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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING STYLE AND
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONGST MALAYSIAN
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

**BY
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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study of Malaysian secondary school students' approaches to learning and relates to academic achievement in the Principles of Accounts subject. The aim of the study is twofold. Firstly, to identify approaches to the learning of Malaysian secondary school students in the Principles of Accounts subject. Secondly, to investigate the relationship between approaches to learning and academic achievement. The sample of this study comprised seventy-five Form Four students who were taking Principles of Accounts. The students were from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Tun Dr. Ismail, which is a 'bestari' school. The students' approaches to learning were identified using 18-items questionnaire taken from the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) developed by Newstead (1992). There were three approaches to studying measured by the ASI. They were achieving, reproducing, and meaning orientation. The achieving orientation relates to obtaining a specific qualification that contains items relating to organized study methods, competitiveness, and hope for success, which is a surface approach. The reproducing orientation relates to syllabus-boundness, attempts to memorize, and extrinsic motivation, which is a surface approach. The meaning orientation is looking for meaning, motivated by interest in topics and courses, intrinsic and academic motivation, which is a deep approach. The students' academic achievements were based on their performance in a Form Four Principles of Accounts mid-semester 2000 examination. The findings reveal that there is no significant difference in the learning styles of students according to their family social status as represented by father's education. The results of the study showed statistically significant evidence that scores on the achieving and meaning approaches correlated with academic performance ($r=0.301$ and $r=0.404$ respectively). There is no relationship in the academic achievements of students according to family social status as represented by father's education. The study also revealed that except for the reproducing orientation, all other variables i.e. achieving and meaning orientation were statistically significant in their relationship to academic achievement. There is statistically significant evidence that differences in the academic achievements of students vary according to learning styles represented by achieving and meaning orientation.

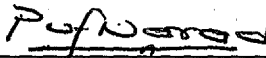
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ACHIEVEMENT AMONGST
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SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project paper is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by reference notes and a bibliography is appended.

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Dedicated to

My dearest husband, Burhanuddin Ab. Ghani,

daughter, Halaa Burhanuddin

sons, Anas Burhanuddin & Ammar Burhanuddin

for being alongside with me

throughout this one year study of

Master of Management

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Education is an important factor in developing countries. The Malaysian Government has invested a large sum of money to make the country a center of education excellence. With regard to this, students as the next generation play an important role in the development of the country.

The government wishes the society to be a knowledgeable society in line with the concept of the K-economy (Knowledge Economy). This implies that a good society is a learning society. Students can be considered as the human resources of our country. This means we need to fully understand the learning characteristics of students in Malaysia.

There are many research studies on learning approaches of students especially in higher education (Sadler-Smith, 1996, Newstead, 1992, Biggs, 1989, Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Recently, Taylor and Maliah (1999) in their study on undergraduate accounting students and their instructor investigate the extent of the gap between students' learning approaches and the instructors' teaching orientations towards facilitating these approaches. The subsequent employability of accounting graduates, it

was contended, depends in part on the nature and extent of this gap. The students learning approaches in the study were measured on two dimensions i.e. deep and strategic approaches, drawn from Tait and Entwistle's (1995) revised approaches to learning (RASI) instrument. The instructor's facilitation of students' learning was measured by a re-orientation of the same RASI instrument toward teaching approaches. The items contained in the respective dimensions of deep and strategic learning/teaching approaches were paralleled with the literature on employers' expectations of the qualities of accounting graduates. Taylor and Maliah (1999) found that there are several significant differences of emphasis between undergraduate accounting students and their instructors in terms of deep and strategic approaches. In these areas, students are falling short of what their instructors believe they are facilitating (i.e. in both deep and strategic dimensions) in terms of the development of their employability competencies and characteristics for a professional career. Of particular concern for employability is the finding that the gap between teaching and learning approaches becomes greater for fourth year cohorts than first year cohorts in the accounting program. However, no study is being carried out at the school level, i.e. on secondary school students' studying/learning approaches in the Principles of Accounts class. It is not unreasonable to expect that these students will be pursuing accounting course in colleges or universities.

Che Lai (1993) in his study of 100 Form Five Principles of Accounts students in six selected schools in three states, Selangor, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and Johore, found that 97.0 percent of the students stated that it was out of their own choice that they took up the Principles of Accounts subject, though there are other elective

subjects offered. Only 3.0 percent of the respondents indicated that there is no other alternative for them because their school does not offer other elective subjects. This shows that there is a growing interest among students in the subject, they are aware of the opportunities available in the accounting field, and they are well advised in taking their elective courses.

On the issue of teaching and learning, the teaching methods in Malaysian schools have emphasized an approach that involves considerable memorization, rote learning, and strict conformity to the expectations of teachers. This could be due to the influence of traditional culture. Malaysian students are more accustomed to a formal classroom atmosphere. Lectures are the primary teaching method they have been exposed to. Teachers are looked upon as symbols of authority, learning takes place in a passive manner and personal interaction with students is rare. According to Biggs (1992) (cited in Watkins and Maznah, 1994) students from Asian countries are often perceived by their professors at Western universities as being over-reliant on rote learning. They are accused of internalizing the views of their teachers and textbooks rather than displaying the independent, critical thinking desired at the university level.

Datuk Dr. Jamaluddin (cited in *The Star*, March, 30, 2000) said that the Malaysian education system was more inclined towards rote learning. During the debate on the Budget at the committee stage, he said that:

There should be a study to find out whether the emphasis is more on memorizing rather than understanding the subject at hand.

