Original article

The impact of different sources of social support on academic performance: Intervening factors and mediated pathways in the case of master's thesis

L'influence de différentes sources de soutien social sur la réussite universitaire : facteurs intervenants et processus dans le cas du mémoire de fin d'études

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Academic failure and dropout are pervasive challenges at all levels of the education system. Research so far pointed out different aspects of this large phenomenon. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that social support is a key factor to foster learning and persistence. On the other hand, some other scholars have rather highlighted the role of student motivation and engagement itself in improving performance on academic tasks. In this article, we tested theoretical models that combine the two approaches in a whole process.
Aims. – We aimed at clarifying (1) the specific contribution of several sources of perceived social support to academic performance, and (2) the mediation role of motivation and engagement in the relationships between perceived social support and performance.
Method. – The sample consisted of 226 last year university students. Structural equation modeling analyses were used to test the hypothesized associations.
Results. – Structural equation modeling analysis revealed that institutional and supervisor support were associated with motivation, which in turn predicted greater behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Further, behavioral engagement was the unique contributor of academic performance at the master's thesis.
Conclusion. – The results clarify the specific contribution of different sources of perceived social support and underline the importance of the supervisor and the institution. They also underline the importance of considering different sources of perceived social support at the same time. Finally, theoretical assumptions concerning the mediational role of motivation were confirmed.

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RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. – L'échec et l'abandon des étudiants sont des défis importants pour de nombreux systèmes éducationnels. La recherche a mis en évidence différents aspects de ce large phénomène. D'un côté, certains chercheurs ont proposé que le soutien social soit un facteur clé pour favoriser l'apprentissage et la persistance. De l'autre, d'autres chercheurs ont souligné le rôle de la motivation et de l'engagement des étudiants dans l'amélioration de la performance dans des activités d'apprentissage. Dans cet article, nous avons testé des modèles théoriques qui combinent les deux approches dans un même processus.
Objectifs. – Nos objectifs étaient de clarifier (1) la contribution de différentes sources de soutien social sur la performance et (2) les effets médiationnels de la motivation et de l'engagement dans les relations entre le soutien social et la performance.
Méthode. – L'échantillon était composé de 226 étudiants en dernière année à l'université. Des analyses en équations structurelles ont été utilisées pour tester les associations supposées du modèle.

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Résultats. – Les analyses ont révélé que le soutien institutionnel et celui du superviseur étaient associés aux facteurs motivationnels qui, à leur tour, prédisaient un plus grand engagement comportemental, cognitif et émotionnel. En outre, l'engagement comportemental était le contributeur unique de performance académique au mémoire de fin d'études.

Conclusion. – Les résultats ont clarifié les contributions respectives de chaque source du support social, ont mis en évidence le rôle important de l'institution et du superviseur et ont confirmé les postulats quant aux effets médiateurs de la motivation et l'engagement.

Academic failure and dropout are pervasive challenges at all levels of the education system in most countries (OCDE, 2013). Research so far pointed out different aspects of this large phenomenon. On the one hand, some 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, & Govern, 2011; Robbins, Oh, Le, & Button, 2009). On the other hand, in consistence with the opinion of many teachers, some other scholars have rather highlighted the role of student motivation and engagement itself in improving performance on academic tasks, and collected empirical findings supporting this (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). These evidences highlighted one aspect at the time then. However, if we look at theoretical models approaching this topic, they tend to be more inclusive and postulate that the provision of social support nurtures students' motivation and engagement, which in turn facilitate performance (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Skinner et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1998) in a whole process.

Nowadays questions remain about (1) the specific contribution of several sources of social support to academic performance, and (2) the mediation role of motivation and engagement in the relationship between perceived social support and performance. Are some sources of social support more important than others for achievement? In order to reduce academic failure, is it more important to intervene on social support or on student motivation? Or could student motivation be sustained by fostering social support? Understanding these processes may help to identify the relevant targets for effective interventions. The purpose of the present study is to move forward in this direction by testing a conceptual inclusive model of the relations between student perception of support from family, peer, teacher and institution, motivation, engagement and academic performance. In the next sections, a closer look is given on these specific associations and on variables implicated.

1. Perceived social support and academic performance

While working on a learning task, students interact and/or work with different social partners: peers, family, supervisor/teacher and the institution in which the task is realized. Perceived social support corresponds to the simple perception that these actors are supportive. According to Weiss (1974), different types of support may be derived from relationships with others: guidance (advice and information), reliable alliance (tangible aid), attachment (expressions of caring and love), reassurance of worth (respect for abilities and personal qualities), and social integration (mutual interests). Consequently, social support is supposed to be a valuable resource for to cope with stress but also to achieve school or university requirements.

In another research field, motivational theorists (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Wentzel, 1998) have suggested that perceived

social support directly promote motivation and subsequent engagement in learning activities. According to them, supportive social partners favor the adoption of socially valued goals and objectives that motivate students to succeed and to behave in socially appropriate ways in educational contexts. In addition, Bandura (1997) suggested that social partners, through acts of verbal persuasion, increase students' motivation.

Regardless their theoretical backgrounds, two decades of research in academic contexts have found a consistent association between perceived social support on the one hand, and student motivation, engagement, or academic performance on the other hand (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Finn, 1993; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1998). Here follows a brief summary of these findings and some of their limitations.

1.1. Perceived supervisor/teacher support

The supervisor/teacher's support includes behaviors 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, Galand, Hospel, & Nils, 2014; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Roeser, Midgley, & Urban, 1996; Williams & Deci, 1996). In addition, teachers' provision of accurate feedback and suggestions, increase students' perceived ability and the performance in the end (Bandura, 1997) as well as intrinsic motivation (Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009).

1.2. Perceived family support

Supportive families provide students with positive schemata regarding oneself. According to Sarason, 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. Studies have shown that perceived family support increases students' perceived ability (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011; Schunk & Pajares, 2009; Torres & Solberg, 2001), students' positive value attributed to learning tasks, their engagement (Reynolds & Clements, 2005) and their achievement during undergraduate studies (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994).

1.3. Perceived 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' motivation and engagement in learning activities and their performance (Robbins et al., 2004; Torres & Solberg, 2001). In addition, Tinto (1997) suggested