



## Social support, stress, health, and academic success in Ghanaian adolescents: A path analysis



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the role psychosocial factors play in promoting the health and academic success of adolescents. A total of 770 adolescent boys and girls in Senior High Schools were randomly selected to complete a self-report questionnaire. School reported latest terminal examination grades were used as the measure of academic success. Structural equation modelling indicated a relatively good fit to the posteriori model with four of the hypothesised paths fully supported and two partially supported. Perceived social support was negatively related to stress and predictive of health and wellbeing but not academic success. Stress was predictive of health but not academic success. Finally, health and wellbeing was able to predict academic success. These findings have policy implications regarding efforts aimed at promoting the health and wellbeing as well as the academic success of adolescents in Ghana.

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### Introduction

The academic success of children does not occur within a vacuum, but rather is situated within nested environments characterised by dynamic and subtle influences. 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 hopeless, and feeling lonely which in turn had a negative effect on their daily life activities (Owusu, 2008). The psychosocial needs of adolescents play a critical role in their academic success. Several studies have demonstrated that social support has a positive effect on adolescents' health and wellbeing (Gini, Carli, & Pozzoli, 2009; Lindsey, Joe, & Nebbitt, 2010) and on their academic success (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009; Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010).

Conversely, stress has negative effects on health and wellbeing (Flouri & Kallis, 2011; Hjern, Alfven, & Ostberg, 2008) and on academic success (Alva & De los Reyes, 1999; Chung & Cheung, 2008; Flook & Fuligni, 2008). These findings also suggest that social support mitigates the deleterious effects of stress on health (Gayman, Turner, Cislo, & Eliassen, 2011) and academic success (Danielsen et al., 2010). Stress is known to be deleterious to health by promoting maladaptive behavioural coping responses (e.g. smoking, alcohol intake, binge eating). Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood (2000) assert that beliefs of perceived social support may reduce or even annihilate an emotional reaction to stressful situations and prevent or alter maladaptive

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behavioural response, and may also alleviate the deleterious effects of stress appraisal by providing a solution to a problem, either in terms of health or academic success.

In response to concerns that academic standards are falling in Ghana, policy makers have placed considerable emphasis on factors such as school feeding programmes, curriculum modification, and education reforms among others (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2003). Although these school-based factors may be positive for academic success, the psychosocial needs of adolescents, for whom these measures have been instituted, has received little attention in terms of research and policy formulation. Thus, the main purpose of this study was to explore the impact of social support, stress, and health on the academic success of Ghanaian adolescents.

#### *Social support, stress, and health*

Social support is a multidimensional construct comprising of the psychological and material resources available to individuals through their interpersonal relationships and it enhances an individual's ability to cope with stressful life events (Cohen, 2004) and their general health and wellbeing (Uchino, 2006) by influencing cognitions, emotions, behaviours and biological responses (Cohen et al., 2000). Research indicates that higher levels of social support play either a buffering or direct role in diminishing stress appraisal and response thereby decreasing distress or ameliorating health and wellbeing (Oliva, Jimenez, & Parra, 2009), albeit the mechanism involved in this process is equivocal (Lovallo, 2005; Uchino, 2006).

The association between social support and stress has been investigated for various aspects of adolescent health. Social support from family and friends has been found to be effective in protecting against mental health problems (e.g. Monroe & Harkness, 2005; Murberg & Bru, 2004; Suliman et al., 2009; West & Sweeting, 2003) and psychosomatic disorders (Gini et al., 2009; Hjern et al., 2008), while increasing engagement in physical activity (Beets, Cardinal, & Alderman, 2010), healthy eating habits (Kubik, Lytle, & Fulkerson, 2005) and decreased smoking (Scales, Monahan, Rhodes, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Johnson-Turbe, 2009).

#### *Social support, stress, and academic success*

Several studies have found that social support and stress have a strong influence on academic success. 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 (Domagała-Zyśk, 2006) and poor academic performance (Rothon et al., 2010). With regard to stress, Flook and Fuligni (2008) reported that high family related stress is associated with lower grade point average.

#### *Health and academic success*

Various aspects of health impact on the academic success of adolescents, including negative mood, feelings of low self-esteem and depression (DeSocio & Hootman, 2004), general mental health problems (Ding, Lehrer, Rosenquist, & Audrain-McGovern, 2009), and emotional intelligence (Parker et al., 2004). Negative thinking has also been found to lead to procrastination and eventually poor academic performance (Humensky et al., 2010).

Barriga et al. (2002) assert that somatic conditions impair and exacerbate attention problems that then have a concomitant negative impact on academic performance. Headaches causes adolescents to often miss school (Breuner, Smith, & Womack, 2004), adolescents who report that they did not get enough sleep were more tired during the day, having difficulty paying attention in school and getting lower grades (Noland, Price, Dake, & Telljohann, 2009). Adolescents who smoke very often are more likely to have low grades compared to their peers who do not smoke (Cox, Zhang, Johnson, & Bender, 2007; Diego, Field, & Sanders, 2003). Furthermore, MacLellan, Taylor, and Wood (2008) found that adolescents who reported better academic performance were also more likely to have a healthier diet.

Most of the studies that have examined the interrelationships between social support, stress, health, and academic success among adolescents have been conducted in western countries. Given that culture could have a strong influence in the perception of social support and stress, it is important to study how these variables influence academic success in other cultures. We are not aware of any other similar study that has been conducted using a sample of Ghanaian adolescents. The aim of this study is to examine how social support and stress influence the health and academic success of Senior High School adolescents. Based on the review of related studies, we hypothesise that social support will have a positive effect on both health and academic success, and a negative association with stress. Also, we hypothesise that stress will have a negative effect on both health and academic success, whereas health will have a positive effect on academic success.

## **Method**

### *Participants and procedure*

The sample of 770 second-year and third-year students was selected randomly from four Senior High Schools in Accra, Ghana. First-year students could not participate because at the time of data collection they had just received their admission

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