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SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL LIFE: CAPTURING MALAYSIAN PUPILS' VOICE FROM A MULTIETHNIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the aspects that shaped pupils' satisfaction with school life in a multiethnic Malaysian context. The multiple case study design was employed to understand and elicit pupils' experiences, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions of their satisfaction with school life in three different types of Malaysian primary schools, namely National Primary School (Malay-dominated), National Type Chinese Primary School (Chinese-dominated), and National Type Tamil Primary School (Indian-dominated). A total of 18 pupils with six members from each type of Malaysian primary schools participated in three focus group discussions respectively. Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data: (1) emotional contentment, (2) curricular achievement and co-curricular achievements, (3) safe, conducive, and comfortable learning environment, and (4) development of the 21st-century skills. These emerging four themes from the participants' views and experiences provided a holistic perspective on satisfaction with school life in Malaysian primary schools. Practical implications that could be beneficial in leveraging life satisfying experiences of the pupils in the school were discussed. This study has contributed to the body of knowledge with regard to satisfaction with school life from a multiethnic perspective.

Keywords: Malaysia, multiethnic, primary school, qualitative study, satisfaction with school life

INTRODUCTION

Life satisfaction is associated with subjective well-being (Doğan and Çelik 2014) and happiness (Cleveland and Sink 2018). Interestingly, life satisfaction is experienced through the circle of influence or the many domains of life of an individual, such as in relationships (Villa and Del Prette 2013) and workplace (Raziq and Maulabakhsh 2015). These contextual descriptions imply that life

satisfaction is developed based on the place or affiliation where an individual spends a considerable amount of time of his or her daily activities. Corollary to this, it is worthy to explore the pupils' life satisfaction with schools as they spend a significant number of their waking hours at school (Seligson, Huebner and Valois 2003; Thien, Karpudewan and Chin 2020).

Previous empirical studies have argued that there is 'no-one-size-fits-all' scale that is able to fully capture the students' satisfaction with school in different contexts (Tian, Zhang and Huebner 2018), and that students' satisfaction with school life differs across contexts and countries (Beck, Maranto and Lo 2014). Thus, it is worthy to explore pupils' views on their satisfaction with school life in a non-western and multiethnic-context society like Malaysia. Moreover, a close scrutiny of the life satisfaction literature revealed that most of the previous empirical studies related to satisfaction with school utilised the quantitative methods of research (Huebner 1991). This could be attributed to the accessibility of the unidimensional scale (Adelman Taylor and Nelson 1989; Huebner, 1991) and multidimensional scale (Huebner 1994; Seligson, Huebner and Valois 2003) of pupils' satisfaction with school life. It is notable that most of these existing scales were developed in the Western context (Tian, Zhang and Huebner 2014; Thien et al. 2020). Moreover, the applicability of these existing scales in a multiethnic context remains unclear.

To fill the contextual and methodology gaps, this study seeks to conduct a qualitative study to gain an in-depth understanding of the aspects that shape the school life satisfaction of primary school children in the multiethnic context in Malaysia. The findings of this study will help to extend the theoretical validation of previous studies and thus become useful for curricular improvements and policy implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysian Primary Schools As Multiethnic Context

Malaysia prides itself as a "successful multicivilisational society in Southeast Asia" (Abdul Rahman Embong 2002, 38). The country has three main ethnic groups due to the demographic make-up of its population, of which 69.6% are Malays, 22.6% are Chinese, 6.8% are Indians, and 1% comprise others which may include the non-citizens (Mahidin 2020). The heterogeneity of Malaysian society has been shaped by the original Malays and other ethnic minorities plus the migration of Chinese and Indians (Abu Bakar, Norlidah and Saedah 2013). With this multicultural society comes the diverse acculturation of ideologies such as differences in religion, belief system, tradition, language (Abu Bakar et al.

2013), and values and expectations (Ramlee et al. 2009). Thus, this allows the ethnic groups to maintain their cultural heritage and identities (Noor and Leong 2013). These cultural heritage and identities are carried over to the different school types (Centre for Public Policy Studies 2016).

School Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction which is one of the indicators of happiness in line with the positive psychology movement (Suldo et al. 2013) has been conceptualised in various ways in the literature. Shin and Johnson (1978) described life satisfaction as a “global assessment of people’s quality of life according to their own chosen criteria” (478), while Diener, Oishi and Lucas (2009) referred to it as one’s mental description of what makes people’s lives positive either in general or specific aspect from the positive psychology perspective.

Deriving from the concept of global life satisfaction, school life encompasses several aspects of everyday living among pupils (Huebner 1994; Suldo and Shaffer 2007) as it is associated with their positive social, emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes (Suldo et al. 2011). This is in consonance with Huebner’s (2004) emphasis that to truly understand the minutest details of satisfaction with life in school, one must consider the holistic perspective of a pupil’s experiences.

In an attempt to understand school life satisfaction, Huebner (2004) stressed that the evaluation of pupils’ life satisfaction at school is not only measured by the pupils’ academic excellence, but in every aspect of their very existence in the school wherein they spend most of their waking hours with. These aspects include human relationships, curricular and co-curricular activities (Kaphingst 2013), physical and psychological learning environment (Giardina 2012), and school facilities and services (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments 2021) as revealed in the literature.

