higher perceived social support at age 15 predicts a more pronounced decline in individual academic achievement over time

Discussion & Conclusions

✓ Grades tend to decrease during the transition to post-secondary education for adolescents, supporting hypothesis 1.

✓ Post-secondary education appears to “level the playing field” in terms of academic achievement, with the highest-performing high-school students experiencing the greatest decrease in their grades.

✓ However, high levels of perceived social support at age 15 did not protect against declines in academic achievement over time, failing to support hypothesis 2.

✓ In sum, perceived social support appears to have no bearing on adolescents’ future academic performance, despite commonly held assumptions of its importance.

Full results published in:

Mackinnon, S. P. (in press). Perceived social support and academic achievement: Cross-lagged panel and bivariate growth curve analyses. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. doi: 10.1007/s10964-011-9691-1

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Acknowledgements

