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# EXPLORING ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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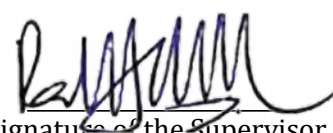
  
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Thank You.





## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and enlist factors of academic stress among primary school students. A qualitative exploratory research which utilized focus group interviews as a mean of collecting data was carried out. A total of 80 primary school students were selected from two public primary schools in Kuala Lumpur and one private primary school in Selangor. Students were divided into groups of 10 students each for focus group interviews. The data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results from analysis revealed six superordinate themes of academic stress among primary school students; (1) Teachers related stress, (2) Family and home environment related stress, (3) School related stress, (4) Stress arise from hectic schedule, (5) Stress due to excessive leisure activities and (6) Peers related stress. There were also fourteen sub-themes. As a conclusion, some of the academic stress issues experienced by primary school students were common issues faced by students in other levels of education. However, there were also a few academic stress issues that were unique to primary school students due to the differences in the school environment. The implication of this study is that the themes can be used to develop an academic stress questionnaire specifically for primary school students.





## **MENEROKAI STRES AKADEMIK DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH RENDAH**

### **ABSTRAK**

Kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk meneroka, dan menyenaraikan faktor-faktor stres akademik dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah rendah. Satu kajian kualitatif penerokaan yang menggunakan temu bual kumpulan fokus sebagai kaedah untuk mengutip data dijalankan. Seramai 80 orang pelajar sekolah rendah telah dipilih dari dua buah sekolah rendah awam di Kuala Lumpur dan satu sekolah rendah swasta di Selangor. Pelajar dibahagikan kepada kumpulan yang mengandungi 10 pelajar untuk temu bual kumpulan fokus. Analisis Fenomenologi Tafsiran (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) digunakan untuk menganalisis data kajian. Hasil kajian mendedahkan enam tema superordinate stres akademik dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah rendah; (1) stres berkaitan guru, (2) stres berkaitan keluarga dan persekitaran rumah, (3) stres berkaitan sekolah, (4) stres dari jadual harian yang padat, (5) Stress kerana aktiviti masa lapang yang berlebihan dan (6) stres berkaitan rakan sebaya. Terdapat juga empat belas sub-tema. Kesimpulannya, beberapa isu stres akademik yang dialami oleh pelajar sekolah rendah adalah isu biasa yang dihadapi oleh pelajar dalam peringkat pendidikan lain. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat beberapa isu stres akademik unik yang hanya dialami oleh pelajar sekolah rendah kerana perbezaan persekitaran sekolah. Implikasi kajian ini adalah semua tema yang didapati boleh digunakan untuk membina soal selidik stres akademik khas untuk pelajar sekolah rendah.





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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
EPRD	Educational Planning and Research Division

## APPENDIX LIST

- A Open-ended Questions
- B Focus Group Interviews Transcript
- C EPRD Approval Letter



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces about the study. There are nine sections in total included in this chapter. The first section introduces the background of the study. The second section states the problem statement.

Research questions and objectives of the study are included in the third and fourth sections. The fifth section explains the significance of the study followed by the definition of academic stress in the sixth section. Theoretical approach used in this study; Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is described in the seventh section. Finally, conceptual framework is shown in the eighth section.



## 1.2 Background of study

Psychological stress refers to a particular kind of relationship between a person and an environment. Stress arises when an individual perceives that it is hard to cope with the demands being made on them or threats to their wellbeing (Lazarus, 1990).

It was reported that overall stress levels had increased since 2014 (American Psychological Association, 2016). People reported that they are experiencing extreme stress levels and that the stress levels are higher than what they believe is healthy. Family responsibilities were found to be the most stressful event for most people followed by personal health concerns and health problems affecting the family.

Stress was experienced by almost all people in all ranges of ages. On average, younger adults reported higher stress levels, and are more likely than older generations to report that their stress has increased in the past year. While they are also more likely than older generations to engage in stress relief activities, they are more likely to say they do not feel they are doing enough to manage their stress (American Psychological Association, 2016). Moreover, Dema (2005) added that the stress level is lower among older age group of people compared to younger age group of people. People age ranging from 15 years old to 24 years old especially showed the highest stress level than other age groups. Meanwhile, 23.2% of school children reported on having mild stress and 8.7% of school children experienced severe stress (Fernandez-Baena, Trianes, Escobar, Blanca & Munoz, 2015). In Malaysian context, about one





third of students were found to be under stress (Yusoff, Ahmad Hamid, Rosli, Zakaria, Che Rameli, Abdul Rahman, Abdul Rahim & Abdul Rahman, 2011).