Human Connections

Human relationships are circumscribed to a favourable teacher-pupil relationship. The study of Baker, Grant and Morlock (2008) confirmed that a positive teacher-pupil relationship characterised by warmth, trust, and low degrees of conflict predicts pupil’s successful school adjustment (10). Similarly, a positive pupil-pupil relationship which is established through shared values and academic motivation (Shin and Ryan 2014) and having a considerable number of close friends (Haanpää, Kuula and Hakovirta 2019) is associated with higher satisfaction at school.

Curricular and Co-Curricular Involvement

Concerning curricular and co-curricular activities, a previous study revealed that the majority of honours students were also actively involved in co-curricular activities (Kumar 2006). This implies that the more students are involved in co-curricular activities, the more satisfied they are with school life because they find their relevance and meaning at school (Huang and Chang 2004). Equally significant to pupils' satisfaction with school life is the psychological learning environment which is demonstrated by a competent teacher, both in content and pedagogy. Puteri Darishah et al. (2017) reported that pupil satisfaction has a strong relationship with the quality of their teachers in terms of guidance, assessment, and subject matter, as well as teaching strategies that encourage the 21st-century skills. Similarly, when teachers employ pedagogy through fun learning activities, pupils' satisfaction is optimum as reflected in their academic performance (Light 2002; Lucardie 2014).

Physical Learning Environment

Another context is relating to physical learning environment. The ambient physical classroom environment fulfils a stronger pupil's satisfaction with school life (Ali, Kim and Ryu 2016). This is because a conducive learning environment, which is an important determinant of student learning, helps increase intellectual activities, encourage friendship, cooperation, and support among the students. A productive classroom atmosphere could promote learning, student growth, and development simultaneously, which are indications of a satisfied school life (Puteh et al. 2015).

School facilities as well as school services where the pupils' cognitive, physical, and sense of security are met are also important aspects in measuring school life satisfaction. Zengele and Alemayehu (2016) reported that the lack of appropriate laboratory equipment and well-trained technicians in schools could lead to "serious knowledge deficits" in core subjects which ultimately affects their satisfaction with school life (8). Similarly, beneficial school services such as school meals were identified to have significant influences on the pupils' school happiness (Kwon, Kim and Lee 2018). In the same vein, psychological security, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy have jointly predicted life satisfaction (Afolabi and Balogun 2017, 247).

METHODS

This exploratory study employed a qualitative approach with multiple case study design to understand and elicit pupils' experiences, feelings, beliefs, thoughts,

and perceptions of their satisfaction with school life in three different types of Malaysian primary schools, namely National Primary School (NPS-dominated by Malays), National Type Chinese Primary School (NTCPS-dominated by Chinese), and National Type Tamil Primary School (NTTPS-dominated by Indians). This study was conducted in “a natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 3) as the nature of qualitative research is naturalistic and interpretive (Creswell 2012).

Sample

Participants of this study were 18 Grade 6 pupils of which ten are girls and eight are boys. They were purposively selected from the NPS, NTCPS, and NTTPS in Penang, Malaysia. The three selected schools have evident similarities such as training received by the teachers, curricular offerings, physical and learning facilities available in the schools, and administrative structure.

In qualitative studies, purposive sampling is widely employed for purposes of identifying and selecting the participants who can provide rich-information cases that can provide insight on the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al. 2015; Tongco 2007). Furthermore, pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria were identified by the researchers to carefully select participants who can provide rich information needed for the study (Robinson 2014). Grade 6 pupils were chosen over pupils from other grades levels because they have already developed a full grasp of six years of primary school life, have had attended co- and extra-curricular activities, and have had experienced or had observed others achieve academic excellence awards at the highest level of their primary schooling. Moreover, pupils who excel academically can communicate and express their ideas well, and have better self-confidence in answering interviews. Hence, they volunteered to take part in the study. Low-performing students were initially considered as participants of the study as they could equally provide different perspectives. However, they were not willing to take part in the study. The selection of the participants was based on the pre-determined criterion: (1) recommendation of the school principal, (2) informed consent from the parents, and (3) the pupils' willingness to take part in the study (Creswell 2012).

The identities of the pupil-participants were maintained confidential by providing pseudonyms and indicated as follows: *N, R, J, K, A*, (from NPS) and *P; C, D, H, CI, X* (from NTCPS), and *Y*; and *Sr, Ka, De, Th, Si, and Sv* (from NTTPS). Recruitment of participants stopped when data saturation had been reached (Francis et al. 2010).

Data Collection Procedure

This study employed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Smith and Osborn 2007). The two interview questions were: (1) What is your opinion about school life? (Tell me what makes you happy at school) and (2) How is your dream school like? (Describe the environment of your dream school). The purpose of these interview questions was to elicit pupils' views and experiences on their satisfaction with school life. Follow-up questions related to the participants' responses were used to probe further information that would shed better and in-depth understanding of the pupils' general answers.

