

Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-Being of Rural Poor School Students in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

The presence of psychological well-being is key to the optimal functioning of individuals, for them to lead fuller lives and essential for them to contribute actively to society. Some studies have explored the links between psychological well-being and emotional intelligence. However, no such study has focussed on rural, and more often than not, poor students. Our study looked at the effects of emotional intelligence on the psychological well-being of rural poor students in Sabah, Malaysia. It was a cross-sectional study of 430 students. We found that 73% and 90% of the rural students rated their emotional intelligence and psychological well-being as moderate respectively. Regression analysis showed that emotional intelligence could predict one's psychological well-being. We suggest further research into the differences between school students and school dropouts, and between urban and rural poor students.

Keywords: *emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, rural poor students*

Abstrak

Kesejahteraan psikologis adalah kunci untuk mencapai fungsi optimal individu, untuk menjalani hidup yang lebih baik agar dapat berkontribusi aktif terhadap masyarakat. Beberapa studi mengeksplorasi keterkaitan antara kesejahteraan psikologis dan kecerdasan emosional. Namun, belum ada studi yang fokus di daerah pedesaan, apalagi fokus pada siswa miskin. Studi ini meneliti efek dari kecerdasan emosional terhadap kesejahteraan psikologis pada siswa miskin pedesaan di Sabah, Malaysia. Studi menggunakan metode *cross-sectional* pada 430 siswa. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa 73% dan 90% siswa pedesaan masing-masing memiliki kecerdasan emosional dan kesejahteraan psikologis yang moderat. Analisis regresi menunjukkan bahwa kecerdasan emosional dapat memprediksi kesejahteraan psikologis seseorang. Penelitian selanjutnya dapat melihat perbedaan antara siswa sekolah dan jumlah *dropout* siswa, dan antara siswa miskin di kota dan di desa.

Kata Kunci: kecerdasan emosional, kesejahteraan psikologis, siswa miskin pedesaan

Introduction

Mental disorders are very common across the world with nearly 300 million suffer from depression and 260 million suffer from anxiety (WHO, 2017). Malaysia is a South East Asian country with a population of 32.4 million people, and the picture in Malaysia is no different: 29.2% of those aged 16 and over suffer from mental illnesses and this amounts to 4.2 million people (National Health and Morbidity Survey, 2015). According to NHMS (2015) also, the prevalence was

highest in Sabah and WP Labuan (42.9%) followed by WP Kuala Lumpur (39.8%) and Kelantan (39.1%). By gender, the prevalence was higher among females as compared to males, but it was not significant (30.8% vs 27.6%). Mental health problems were found to be highest among other Bumiputras (41.1%) followed by others (33.2%). This survey also noted that adolescent from low household income families was having a higher prevalence of mental health problems as compared to higher income families.

Furthermore, according to National Health and Morbidity Survey (2017) adolescents in Malaysia found one in five to be depressed, two out of five to be anxious and 1 in 10 reported stress. In this study, the state of Sabah recorded the highest prevalence of anxiety and the second highest prevalence of depression and stress. Form 1 students (13 years old) had the highest prevalence of all three conditions. Bumiputera Sabah ethnicity had the highest prevalence of anxiety and respondents whose parents were separated had the highest prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia and also have the second highest population in Malaysia with 3.9 million population (Malaysia Statistic Department, 2017). About 1.6 million population live in a rural area of Sabah with 5.3% were categorized as poor population (highest in Malaysia rural area). The above findings are of significant concern as adolescents are the future citizens of the country and perhaps even more so for adolescents from low-income families – they are the family's only hope of improving the economic stability of the family.

There could be several factors contributing to the poor mental health of adolescents in such settings: financial difficulties, academic problems and family issues such as divorce, and other situational factors. Further, it needs to be noted that mental health is associated with emotional intelligence and psychological well-being.

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to monitor self-emotions and others, distinguishing them and using them as guides in thinking and behavior (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Later, Mayer and Salovey (1997) classify emotional intelligence into factors include accurately interpreting emotions, assessing and expressing emotions, generate feelings for facilitating thought, the ability to understand emotions and the ability to control emotions to

promote emotional and intellectual development.