Merely adopting memorization in studying is bad because it does not encourage thinking that is needed in understanding. Also, acquiring knowledge by memorizing will enable the students to only temporarily retain the knowledge whereas the accounting subject is such that it requires understanding and the ability to relate.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This research attempts to identify students' approaches to learning in one learning environment, i.e. in Principles of Accounts class of a selected secondary school in Malaysia. The approaches to learning identify how students learn as measured by the deep and surface dimension and relate them to academic performance. The objective of the Principles of Accounts curriculum is to enable students to acquire basic accounting knowledge and skills, which emphasize rational understanding. Dunn (1990) stated that students are not failing because of the curriculum. Students can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with methods and approaches responsive to their learning style strengths.

The main theme of this study centers on a few fundamental questions, such as, 'What do we mean by the term learning style/approaches to learning?', 'What factors

affect learning style/approaches to learning?', and 'What do we mean by academic achievement?'. More specifically, the primary objectives of this study are:

- 1) to identify the approaches to learning of Malaysian secondary school students taking the Principles of Accounts subject.
- 2) to determine the relationship between family background factors and learning styles.
- 3) to determine the relationship between family background factors and academic achievement.
- 4) to explore the relationship between learning styles and academic achievement.

1.3 Context of the Study

This study focuses on the Malaysian secondary school students taking the Principles of Accounts subject. The sample chosen is Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Tun Dr. Ismail Form Four students taking Principles of Accounts.

A student in Malaysia goes through six years of primary education and five years of secondary education before attending college, polytechnic, or university education if the student chooses not to attend Form Six. Between the ages of 11 and 18, a student has to sit for three major examinations, and depending on his or her performance, will be placed into different schools or education streams. The Malaysian students specialize at

the very early age of 15, that is, after the Form Three Lower Secondary Assessment (Penilaian Menengah Rendah, PMR). From their performance in this examination they are streamed into the science, commerce, arts streams and some even enter technical schools.

Principles of Accounts is one of the elective subjects offered under the Vocational and Technical Group of the Form Four and Five students. The two-year course is a continuation of the bookkeeping aspect taught in the Living Skills subject at the lower secondary level: Form One, Two, and Three. Principle of Accounts studied at Form Four and Five can also form a good basis for studying Accounting at the Form Six level.

Before 1981, the Principles of Accounts used to follow the syllabus prepared by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. Subsequently, the Malaysian Council of Examinations took over the role of formulating local syllabi and setting questions for public examinations.

According to the Principles of Accounts syllabus published by the Curriculum Development Center and the Technical and Vocational Division, Ministry of Education in 1990, the explicit objectives of the subject are to structure the theoretical and practical aspects of the subject to fulfill the needs of accounting education. For example, the need to provide the students with the basic knowledge and comprehension of material needed for more advanced work in the field and to promote the students' interests, values, attitudes, and motivation to upgrade the quality and productivity in any field of work they

will be involved in. These objectives are also supported at tertiary level (Deakin and Granof, 1974).

Hence, the objective of the Principles of Accounts subject is to produce individuals who have the knowledge and skills of basic accounting through the process of learning which emphasizes the rational understanding of procedures and reasons for things to be done as opposed to rote learning. The subject provides general business training, job-competency, and general education to students to help them become informed citizens and to promote values of neatness and accuracy among them.

Therefore, the individual can think logically, is able to practice positively based on carefulness and punctuality, manages to follow orders, and is able to work and communicate with others effectively. Apart from that, the individual will be able to make decisions, realize the implications of the decisions made, and will therefore be able to be responsible and accountable for the consequences of such decisions.

1.4 Significance of the Study

One of the distinctive contributions of this study to the field of education is to extend the present knowledge related to the learning styles of secondary school students taking the Principles of Accounts subject. Understanding the approach to studying of school students will assist teachers in how to motivate students to study Principles of Accounts with greater understanding.

Secondly, the study makes a contribution in relation to the relationship between learning styles and academic achievement. It has been found that there is a relationship between learning styles and academic achievement, i.e. the meaning and achieving approaches are related to good academic performance.

1.5 Research Questions

1. The main objective of the research is to identify the approaches to learning of Malaysian secondary school students and relate them to academic achievement.

In relation to the above issue, the research study seeks to investigate the influence of family background, particularly social status, because of its possible influence on the students' learning style and achievement. The variables of family social status constitute the background variables of the students in the sample.

Academic achievement is measured by the Form Four students' achievement in the Form Four mid-semester examination results. The writer wished to take the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) result as a measurement but due to insufficient time the Form Four mid-semester examination result is instead taken as a measurement. The students took this Form Four mid-semester examination in the months of May and June 2000 academic year. The students will only be taking their SPM examination at the end of 2001. The main questions revolve around, firstly, academic achievement, secondly,

learning styles, and thirdly, the relationship between learning styles and academic achievement. Hence, for the Form Four students' sample, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1.6 Differences in Learning Styles:

Main Research Question:

Do students with different backgrounds, represented by their family social status, have different learning styles?

Specific Research Question:

Do students with high social status family backgrounds have different learning styles from students with low social status family backgrounds?

1.7 Differences in Academic Achievement:

Main Research Question:

Is there any difference in the academic achievement of students from different backgrounds represented by their family social status?

Specific Research Question:

Is there any difference in the academic achievement of students with high social status family background and low status family background?