The researchers were able to probe relevant issues that arose spontaneously in the course of the dialogue (Patton 2002; Smith and Osborn 2007). The focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted between 40 minutes and one hour. The primary language used in the FGDs was Malay for all participants since it is the primary medium of instruction in Malaysian public schools. The researcher-interviewer mixed Malay with Mandarin in the FGD with the Chinese students, and Malay and English for the Indian students. The use of Malay, Chinese, and English languages allowed both the researcher and the pupils to converse freely without the need to mentally translate in their mind the thoughts they wanted to express. This interview strategy was employed to ensure that the pupils understood the questions clearly and that they could best express their ideas in the language they were comfortable speaking (van Nes et al. 2010). Besides, the researcher-interviewer is Chinese and can only speak Chinese, English, and Malay. A voice recorder was used during the FGD with the participants to ensure that the discussion flow would be recorded uninterrupted.

Prior to the conduct of the FGD, approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the authority was secured. Furthermore, informed consent from the class teachers, school principals, and parents where the FGD were conducted were likewise obtained.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, following Patton's (2002) guidelines, the researchers read the transcripts in Malay, Mandarin, and English languages carefully and separately at least twice. Working through the transcripts, the researchers employed open coding based on the preliminary identified codes for each transcript. Separate coding was done according to each school type. There was a total of 27 codes that were initially identified in this phase of data analysis for NPS, NTCPS, and NTTCPs. The categories of codes in Malay and Mandarin languages were then translated into English. In accordance with the suggestions of Aguinis and Solarino (2019), the researchers grouped the

27 codes into categories based on the commonalities and differences. Some codes were combined during this process, whereas others were split into subcategories. Finally, the researchers examined the categories of codes and synthesised them into themes. The labels for each theme that emerged in the data analysis were terms assigned by the researchers based on the characterisation of each identified theme.

RESULTS

During the data analysis, the researchers identified four emerging themes which were conceptualised as aspects that shaped the pupils' satisfaction with schools. The four themes are emotional contentment; curricular achievement and co-curricular involvement; safe, conducive, and comfortable learning environment; and development of the 21st-century skills.

Theme 1: Emotional Contentment

Based on the participants' responses, emotional contentment is the label assigned to describe the sense of enjoyment that the pupils encounter in their relationships with teachers and peers. This contentment resulted from kindness, which was expressed in different ways, from both teachers and peers. This theme was further divided into two subthemes: the emotional contentment resulting from the teacher-pupil relationships and pupil-pupil relationships.

Malay pupils' perspective

The Malay pupils expressed a high regard for their teachers, obeying them like their own parents. This was highly indicative of their culture of being obedient to parents. Disciplinarian and caring were the words that the pupils used to best describe their teachers. For their teacher-pupil relationships, the Malay pupils viewed their teachers' kindness, attention to discipline, and competence in teaching as contributory to the pupils' satisfying school life. N shared that the teachers treated the pupils like their friends. This was further reaffirmed when the pupils explained how they prioritised seeking their teachers' advice: "pupils always consult teachers first instead of their parents", said P. Pupils R, K, A, and P all agreed that if they made mistakes, their teacher gave them advice so they would not make the same mistakes anymore. Furthermore, the pupils also expressed that their teachers were their inspirational figure because of their high competence and being seasoned teachers. J and K shared that their "teachers have been teaching very long, so they know how to handle pupils". A mentioned that the teachers in school were "very good, polite, and not fierce" and that they could very well help the pupils in their learning.

For their peer relationships, the Malay pupils identified respect, tolerance, and “you-scratch-my-back, I’ll-scratch-your-back” attitude among classmates and friends. *N* shared that the children were happy with their school life because they could meet many friends. Friends in school were respectful towards each other because “they don’t tease and never give nicknames” to anyone. *J* also mentioned that a student gave and get respect from another student because they treated each other very well. *R* also shared that friends at school treated each other nicely and politely in such that they were willing to reciprocate the friend’s kindness shown to them. While part of the pupils’ school life was teasing and fighting at school, the value of tolerance helped the pupils maintain good relationship with their friends. For example, *J* shared that some of the classmates made fun of another classmate’s name by making it sound like a food name. However, other friends would advise *J* to just “ignore the teasing”. In cases where there were misunderstandings and arguments between friends at school, *K* shared that it would only last awhile or two days, at most, and the friendship would be “restored” as usual. Overall, the Malay pupils shared that they repaid kindness with kindness and showed tolerance towards rudeness. This is a stereotypical trait of the Malay culture (Mastor, Jin and Martin 2000). The Malays tend to be portrayed as polite and avoid conflicts whenever possible (Mastor et al. 2000). Maintaining a harmonious relationship was reflected by the current findings in which the Malay students tend to not “tease and never give nicknames” and advise others to “ignore the teasing”.