It has been recommended that there is a great need for mental health education at schools to raise awareness about the importance of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being to minimize the impact of depression and stress faced by secondary school students (Rathakrishnan, Nagashehara, Balakrishnan, & Narasapa, 2012). However, this aspect has not been adequately studied among rural students (from low-income families) in Malaysia.

Mehmood and Gulzar (2014) conducted a study on emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among Pakistani teenagers. The findings show that emotional intelligence has a negative relationship with depression and positive relationships with self-esteem. A person with good emotional intelligence is associated with an optimistic attitude towards self and society. They know what they need and how they meet their needs without interfering with the rights of others. Besides, Samaie and Sepahmansour (2015) and Ramya (2011) also found that there was a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Although some studies have looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, and the influence of emotional intelligence on the psychological well-being of adolescents, however, no study to date has looked at this among the rural adolescent students in Malaysia.

Hence, the purpose of our study was to fill this important knowledge gap – the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, and the influence of emotional intelligence on the psychological well-being of rural students. The policy implications of relevant findings are hugely relevant to the mental health and psychological well-being of adolescents.

The objectives of this study are to identify the level of emotional intelligence and the psychological well-being of rural

students in Sabah Malaysia, and to identify the effect of emotional intelligence on psychological well-being.

Seligman's Perma Model

The PERMA model was formed by Martin Seligman which emphasized the five essential elements for obtaining psychological well-being and happiness. Seligman believes that these five elements can help individuals achieve happiness and meaning in life. In the context of this study, this theory may show some similarity with the framework of research conducted by the researcher that emotional intelligence has similarity with positive emotions. While, engagement, positive relationship, the meaning of life and achievement has similarity with the elements in psychological well-being by Ryff (1995).

Positive emotion is the first and important component needed to get happiness and well-being. According to Seligman, positive emotions can also eliminate negative emotions. Individual who have emotional intelligence can produce positive emotion because high emotional quotient (EQ) person familiar with their emotions and have control over it. This positive emotion will lead to individual engagement which is the involvement of individuals in daily activities.

Engaging in activities is important to provide individualized experience

opportunities and also will test the intelligence, sensitivity, emotional level, and patience. This element is the same as environmental mastery in psychological well-being. A healthy engagement will drive to one's happiness.

The third element is a positive relationship. Positive emotion or emotional intelligence will help strengthen the individual relationship with other people. This is because, EQ is also an ability to recognize others emotion and will use this information in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. A positive relationship with others is also one of the aspects of Ryff psychological well-being.

After emotion, engagement and relationship are fulfilled, people will find their meaning of life and try to accomplish the goal. Having the goal to achieve in life and making an effort to achieve it is essential to prosperity and happiness. Achievements help build self-esteem and strengthen self-esteem. Achievements also create satisfaction and indirectly also affect happiness, well-being and mental health of an individual.

Seligman (2011) in the theory of PERMA emphasizes that positive emotions are one of the key elements in the quest for happiness. Seligman also emphasized that positive emotions and negative emotions can be eliminated in individuals. The wisdom in controlling emotions and positive emotions in dealing with the stress



Figure 1. Seligman's Perma model

affects overall psychological well-being (Ramya, 2011); in contrary, individuals with low emotional intelligence and negative thoughts, are exposed to extreme depression and stress when faced with problems as well as adversely affecting psychological well-being and mental health. Hence, students need a good emotional intelligence as a solution for the challenges in life.

Research Methods

Sampling

Our study was cross-sectional in design using pen and paper self-completion questionnaires among 13 to 18 years old students in five schools from five large regions around Sabah (Tawau, Sandakan, Kudat, West Coast, Interior of Sabah). The schools were selected using a cluster sampling technique and respondents were randomly selected. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2001), the suitable total of sample for this population is 383 respondents. So, a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire was divided equally 120 questionnaires per region. The researcher also divides the questionnaire equally to 30 respondents per age. Ministry of Education Malaysia does not allow 15- and 17-years old students involved in the study because of their involvement in the big examination. Prior permission was sought and received from each of the schools for participation in the study. The survey was carried out over two months. The researcher only chooses 430 students from a poor family background that have income below RM 1180 according to the Malaysia Department of Statistics (2015).