Students are especially vulnerable to experience stress. The main source of stress among students was found to be intrapersonal and academic related. Intrapersonal stress includes the death of a family member and relationship problems. Meanwhile, low grades, time management and missed classes were the sources of problems in promoting academic stress among students (Negga, Applewhite & Livingston, 2007).

According to Wilks (2008) academic stress is the product of a combination of academic related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual. Previous researches revealed that the major source of students' stress was in fact academic related issues (Negga et al., 2007; Yusoff et al., 2011; Dema, 2015). Students are reported to experience high level of stress due to workload, pressures, long hours of study and financial difficulties (Yumba, 2008). Ross, Niebling and Heckert (1999) added that the intrapersonal sources such as changes in sleeping habits, lack of vacations or breaks, changes in eating habits, having new responsibilities and changes in social activities also contributed to the stress levels experienced by students. Students' academic stress also arises from their self-expectations and other people's expectations on them regarding their concerns on personal and school related issues (Huan, See, Ang & Har, 2008). Various studies have also found gender differences in academic stress. Female students showed relatively higher level of stress compared to male students (Huan et al., 2008; Yumba, 2008; Chothani, 2014; Dema, 2015).





Additionally, assessments and examinations are crucial in determining the performance of the students in school. They reflect students' performance in school. As such, it is not surprising for the students to experience a high level of stress during these periods. In fact, Dema (2015) found that students showed the highest level of stress during examinations and peak assessment periods. Additionally, Nandamuri and Gowthami (2011) have also found that assessments are one of the stressors for academic stress experienced by students. Students are reported to feel stressful as they are trying to meet deadlines and getting good grades.



Apart from that, curriculum and instruction factors such as regular attendance for class work, achieving academic goals and keeping up with regular reading and learning all materials were found to be largely responsible for students' stress. On the contrary, teamwork and placement such as interviews and future job location issues were found to be a minor source of stress among college students (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011).

The medium of instruction used in school may also affect the students' academic stress level. Schools in Malaysia use local language (Malay language) in some classes while other classes use English. The usage of another language which is not the students' native language, might be stressful for the students as they struggle to understand or grasp the concept that has been taught in class. Chothani (2014) demonstrated that the medium of instruction contributed towards the enhancement of stress among students. Students who are placed in a local language usage schools appeared to be experiencing less academic stress and are well adjusted compared to students who are placed in a foreign language medium schools (Chothani, 2014).





Students who experience high level of academic stress face many problems throughout their life in school and are more prone to having mental health issues and behavioral maladjustments (Ang & Huan, 2006; Barrett & Heubeck, 2000; Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015). Furthermore, academic stress will affect the academic achievement and performance of the students in school. Higher level of academic stress significantly results in lower academic achievement and performance (Shakir, 2014).

Major life events in students' life and daily hassles such as school work, teachers and home-related issues faced by students make a major contribution to students' academic stress and conduct problems in school. On the contrary, uplifts (daily experiences appraised as positive) experienced by students could reduce these problems (Barret & Heubeck, 2000).



According to Fernandez-Baena et al. (2015), higher number of stressors experienced by students affect the students' social adaptation. Students who face higher number of stressors in their life are more prone to exhibit socially maladaptive behaviors such as aggression and inhibition.

Even though various past researches have shown that academic stress contributes to many problems in students' life, academic stress is not necessarily always bad. While high levels of academic stress may lead to various problems, however, a moderate level of academic stress is helpful for students to enhance their learning and having a more sustainable and prosperous life. Without any stress at all, students would lose motivation to do anything in life. Therefore, moderate level of stress is essential to motivate students to study and achieve their optimum performance. In fact, Yerkes and Dodson (1908) demonstrated that individuals under



low and high level of stress learn the least while those under moderate level of stress learn the most.

### 1.3 Problem statement

This current study focuses on exploring academic stress among primary school students. Academic stress has been one of the popular topics of research since long before. Despite the overflowing researches on academic stress, majority of them concentrates more on high school, college and university student population (Dema, 2015; Huan et al., 2008; Hussain, Kumar & Husain, 2008; Kaplan, Liu & Kaplan, 2005; Lin & Chen, 2009; Ross et al., 1999; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011). While there are only a few numbers of researches that studied stress in general among primary school students (Barrett & Heubeck, 2000; Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015), less is known that specifically study the academic stress.

Middle childhood is a period of significant growth and development. It is the time when children move from home into wider social contexts that strongly influence their development. Children's development during this period is driven by basic psychological needs to achieve competence, autonomy and relatedness. They seek opportunities to master and demonstrate new skills, to make independent decisions and control their own behavior, and form a good relationship with peers and adults outside the family (Eccles, 1999).



