

# Environmental Support and Students' Involvement in Improving Soft Skills of Secondary School Students

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**Abstract-** This study aims to identify the environmental support and students' involvement in improving the students' soft skills based on the types of schools. Environmental support refers to teacher support, peer support and parental support. Students' involvement is examined in terms of learning in the classroom, social interaction in the school environment and co-curricular activities. Environmental support and students' involvement lead to soft skills that are higher order thinking skills, social and interpersonal skills, leadership skills and problem-solving skills. A survey is conducted by using questionnaire to collect data. The sample was chosen randomly, involving a total of 1600 form four students. It is divided into four zones of schools named North Zone, South Zone, East Zone and Central Zone of Peninsular Malaysia. Data analysis involves descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. It was analysed by using Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24. The descriptive analysis is used to obtain the frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Cronbach Alpha coefficient value is between 0.896 and 0.965. The results show that environmental support, students' involvement and soft skills are at moderate level. Pearson correlation analysis portrays significant relationship between environmental support and soft skills towards the students' involvement. Research implications show that environmental support and student engagement are at a satisfactory level in improving student's soft skills. Hence, various efforts, activities and programs need to be tailored to the needs of the students to enhance the soft skills among students.

**Index Terms-** Environmental support, Students' involvement, Soft skills.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental support is a catalyst in mobilizing the spirit of students to participate in learning activities as well as school adaptation. Teacher support, parents and peers give influence to the construction of student involvement. The choice of teachers on the subject matter, classroom activities and the application of soft skills also affects the involvement of students whether they can appreciate and develop what has been learned in school. Parents who are concerned about their children's desires and aspirations will always support, motivate and stimulate what they aspire to and help in improving the student's soft skills (Anisa Saleha, 2015 & Haslina Md Yunus, 2015).

Soft skills should be encouraged in self-development of students. Students must be equipped with creative and critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, initiative, ethical and cultured lifelong learning (Marlina et. al., 2011). In secondary education, students are required to apply soft skills in order to acquire it for future endeavours. In other word, students' learning aspects need to be addressed so that the circumstances of academic and moral disability among students can be overcome. As a result, it will enhance the soft skills and the academic achievement of students (Supian Hashim, 2010).

This paper discusses about environmental support and student involvement in improving students' soft skills. The soft skills cover four components, namely higher order thinking skills, social skills and interpersonal skills, leadership skills and problem-solving skills as illustrated in the following diagram:

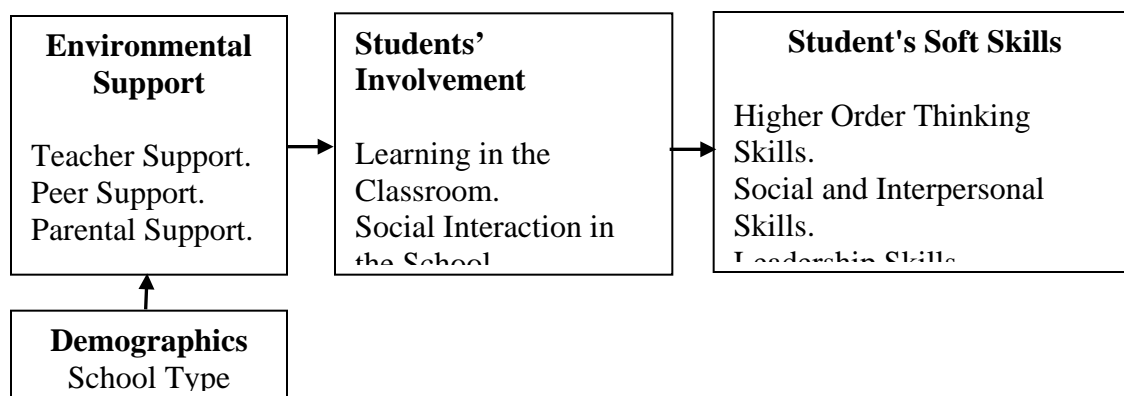


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Microstructure layer of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1979), Putnam's Social Capital (2000) and PPM Student Aspiration Model (Ministry of Education, 2013)

### Problem Statement

The level of student engagement in school linked to the support of student environments named as teacher support, peers and parents. A good construction of learning environment and clear expectations will enhance student's engagement and soft skills (Anisa Saleha, 2015 & Haslina Md Yunus, 2015). In contrast, weak environment support creates various problems affecting student behaviour such as emotional changes which draw the feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and boredom characteristics within students. As a result, the students will possess inferior personality characteristics and become silent, easily offended, low motivated hence leading to unfavourable academic achievements (Habibah Elias et al., 2002; Yahya Buntat et al., 2010; Mohd Asran, 2011; Tan Swee Chen et al., 2013). In a word, the schools need to be proactive in addressing this phenomenon.

An active involvement of students in co-curricular also affects students' soft skills. In the meantime, there are less contributions of schools into the improvement of soft skills during student enrolment (Wilhelm et al., 2002). Soft skills need to be integrated in the curriculum and co-curriculum. A competent student need to acquire the basic skills in order to synchronize the soft skills (Martinez, 2005). Therefore, a constructive plan by the school in addition to the significance of stakeholders' view are important to highlight the soft skills applied to earlier enrolment.