The questionnaire was self-administered. The questionnaire was administered in a classroom setting with students sitting sufficiently apart so that answers could not be revealed to or discussed with each other. Participants, on average, took about thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The areas that were assessed are emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. The questionnaire initially prepared in English was translated into Malay (the vernacular language) and then back-translated to check for accuracy. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted in 1 school (not included in the data analysis) to test for accuracy of translation and understanding of questions.

Instruments

Socio-demographic profile (age, sex, area of residence, and religion) was assessed using a checklist developed by the authors. Standardized instruments were administered to address emotional intelligence and psychological well-being.

Emotional intelligence. The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was used to measure a student's emotional intelligence. These instruments contain 33 items and four domains: self-awareness, social skills, management of emotion and empathy. For the present study, we evaluated emotional intelligence based on the whole emotional intelligence.

Psychological well-being. Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (RSPWB) was used to measure a student's psychological well-being. These instruments contain 54 items with six domains (autonomy, environmental mastery, life goal, positive relation with others, personal growth, and self-esteem). For the present study, we evaluated psychological well-being based on the whole psychological well-being.

Ethical considerations. Institutional ethical approval was received from the Ministry of Education and Sabah Educational Department and administrative approvals were obtained from the school authorities before the survey. Students were informed that the survey was anonymous and had no impact on their school work or assessments. Verbal consent was obtained from students and the questionnaires were administered only to consenting students.

No incentives were given for completing the questionnaires.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS “*International Business Machines Statistical Package For Social Science*” version 20.0 was used to analyze the data. Simple regression was used to identify the effect of emotional intelligence on the psychological well-being of students.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the respondents of the study are 430 people, 44.2% are male and 55.8% are female. 14 years-old respondents were dominant (27.2%), followed by 16 years (25.3%), 13 years (24.4%) and 18 years (23.0%). Respondents of this study were collected from various location in Sabah. Sandakan consists of 94 (21.9%) respondents and followed by Tawau 91 (21.2%) respondents. In the West Coast of Sabah, consists of 89 (20.7%) respondents. Kudat and interior of Sabah are the same, 78 (18.1%) respondents respectively.

The Bajau population is 10.7%, Brunei is 3.3%, Bugis is 9.1%, Dusun is 28.4%, Kadazandusun is 10.2%, Murut is 3.5%, Suluk is 4.0%, Sungai is 13.5% and other ethnic groups are 17.4% of the study population. About 56.6% of respondents are Muslim, 42.9% are Christian and .5% are Buddhist.

Level of Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-being of Rural Students

The result in table 2 has shown that the emotional intelligence level of the majority of rural students was at moderate (n = 314) representing 73%. A total of 105 people had high emotional intelligence (24.4%) and only 11 students had a low emotional intelligence of 2.6%.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents
(N= 430)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	190	44.2
Female	240	55.8
Age		
13 Years	105	24.4
14 Years	117	27.2
16 Years	109	25.3
18 Years	99	23.0
Location		
Tawau	91	21.2
Sandakan	94	21.9
Kudat	78	18.1
West Coast	89	20.7
Interior of Sabah	78	18.1
Ethnicity		
Bajau	46	10.7
Brunei	14	3.3
Bugis	39	9.1
Dusun	122	28.4
Kadazandusun	44	10.2
Murut	15	3.5
Suluk	17	4.0
Sungai	58	13.5
Others	92	17.4
Religion		
Islam	243	56.6
Christian	184	42.9
Buddhist	2	.5

Table 2
Level of Emotional Intelligence of Rural Students
(N=430)

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	11	2.6
Moderate	314	73.0
High	105	24.4

In terms of psychological well-being, generally, rural students were at a moderate level of psychological well-being (90.0%), followed by 7.4% at a low level and only 11 (2.6%) students were at a high level as shown in table 3.