Chinese pupils’ perspective

The Chinese pupils perceived their relationships with teachers and peers to be grounded in respect and integrity, competence, sense of humour, and caring as imperative in determining satisfaction with school life. For the teacher-pupil relationship, the Chinese pupils valued respect and integrity highly. In fact, they were overwhelmed when they were treated with respect by some of their teachers. However, there was one particular teacher whom the Chinese pupils identified to be engaging in negative attitudes towards the pupils. Some of the negative attitudes include labelling pupils with unfavourable names, getting angry at the pupils on a daily basis, and not talking respectfully with the pupils. As a result, the pupils reported feeling unwanted and incompetent which made their self-esteem spiralling down. The pupils implied that they would appreciate a teacher who models integrity and trustworthiness. During the FGD, the Chinese pupils’ body language and satirical laughter further revealed their dislike towards the teacher because the teacher did not lead by example. The teacher reprimanded them for using their mobile phone during class discussion, yet that same teacher used his or her mobile phone while teaching. The teacher would praise and give credit for “good quality teaching” and yet the teacher’s lesson itself was not clear

to the pupils. The pupils contended that the teacher “taught blindly”, and at the end of the day, they “didn’t know which lesson to follow”, shared *H*. Meanwhile, the pupils valued teachers who are competent, caring, and have a sense of humour. *H* shared that the pupils admired most of the teachers because they have “good teaching quality”. In addition, *CI* expressed appreciation towards the teacher who “explains patiently” until the lessons are well-understood. *C* affirmed that the pupils enjoyed a class where the teacher integrated fun learning. Furthermore, *H* extended his or her appreciation towards the Mandarin teacher who was “very caring and always baked a cake to treat” them.

Regarding peer relationships, the Chinese pupils viewed their level of satisfaction in the relationships with their peers as non-manipulative, selfless, and kind. The pupils informed these values by sharing some of the undesired examples found in the peer relationships. Pupil *CI* revealed that one of his or her schoolmates was “very arrogant” and that the rest of the classmates must follow the arrogant classmate’s instructions. If another pupil makes a suggestion, the arrogant classmate will feel unhappy. A situation such as this would make pupils feeling uncomfortable at school and they further agreed that things would have been better if friends were non-manipulative, selfless, and kind.

Indian pupils’ perspective

The findings revealed that the Indian pupils revered their teachers very highly to an extent that they put teachers on a pedestal like their god. Kindness and care were often discussed about the teachers who served in NTTPS. Consequently, pupils perceived a very strong and positive relationship with their teachers as a contributing indicator of high satisfaction with school life. The pupils shared that they always viewed their school as their home and teachers as their parents in school. According to *Sr*, his or her teachers treated him or her “100% as their child”. Similarly, *Th* and *De* also shared that the teachers are like their second parents to them. They appreciated their teachers’ loving and caring kindness. *Sv* shared that their teachers helped them when they were down and even if they had problems, the teachers were mindful to encourage them to continue with their studies. Interestingly, *Sr* described his or her experience as follows:

This school is like a second home to me. I tell my problem to my teachers. Even if they themselves are facing their own problems, they will put up a smile to make me happy. If I share any problem with them, I feel that I get immediate solution from them than when I do at home. And that makes me feel comfortable here at school.

The teachers’ kindness was also demonstrated through giving physical and medical attention to pupils in need. To illustrate this, *Sr* narrated an incident that

happened to a boy who fell down from the stairs while going to the school canteen. The teacher brought the boy to the school clinic for first aid. Another incident was shared by *Th* when their classmate was running and accidentally fell on the floor and fainted. The teacher, *Th* said, “put great effort to wake the pupil up”. Because of these events, *Th* added that the pupils sometimes see and appreciate their “teacher as a doctor”.

NTTPS teachers were also supportive, friendly, helpful, patient, and pedagogically equipped. *Sr* said, “my teacher is my backbone”. To elaborate, the pupils observed how the teacher had been supportive of everyone in the class, encouraged everybody to enjoy the class, and arranged fun activities in the classroom. *De* also shared that when a pupil won competitions, the teacher would be proud and happy of the pupil’s achievement. Moreover, *De*, *Th*, and *Ka* mentioned that their teachers were friendly. *Sr* stated that their teachers treated them “like a friend more than a pupil”. *Ka* narrated that their teacher was very smart because that teacher could “teach the lesson very well, so it can be easily understood”. *Sa* also described how their mathematics teachers integrated fun activities in the class to allow more pupils in the class to have the opportunity to express their ideas and understanding of the lesson. *Sa*, *Th*, and *De* also divulged that their teacher would diligently teach them until they could understand a lesson, even if it meant teaching the same content for “10 times or 20 times”. This would imply that the teacher could patiently employ effective teaching strategies to develop pupils’ comprehension of the lesson.

On the other hand, the Indian pupils viewed peer relationships as friendly, helpful, and supportive in which these characteristics posed as positive contributors to their satisfaction with school life. *De* and *Sr* shared that they appreciated their friends because their friends were very congenial and that they helped each other in school in many ways. *Th* recalled those times when a pupil taught a classmate about the lessons that they did not know. Reciprocally, the classmates also shared with another pupil the information that the pupil did not know. *Sr* also recounted that their friends helped them when they were down and whenever they had problems. Friends in school also showed empathy and happiness with peers. For example, *Sr* explained that whenever a classmate was lonely or angry, other classmates would come to cheer that pupil up. *Th* also shared about a friend who was fun to be with. Whenever *Th* was sad, a friend cheered the pupil up by imitating animal sounds just to make them laugh. *Ka* also recounted that some of the pupils loved to share jokes with friends for fun.

Theme 2: Curricular Achievement and Co-Curricular Involvement

The second theme discusses the instrumentality of curricular achievement and co-curricular involvement towards pupils’ enjoyment at school. The participants of

the study denoted recognition in curricular achievement and co-curricular involvement as the perceived sense of accomplishment that defined their school satisfaction.