### Objectives of the study

The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the environment support level in terms of teacher support, peer support and parental support.
2. Determine the degree of students' involvement in learning in classroom, social interaction in school environment and co-curricular activities.
3. Determine the level of soft skills from the aspects of higher order thinking skills, social and interpersonal skills, leadership skills and problem-solving skills.
4. Identify the relationship between environmental support and students' involvement.
5. Identify the relationship between students' involvement and soft skills.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study design and Sampling

A survey is conducted by using a complete questionnaire to collect data. In this study, a stratified random sampling

technique is used to select the sample of the study. The population of the study is comprised of 1600 students of Form 4 students. The sample is divided into four zones of schools named North Zone, South Zone, East Zone and Central Zone of Peninsular Malaysia. In this study, stratified random sampling technique is used due the scattered population in each district.

### Data Collection Tools

The questionnaire used was developed according to the study needs. Respondents will be given five choices based on Likert scale (1-5); Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Less Agree (3) Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5). Pilot study was conducted to determine the validity and reliability of the research instrument. Cronbach Alpha coefficient value is between 0.896 and 0.965.

### Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis involves two types of statistics; descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. It was analysed by using Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24. The descriptive analysis was used to obtain the frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation used to describe the overall level of environmental support, students' involvement and student's soft skills. Pearson correlation analysis was used to identify the relationship between environmental support and soft skills towards the students' involvement. The significant level is 0.05.

## III. RESEARCH DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

### a) Environmental Support

Table 1 Level of environmental support

No	Environmental Support	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	Teacher support	3.645	0.519	medium high
2	Peer support	3.595	0.580	medium high
3	Parental support	3.569	0.538	medium high
	Overall score	3.603	0.437	medium high

In general, Table 1 shows the level of environmental support from the aspect of teacher support with the highest mean value (M = 3.645 and SD = 0.519). It is followed by peer support (M = 3.595 and SD = 0.580) and parental support (M = 3.569 and SD = 0.538) each have a mean value at moderate high level. In summary, the teacher support has the highest level compared to peer support and parental support. The level of environmental support among respondents is at moderate high (M = 3.603 and SD = 0.437).

**Table 2 Level of Student Involvement**

No	Student Involvement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	Learning in the classroom	3.641	0.571	medium high
2	Social interaction in the school environment	3.568	0.515	medium high
3	Co-curricular activities	3.472	0.532	medium high
	Overall score	3.560	0.539	medium high

Students' involvement is measured based on learning in the classroom, social interaction in the school environment and cocurricular activities. It shows that the level of students' involvement score is at moderate high (M = 3.560 and SD = 0.539). According to the Table 2, the dimension of learning in the classroom at moderate high (M = 3.641 and SD = 0.571). While, the dimension of social interaction in the school

environment is at moderate high (M = 3.568 and SD = 0.515). Finally, co-curricular activities dimension is also at moderate high (M = 3.472 and SD = 0.532). To conclude, the dimension of learning in the classroom hold the highest level compared to social interaction in the school environment and co-curricular activities.

**Table 3 Level of Students' Soft Skills**

No	Students' Soft Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	Higher Order Thinking Skills	3.560	0.619	medium high
2	Social and Interpersonal Skills	3.716	0.601	medium high
3	Leadership Skills	3.553	0.586	medium high
4	Problem-solving skills	3.558	0.595	medium high
	Overall score	3.597	0.518	medium high

In this study, the level of students' soft skills is measured based on higher order thinking skills, social and interpersonal skills, lead skills and problem-solving skills. In general, the students' soft skills (M = 3.597 and SD = 0.518) is at moderate high level. Based on the Table 3, students' soft skills in social and interpersonal skills has the highest mean value (M = 3.716 and SD = 0.611). It is followed by higher order thinking skills (M = 3.560 and SD = 0.619), problem-solving skills (M = 3.558 and SD = 0.595) and leadership skills (M = 3.553 and SD = 0.586) respectively.

**Table 4 Pearson correlation coefficients between environmental support and students' involvement**

Domain	Students' Involvement		Interpretation
	R	Sig.	
Environmental support	0.701	0.000	Strong

\*\* p <0.01

According to the Table 4, Pearson correlation analysis reported that there is a significant relationship between environmental support and the students' involvement with the value (r = 0.701) and sig = 0.000 (p <0.01). The strength of the relationship is strongly positive. In a word, it showed that there is a significant relationship between environmental support and the students' involvement. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected.

**Table 5 Pearson correlation coefficients between students' involvement and soft skills**

Domain	Students' Involvement		Interpretation
	R	Sig.	
Soft skill	0.723	0.000	Strong

\*\* p <0.01

Pearson correlation analysis as shown in Table 5 shows that there is a significant correlation between students' involvement and soft skills of high school student with value (r = 0.723) and sig = 0.000 (p <0.05). The strength of the relationship is strongly positive. In overall, there is a significant relationship between the students' involvement and the students' soft skills. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Environmental support affects the students' involvement in various activities in the school to enhance students' soft skills. Schools should always create a competent and holistic human capital internationally. Such skills need to be developed and nurtured throughout the schooling process and integrated into classroom activities. The Ministry of Education's wishes through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes on empowerment of the soft skills among students. The System Aspiration targets the effort to empower the students' academic achievement as outlined in the National Education Philosophy.

Therefore, without fails, all parties should provide supports and opportunities for students to engage in various activities in a way to enhance the students' soft skills.

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