According to Erik Erikson, middle childhood is a time when children develop a ‘sense of industry’ and learn to cooperate with their peers and adults. The involvement in formal schooling and organized activities that begins during these years introduces children to new social roles in which they earn social status by their competence and performance. Failure to master the skills in these new settings will lead to what Erikson called a ‘sense of inferiority,’ which can lead to long-lasting effects on children’s intellectual, emotional and interpersonal skills (as cited in Santrock, 2011). In fact, Cole (1991) stated that children who perceive themselves as incompetent in academic, social or other domains during their elementary school years showed higher level of depression and social isolation. Yet, this population receives less attention in the literature compared to adolescence and young adults.



Currently, sources of academic stress among children in this development stage are still not well-explored. Students in primary school experience different environment and educational system from that of high schools, colleges and universities. Therefore, different kinds of academic demands are being made on them. Furthermore, students in primary school may have concerns that differ from students from high schools, colleges and universities (Huan et al., 2008; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011; Fernandez-Naena et al., 2015). It has been reported that stress varied across years in school and students in different years respond differently to stressors (Misra, McKean, West & Russo, 2000; Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015). Therefore, this current study aims to explore academic stress and determine its issues among primary school students.



## 1.4 Research questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. What are the domains of academic stress experienced by primary school students?
2. What are the factors affecting academic stress among primary school students?

## 1.5 Objective of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore academic stress among primary school students.

1. To explore the domains of academic stress of primary school students from focus group.
2. To enlist the factors affecting academic stress among primary school students.

## 1.6 Significance of the study

The subject of stress has long been studied by various researchers and it was shown that younger generation has the population with the highest level of stress (American Psychological Association, 2016). Students are especially prone to stress mainly arose from academic related issues (Negga et al., 2007; Dema, 2015). Various past researches have studied the sources of

academic stress and found that students experience various issues in school such as workload, assignments, classes, examinations and grades (Yumba, 2008; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011; Dema, 2015). Apart from that, other problems such as financial difficulties (Yumba, 2008) and intrapersonal sources play a major role in inducing stress among students (Ross et al., 1999; Negga et al., 2007). However, these researches had only been studied using a sample of high school, college and university students. Current study will be a significant endeavor to explore and highlight the issues affecting academic stress among primary school students.

This study is attempting to determine the factors of academic stress from the perspective of the school children themselves instead of adults such as teachers' and parent's perspectives. Therefore, an interview session with focus groups will be planned in order to get information regarding the issues related to school children's academic stress. Focus group is selected as a means of determining the domain of academic stress because of a few benefits it provides. The first one is a focus group that could provide a better insight into how people think and deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied. The group interaction between members during focus groups may encourage participants to make connections to various concepts through discussions. Therefore, data collected in the focus group interview with participants who are familiar with the concept can help enrich and develop what has been identified on concept (Tilden, Nelson & May, 1990).

By understanding the sources of academic stress, teachers and counselors will be able to plan and carry out suitable interventions. Students will be able to learn on how to cope with stress properly depending on the sources of the academic stress. Thus, preventing various

problems from arising such as mental health issues, behavior maladjustments and promoting better achievement and performance in school.

Various past researches had shown that high level of academic stress is associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies (Yadusky-Holahan & Holahan, 1983; Misra & McKean, 2000; Ang & Huan, 2006). Furthermore, high level of academic stress also results in various behavior maladjustment such as aggression and inhibition (Barrett & Heubeck, 2000; Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015). Students with high level of academic stress also generally shows lower adjustment level (Hussain et al., 2008; Chothani, 2014). Shakir (2014) added that academic stress affects students' academic achievement and performance. On the other hand, implementations of coping strategies help reduce students' academic stress (Compas, Malcarne & Fondacaro, 1988) and better adjustments (Abdullah, Elias, Uli & Mahyuddin, 2010). Thus, they help in promoting better achievement and performance of students.

Finally, the academic stress issues found in this study can serve as parameters to explore for further research regarding the academic stress students experienced in their school. It was no doubt that the findings of this study will be a significant help for researchers to endeavour academic stress issues among primary school students.



## **1.7 Definition of variable**

Conceptual definition of academic stress is explained in the following section. Conceptual definition is the underlying understanding of something that is necessary to attain before understanding how it is used or applied. Basically, it gives meaning of a concept.

### **1.7.1 Conceptual definition of academic stress**

Stress refers to a particular kind of relationship between a person and environment. Stress arises when an individual perceives that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their wellbeing. In other words, stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources (Lazarus, 1993).