Malay pupils' perspective

The Malay pupils shared that they must study hard so that they would be able to achieve their goals and be pupils who emulated diligence and being responsible towards their studies. In addition, the Malay pupils stressed that element of fun should be integrated into their learning so that their learning experience could become interesting. For the curricular achievement, *N* expressed that pupils in the school were happy with their school life because through proper education, they could achieve their ambitions. *P* added that “school was very fun” and that the fun experience of learning helped the pupil learn better. When asked to describe their dream school, *R* shared that they envisioned a “school with more subjects on mathematics, English, and science” because these subjects helped them “to pursue study at tertiary level in the future”. Meanwhile, *P* mentioned that “school must be full of fun activities” so that pupils would have an increased interest towards studying.

Another factor that contributed to the pupils' satisfaction with school life was their involvements in co-curricular activities and the inspiration of achieving rewards from these involvements. For instance, *J* narrated that a classmate used to be lazy in coming to school. But when the school started to have some activities such as Lego games, that pupil started to gain interest in school activities and never missed a day in school, which consequently allowed that pupil to have “lots of fun in school”. *J* added that in school “there were many competitions.” If a pupil were to win, then a certificate and trophy would be awarded. This attracted the pupils for the need to be in school every day. *R* also shared that their achievements in computers and robotics competitions always made them feel satisfied and happy with their time spent in school.

Chinese pupils' perspective

For the Chinese pupils, they viewed academic involvement as merely listening to the teachers through traditional teaching and wanting to finish their studies as soon as possible. The Chinese pupils reported feeling lethargic due to the excessively demanding curricular activities in their school. Pupils *C* and *H* both shared the same sentiments towards the heavy academic load by saying “we just have to study and finish school as soon as possible”. Pupils *H*, *CI*, and *Y* all narrated that it was their responsibility to “finish the task as instructed by (their) teacher, study well, listen to their teacher (carefully), and finish homework, and then listen to their teachers again and again”. Pupil *CI* also shared that their

school was purely examination-oriented whereby they “study for the examination only”. The pupils indicated that it would have been better if the assessment for their learning was based on their preference of learning. *C1* mentioned that in school, they “didn’t study based on their own preferences”. The pupils also implied through their body language and gestures during the FGD that they were not excited about school because of the “poor teaching quality of the teachers,” according to *X*.

It is of essence to note that Chinese pupils have less inclination towards co-curricular activities. When asked about their co-curricular involvement, the pupils shared about academic challenges and pursuits. This scenario can be understood as the Chinese society stresses efforts, diligence, and personal success through education (Thien et al. 2020). The Confucian culture seems likely to have shaped the Malaysian Chinese community to embark on developing an ingrained belief in the importance of education for their children compared to their involvement in co-curricular activities.

Indian pupils’ perspective

For the Indian pupils, the competence and the patience of their teachers, coupled with fun teaching strategies, helped them achieve their academic aspirations – mostly to get excellent results in the national assessment, and consequently to make their family, friends, teachers, and school to be proud of them. Therefore, the pupils felt that it was their responsibility to do their best in academic activities. Pupils *Ka*, *Th*, *Sa*, and *Si* all aspired to get excellent academic performance in the national assessment so that their parents, siblings, school, friends, teachers, and relatives would be proud of their achievements. Hence, according to *De*, pupils should: (1) “study well and achieve good results”, (2) “take effort to study hard for the future”, and (3) “be a disciplined person to become a better person”. When being asked to describe their dream school, *Th* described a school where teachers were equipped and pupils were educated and well-trained so that when they wished to participate in competitions, their dream school would be the winner of the competition.

The pupils shared that aside from excelling academically, they also participated in co-curricular activities. The pupils found a sense of fulfilment and enjoyment when they joined the co-curricular activities. *De* shared that some of the pupils were “interested in sports” because they aspired to “become the athlete,” and winning in competitions would make them feel proud and jubilant. *Th* also described the happiness and recognition that pupils felt when they received the medal award in front of the Minister of Education after winning a national-level English language competition. *Sr* likewise narrated a fun memory of joining an educational trip to the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. *Sr* said that it was

their class' best experience because of the hands-on experience of handling many electronic gadgets such as the 3D features in the camera and the telescope where they could view the entire city of Kuala Lumpur.

Theme 3: Safe, Conducive, and Comfortable Learning Environment

The pupils expressed terms such as “security”, “well-equipped”, “functional”, “free”, and “full of fun”. These codes describe a safe, conducive, and comfortable learning environment for the pupils. A conducive learning environment would be defined as a learning space which is equipped with good and functional facilities that is comfortable for the pupils to have fun while learning.

Malay pupils' perspective

The Malay pupils perceived the element of fun learning in school as a predominant factor that determined their level of school life satisfaction. *K* said that they found school life as fun because they could talk with their friends and play with them. *P* supported the idea by sharing that in school, they had “many chances to play, talk, do many things, and freely share emotions with friends”. When being asked to describe about their dream school, *P* shared that his or her dream school should be “full of fun and playtime activities while studying so that the pupils could have more interest while learning and be never stressed at school”.