Table 3
Level of Psychological Well-being of Rural Students (N=430)

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	32	7.4
Moderate	387	90.0
High	11	2.6

The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Psychological Well-being in Rural Students

The result of the regression analysis in table 4 shown that emotional intelligence is a predictor of psychological well-being. Emotional intelligence gives a positive influence to overall psychological wellbeing ($\beta = .430, k < .01$). Independent variables (emotional intelligence) can be explained significantly by 18.5% of the variance in the dependent variable, psychological well-being ($F (1.429) = 97.203, k < .01$).

Table 4
The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Psychological Well-being in Rural Students

Psychological Well-being	R ²	F	Beta	t	Sig.
Overall	.185	97.2	.430	9.859	.000**

The study involved 430 poor rural students. The findings showed that the emotional intelligence and psychological well-being of poor rural students are at moderate and low levels. The findings of this study are quite similar to that of Mohamad, Rathakrishnan, Sang, and Loh (2015), showing that these rural students have low emotional intelligence. This situation may be since rural students were separated from their families for the first time and forced to be independent (Mohamad et al., 2015). This suggests that rural youths are still at a moderate level of concern. Although it is not chronic, some initial steps need to be taken to develop emotional intelligence and coping skills before the situation gets worse. Mental health is an important and difficult aspect

to treat. Therefore, a moderate level of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being are not enough because at this stage various problems arise among adolescents and students, especially the concern of mental health problems. This finding is supported by the Indeks Belia Sabah report (2015) which concur that adolescent emotional intelligence is at a moderate level but improvements need to be made as this aspect is important for adolescents to face the current challenges. Hence, preventive measures need to be taken to save the generation of future leaders.

The study found that emotional intelligence affects the psychological well-being of the students. Emotional intelligence plays a role in making a more proper decision when dealing with sources of stress which indirectly affects psychological well-being. This finding was supported by the findings of Mehmood and Gulzar (2014), Raina and Bakshi (2013) and Urquijo, Extremera, and Villa (2015) who concur that students with positive emotional intelligence also have good psychological well-being. According to Mayer and Salovey (1993) individuals who have good emotional intelligence, know their emotions, can control and manage their emotions so as not to negatively affect themselves during life's challenges. This finding also can be related to the theory of Seligman which shows positive emotions can also eliminate negative emotions. Individual who have emotional intelligence can produce positive emotion because high emotional quotient (EQ) person familiar with their emotions and have control over it. Whenever the student got any stress they can control their stress and can make a better decision. Emotional control helps the student to overcome all the negative issue to be more positive. The student can understand but all the problems can be solved. This is very important for students who are having a financial issue because they can't be focused in their studies

because of many other issues such money for food, buying the book and other necessities for their studies. If their EQ is high they can eliminate the entire barrier to be more positive and become more successful in their studies.

This positive emotion will lead to individual engagement which is the involvement of individuals in daily activities. In this study, rural poor students have to face many difficulties in their lives such as financial problems, learning, relationships with others, and social demands. Furthermore, poverty experienced also affects students' lives. According to students, the financial problems cause other problems to arise such as parents' quarrels which stressed students and eventually disturbed their learning. If these challenges are not well dealt with, it will indirectly affect the formation of personalities, self-esteem, and even the necessary skills for the next stage which is more challenging. On the other hand, if properly addressed, emotional intelligence can act as an appropriate force to eliminate or reduce the negative effects of stress (Sunil & Rooprai, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Seligman's Perma model positive emotion or emotional intelligence will help strengthen the individual relationship with other people. This is because, EQ is also an ability to recognize others emotion and will use this information in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. A positive relationship with others is also one of the aspects of Ryff Psychological Well-being.

Conclusion

The results of this study are expected to help various parties including the Ministry of Health Malaysia, the Ministry of Education, the school and parents in developing a program of emotional intelligence and strategy of action. In addition, this study provides a real picture of the psychological well-being of rural students in Malaysia, especially in Sabah.

This is because existing studies are under-conducted involving rural poor students where they are the most vulnerable groups in Malaysia. The findings are also expected to provide useful contributions to the field of positive psychology. This field is seen as increasingly important in this era because more and more students are exposed to problems and mental disorders, depression, and suicidal behavior.

The researcher suggests further studies on the differences between normal and risky students or dropouts, the difference between urban and rural poor students, and academic achievement.

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