According to Wilks (2008), academic stress is the product of a combination of academic demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual. Academic stress happens when the mental pressure installed onto a person due to excessive demands being made and it affects the person's performance and functioning in school.

## 1.8 Theoretical approach

Theoretical approach that was chosen appropriate for this study is Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. This model proposed by Lazarus (1993) is a model of psychological processes involved in stress. The model is further explained in the following section.

### 1.8.1 Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was proposed by Lazarus (1993). Stress is a result of a dynamic, transactional relationship between the person and their environment from which stressors arise (Lazarus, 1993). Stress is considered to be a transactional phenomenon. Transaction implies that stress is neither in the environmental input nor in the person, but reflects the conjunction of a person with certain motives and beliefs with an environment whose characteristics pose harm, threats, or challenges depending on these person's characteristics. Transaction also implies process. The stress relationship is not static. Instead, it is constantly changing as a result of the continual interplay between the person and the environment (Lazarus, 1990).

While facing stressful situations, a person will first appraise the stressful events and apply coping strategies. In fact, the degree of stress reaction depends on a person's appraisal and coping. Therefore, when faced with a stressor, a person will evaluate the potential threat. This is called primary appraisal. Primary appraisal is a person's judgment about the significance

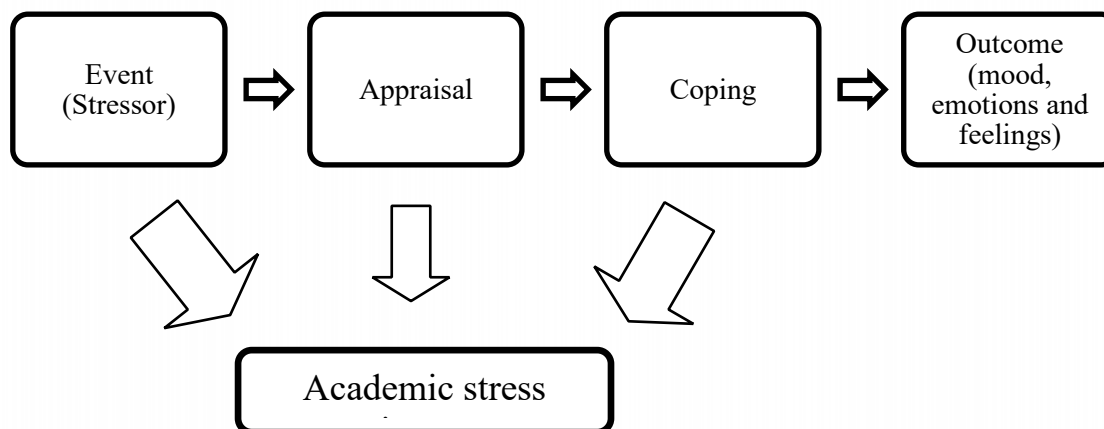
of an event as stressful, positive, controllable, challenging or irrelevant. Facing a stressor, secondary appraisal follows. Secondary appraisal is the evaluation of the controllability of the stressor and a person's coping resources. A person decides what can be done to reduce the feelings of stress during secondary appraisal (Lazarus, 1993).

Once a person has appraised a transaction as stressful, coping process takes place in order to manage the troubled person-environment relationship (Lazarus, 1990). Altering circumstances, or how the stress is interpreted, to make them more favorable is an effort called coping. In other words, coping efforts are the actual strategies used to mediate primary and secondary appraisals (Lazarus, 1993). Lazarus (1993) emphasized coping as a process where coping is a person's efforts in thoughts and actions to manage specific demands appraised as overwhelming. Coping depends on appraisal of whether anything can be done to change the situation. Problem-focused coping predominates if appraisal says something can be done. It puts attention on the issue and seeks to fix the problem and possibly prevent from recurring. Meanwhile, if an appraisal finds that nothing can be done, emotion-focused coping predominates. Emotion-focused coping seeks just to reduce the stress (Lazarus, 1993).

## 1.9 Conceptual framework

In order to explore the issues of academic stress among primary school students, focus group interview was used to collect data. During focus group interview, students shared their

experiences and issues in their school and life and how it has contributed towards their emotion and distress.



*Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework of the study*

## 1.10 Summary

Stress happened when a person finds themselves to be in a state of incapable of coping with demands, threats or challenges (Lazarus, 1993). Students were especially vulnerable to stress. Stress among students were found to be majorly caused by academic (Negga et al., 2007). Academic stress is the product of a combination of academic related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Wilks, 2008). Despite being a popular topic of research, academic stress among primary school children population received less attention from researchers. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the academic stress and its issues among primary school students.