Chinese pupils' perspective

The Chinese pupils perceived good and functional learning facilities that are conducive to learning as the main factor in their school life satisfaction. Pupils *X*, *D*, and *CI* all shared that the school should be “well-equipped with good and sufficient facilities”. *CI* shared that from his experience, the lack of laboratory instruments meant that “the experiment cannot be carried out”. Furthermore, the pupils also expressed that for them to learn better, “functional air conditioning inside the classrooms and science laboratory rooms” must be made available. Aside from good facilities, *C* concluded that a conducive school environment should provide students with a safe and secure place for learning, whereby the “security aspect” of the schools would be addressed and where the security guard would not sleep while on duty.

Indian pupils' perspective

The Indian pupils perceived a safe, clean, and technology-savvy learning environment as the main factors that determined their satisfaction towards school life. *Ka* shared that they loved their school because it was a “very comfortable

and very safe place,” making it “a good environment, conducive for learning”. When the pupils were asked to describe about their dream school, *Th* asserted that they wanted to paint their dream school with vibrant colours as the different colours would signify happiness and promote good mood for everyone. *Th*, *Sa*, *De*, and *Ka* all agreed that a technology-savvy classroom and technology-equipped teachers would make learning fun and interesting. The pupils would not want to leave their school because the in-school learning facilities such as “ICT room, library, facilities, and some medical clinic” would be sufficient to keep the pupils feel happy and contented in the school, according to *De*.

Theme 4: Development of 21st-Century Skills

The fourth theme, which is the development of 21st-century skills, signifies to the conceived relevance of learning experiences of the pupils that would better prepare them towards the learning demands in the 21st-century. The characterisation of this label is based on the terms mentioned by the students such as “technical-savvy”, “reflection”, “discover things”, “work as a team”, and “internationalisation”.

Malay pupils’ perspective

For the Malays pupils, they loved school that is full of fun activities while studying. In this way, according to *P*, the “pupils are not stressed”. One way to achieve this scenario in school is having inspiring and technologically-equipped teacher who would have interesting teaching strategies related to teaching ICT skills where pupils could develop their essential skills for the 21st century. An example of an activity in school that prepare pupils for the future is developing their collaborative and critical thinking skills. It was suggested to be achieved through employing classroom cooperative strategies such as group discussion and team collaboration so that pupils could “figure out the discovery of learning activities” themselves, said *J*.

Chinese pupils’ perspective

The Chinese pupils were excited for the opportunity to learn languages and the ability to self-discover in preparation for the learning demands of the 21st-century. According to *C*, “Mandarin, Malay, and English (were) very useful” to them. *C* added that learning these international languages could help them “overcome the gaps of internationalisation”. In addition, *CI* envisioned a dream school that would not be loaded with too many bookish work and homework so that the pupils would “have some free time” allowing the students to do “self-reflection and discover things” that they were interested in based on their learning preferences.

Indian pupils' perspective

The Malaysian Indian pupils were enthusiastic about the learning experiences that prepare them for future demands. Such learning experiences included developing their communication, collaboration, leadership, and technology skills. For instance, *De* mentioned that they loved the English subject because it was an international language. A pupil also added that being proficient in the English language would permit one to work abroad such as working as a chef in an overseas restaurant. In return, individuals with experiences working abroad would garner respect from the community and it would enable better chances of achieving one's life ambition in the future. *P* also shared that learning English was crucial because it would allow the pupils to "communicate (in) English fluently". On the other hand, *Sv* was enthusiastic about classroom group activities because they encouraged the pupils to "work as a team", thereby giving them the opportunity to exercise teamwork and leadership. Overall, there are four main factors contributing to the Malaysian primary pupils' satisfaction with school life as shown in Figure 1.

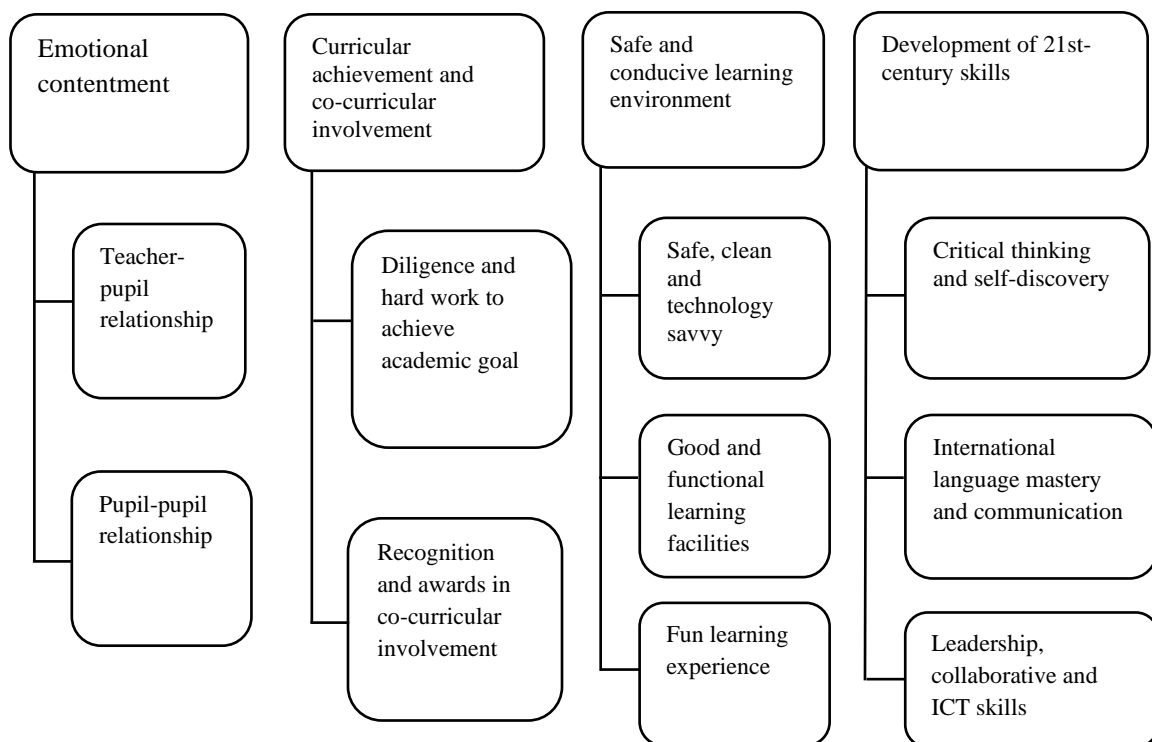


Figure 1: Factors contributing to satisfaction with school life.

DISCUSSION

The scarcity of context-specific research and satisfaction with school life studies using qualitative approach has prompted the current study to gain an in-depth understanding as to the essence of the pupils' experiences that make school life satisfying among the Malaysian primary school pupils who live in a multiethnic society. The current study revealed four important aspects that define the Malaysian pupils' satisfaction with school life. These four aspects are: (1) emotional contentment, (2) curricular achievement and co-curricular involvement, (3) safe, conducive, and comfortable learning environment, and (4) development of the 21st-century skills.

The first theme that emerged in the analysis is related to the emotional fulfilment of the pupils arising from human relationships with teachers and peers. Regardless of the ethnicity, human connection is a universal denominator for sustaining a satisfied life at school (Roffey, 2012). As evident from the pupils' experiences in this study, kindness was demonstrated to bind any human relationship regardless of ethnicity and culture, age, and religion. Kindness makes the receivers happy (Buchanan and Bardi 2010), and the givers happier (Otake et al. 2006). Kindness makes relationships stronger (Jasielska 2018). The findings of this study correspond to the study of Oberle, Schonert-Reichl and Zumbo (2011), which showed that happiness among adolescents in a community where they belong is brought about by "supportive and positive relationships" (896) with the people they spend time with. Indeed, when pupils feel loved and taken care of by significant adults, pupils' life satisfaction is elevated (Haanpää et al. 2019). Conversely, according to the findings of Okun, Braver and Weir (1990), pupils reported low quality of satisfaction with school life when they lacked personal attention from their teachers.

While empirical studies have quantitatively identified the factors that contribute to satisfaction with school life among pupils and have statistically measured the level of significance and relationships between kindness and satisfaction with school life, this current study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing vivid imagery of how kindness builds human relationships. These findings were consistent with a study conducted by Baker et al. (2008) that a quality teacher-pupil relationship characterised by warmth, trust, and low degree of conflict contributes to satisfaction with school life. On the other hand, the present study describes a good teacher-pupil relationship with a vivid example of a teacher as the "backbone" to the pupils that gave emotional support to the pupils through cheering and praising their achievements. The present study showed that a teacher would also play the role as a parent in school because they listened to the pupils' problems and gave loving advice. A teacher would also be regarded a doctor because they provided tender loving care through first aid to the injured

and resuscitated a fainted pupil. Lastly, a teacher who baked a cake to treat a pupil for his or her achievement would be highly appreciated by the pupil.

The second theme is relating to the recognition for curricular and co-curricular achievements in school. It should be noted that the Malay and Indian pupils were actively involved in co-curricular activities, while there was hardly a mention about it among the Chinese participants. This could be explained by the Confucian culture that has influenced the Malaysian Chinese community to embark on developing an ingrained belief in the importance of education for their children. This could be a reason to explain the overemphasis on academic performance compared to their involvement in co-curricular activities among the Chinese students.

The results of this study further revealed that when pupils were achieving excellence in their academic performance, they developed a sense of self-worth, hence boosting their satisfaction with school. This finding is parallel to the study of Huang and Chang (2004), where it was discovered that pupils were more satisfied with school when they were involved in co-curricular activities because they felt they were relevant and that their contribution in school was meaningful. Previous studies viewed the level of satisfaction of the pupils in terms of academic performance—as well as satisfaction and academic performance to be correlated statistically (Ojeda, Flores and Navarro 2011). However, the present study found that beyond the curricular and co-curricular achievements of the pupils is the clear picture of fulfilled dreams and aspirations, thereby motivating the pupils to be even more actively engaged in school activities. The overwhelming sense of fulfilment that they expressed when they received recognition for their accomplishments reflects the personal success that pupils yearn to feel satisfied with their school life.

The third theme pertains to the physical environment of school. According to Han et al. (2018), pupils' general well-being is affected by how the learning environment is designed. For the Malay pupils, having fun while learning was their utmost. Studies revealed that pupils learn best when their creative mind is stirred with fun learning activities (Light 2002). Therefore, it is necessary that fun and enjoyment be integrated in the pupils' learning process (Lucardie 2014). Meanwhile, this study informed that having a well-equipped classroom was essential for the Chinese students. According to Ali et al. (2016), a conducive environment can stimulate the five senses, thereby maximising the learning abilities of an individual. On the contrary, pupils become dissatisfied with poor learning environment because it hampers them from effective learning. The Indian pupils, on the other hand, perceived safe, clean, and technology-savvy environment as paramount for a satisfying school experience.

Han et al. (2018) contended that cognitive achievement and pupil satisfaction are better in “ambient conditions” (12). The present study revealed that both Chinese and Indian pupils regarded safety in school as equally important. In cognisance of Maslow’s theory of needs, a pupil may develop a feeling of anxiety or harm if the sense of security is not met and therefore the pupil becomes dissatisfied with life. Findings of the current study correspond with Afolabi and Balogun (2017), who emphasised that when pupils felt that they were safe in their environment, may it be at home or in school, their level of satisfaction with life would be heightened.

A review of school satisfaction literature indicated that a well-equipped learning environment is positively associated with satisfaction with school life (Ali et al. 2016; Puteh et al. 2015; Zengele and Alemayehu 2016). In this study, pupils have provided clear descriptions of how they experienced enjoyment in a school environment that can protect and take good care of them. However, in contrast, the pupils’ emotional burnout could emanate due to poor-quality teachers and deficiently equipped classrooms and laboratory rooms.

The last theme concerns the embodied soft skills as described by the pupils such as “technical-savvy”, “reflection”, “discover things”, “work as a team”, and “internationalisation”. The findings of this study revealed that at a tender age, the pupils were curious whether they were prepared with the demands of their future time. They expressed that in their schools, the good-quality teachers trained them through effective teaching strategies and lesson contents that would be relevant for the 21st-century demands. This finding showed that the 21st-century learning strategies provided the teachers with the dynamics of scaffolding interventions that allow the pupils to self-discover and self-learn, thereby enabling them to practise skills independently and consequently increasing their satisfaction with school. In fact, the Malaysian authorities have initiated education reforms to improve the education system as stated in the Malaysia Educational Blueprint 2013–2025. Enhancing the 21st-century skills teaching and learning skills is one of the important agendas of education reform. Thus, the term of 21st-century skills has been commonly used at the school level.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscored that each ethnic group of pupils had provided a holistic view on their satisfaction with school life related to the four themes that were identified in this study. This study revealed practical implications that could be beneficial in leveraging life satisfying experiences of the pupils in school. For the school administrators and teachers, for pupils to be happy, a happy learning environment in school must be established. A conducive learning environment helps the pupils feel calm and comfortable while enjoying

their learning experience. Another aspect that the school administrators and teachers should take into consideration is further training for the teachers to be, first, adept in effective pedagogical strategies, especially with the aid of technology in teaching that will help pupils develop 21st-century learning skills; and second, empowered as such the teachers would be ingrained with the initiatives that could help them build positive relationships, especially with pupils.

For the policymakers, it is highly recommended that engaging co-curricular activities that could make the pupils excited about are integrated in the class programmes. While a lively class discussion and interesting lessons can spark curiosity among pupils, getting them engaged in co-curricular activities help them further develop the spirit of teamwork, perseverance, commitment, and passion for their co-curricular preferences. Apart from that, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, through the implementing channels of school principals and teachers, will consider the physical environment of the school. It has been proven in both previous studies and in this study that a conducive learning environment brings out the best in the pupils. Equally important are the personal and professional characteristics of the teachers. It is therefore recommended that personal and professional retraining are to be conducted for self-reflection and self-evaluation among the teachers. Finally, while pupils enjoy a safe and conducive learning environment as well as positive relationships with teachers and peers, they expressed concerns in meeting the learning demands of the 21st century. It is henceforth recommended that teachers in school receive professional development in the areas of knowledge and skills about the 21st-century learning.

There are some limitations in this study. First, the four themes that emerged in data analysis were not verified statistically. Hence, quantitative studies could be conducted to examine the relationship between: (1) emotional containment, (2) curricular achievement and co-curricular involvement, (3) safe and conducive learning environment, and (4) development of the 21st-century skills and satisfaction with school statistically. The current study did not make a clear cut of the school's demographic background. Future studies could investigate pupils' satisfaction with school life by considering school locations (urban versus rural schools). Additionally, the current study has no intention to compare the contributing factors to students' satisfaction with life across three different ethnic groups. Hence, recognition of this limitation could prompt future studies to investigate the similarities and differences in factors contributing to pupils' satisfaction with schools across ethnic groups. As the low-performing students were not able to participate in the interview sessions, this could limit the scope of the analysis of the current study. Hence, future studies could focus on research in this domain from the perspective of low-performing students. Our findings are

predominantly derived from the Malaysian multiracial context. Thus, it is premature to claim the generalisation of the findings to different societies. Nonetheless, this limitation has called for future investigation on students' satisfaction with school life in different societies or research contexts.

Overall, this study has extended the literature of satisfaction with school life from a multiethnic perspective. It is hoped that the current empirical findings could motivate future academic conversations about satisfaction with school life across a broader range of societies both locally and internationally.

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INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the university research committee [JEPeM USM Code: USM/JEPeM/19020139] and Malaysian Ministry of Education.

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