STUDENT WELL-BEING IN SCHOOL: LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES OF THEIR EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The impotance of importance of student well-being in school has been contended by studies of positive psychology in determining student outcomes. School well-being is a related construct and defined in terms of levels of school satisfaction, frequency of positive and negative affect, and useful in framing research focused on student experience. This paper reports on student emotional experiences of primary school students in Jakarta-Indonesia through two different approaches. A questionnaire identified levels of school satisfaction together with positive and negative affect in general, while focus group interviews explored specific situations in which students experience positive and negative emotions in school. Despite students generally feeling well in school, a few students indicated low levels of well-being while students who reported the highest level of satisfaction were not necessarily free from feeling bad in school –they still expressed dissatisfaction with their school experiences. Among several factors associated with student well-being in school, teacher behaviour is a crucial factor. Apart from issues arising concerning the quality of instruction, students pointed out that teacher behaviours, such as favouritism and grumpiness, are sources of negative feelings in school. In contrast, students reported that peer interactions in school are a factor that underpinned their intentions for going to school. Investigating the sources of student emotions in school through listening to their voices has provided valuable data that can assist in understanding the necessary conditions to optimise student well-being in school.

Key words: learning environment, school well-being, school satisfaction, emotions, teacher behaviours

INTRODUCTION

Raising the standards of achievement has become a globalised education policy discourse as a response to the challenge of globalisation (Lingard, 2010). Since it emerged in the 1980s, the global education reform movement has influenced the educational policies and strategies of many countries around the world (Sahlberg, 2007), including Indonesia.

In the globalised education reform movement the evaluation system manifests as national high-stakes testing (HST), and this becomes a driver of all the processes in education systems around the world (Lingard, 2010). As three systems in schooling – curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation – have symbiotic relationships with each other (Berstein, 1971, as cited in Lingard, 2010), it is understandable that

when an education system adopts an evaluation orientation, this has an impact on the pedagogical practices and the curriculum. The underlying logic of these arguments underpins Indonesia's education system and practices, particularly in applying the competence-based approach in the 2004 and 2006 curricula, and in implementing a centralised NE (National Examination) for standard assessment.

There has been much debate over HST with opponents challenging the presumed positive value of standardised testing. Several researchers, such as Amrein and Berliner (2002), Madaus, Russell, and Higgins (2009), and Polesel et al. (2012), identify the benefits of the implementation of standardised testing in education systems on teachers, curriculum and students. In contrast to the proponents, Madaus and Clarke

(2001) come to the conclusion that HST does not have a greatly positive impact on teaching and learning. In addition, the tests cannot motivate students who are unmotivated, despite also arguing that HST has a power to change instruction and learning.

In Indonesia, Marsigit (2013) argues, teaching for the NE is a source of pedagogical problems. The exam-dominated culture in the Indonesian education system drives educational practices, as is the case in most Asian countries (Tan & Samudya, 2009). Multiple choice questions are frequently used in these examinations, with questions focused on factual recall. Basic knowledge and skills are addressed in these questions, but little attention is paid to higher order thinking skills (Kaluge et al., 2004). Most of the time, the process of learning is spent on preparing for tests and exams. Teachers become focused on learning goals for performance rather than actual learning content for understanding (Natal, 2014; Schreuder, 2011). This leads to what Lingard (2010, p. 137) calls a culture of performativity that glossifies school achievement. Teachers have limited opportunities to design lesson plans that can stimulate student engagement and enjoyment (Syahril & Lesko, 2007). They cannot implement constructivist or student-centred practices as they are being pushed to teach in the way tests require.

In reviewing the history of the curriculum in the Indonesian education system, student-centred approaches have emerged as one of the core principles of the learning process. However, the evidence is strong that student-centred approaches are difficult to implement. With some notable exceptions, teacher-centred approaches prevail in Indonesia's education system (OECD/ADB, 2015).

Most teachers use this approach as their fundamental teaching style, and the ordinary classroom in Indonesia is characterised by traditional didactic approaches. Such activity occurs against a rigid time limit and structure, generating passive students who are not actively engaged in the learning process, where students are restricted and constrained in their interactions and movements, and where there is often no alternative activities, learner engagement, collaboration or negotiation possibilities (Epstein & McPartland, 1976; Kaluge et al., 2004). The biggest concern of teachers is that their students have accomplished the basic standards of competence and the teachers have met their responsibility by *transferring* to the learner the entire learning materials embedded in a scheduled curriculum. There is little concern as to whether or not the students really understand the content (Schreuder, 2011). As a consequence, education in schools tends to be restricted in scope, just focusing on baseline academic achievement or requirements of the curriculum (Allodi, 2010b). In addition, large class sizes are common in Indonesian schools, so the instructional process is delivered to the class as a whole and is not adapted to the needs of individual children (Kaluge, Setiasih, & Tjahjono, 2004). The implementation of education objectives has a much higher focus in practice on the achievement of academic outcomes, and practitioners pay little attention to other facets of learning such as aesthetic appreciation, social interaction, affective development and moral outcomes (Kaluge et al., 2004).

With regard to the context of learning in Indonesian schools outlined above, it could be assumed that academic achievement is increasingly perceived as a critical, perhaps even the sole, component of school success. This view appears to be flawed. Indeed, academic achievement does not describe the full scope of what educational outcomes need to include. Leonard, Bourke, and Schofield (2004) and Clement (2010) contend that school quality and effectiveness have to include student affective outcomes. Affective outcomes for students are important because they impact on cognitive outcomes (Elias et al., 1997; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007) and on quality of life in the long term (Wirth, 1988, as cited in Leonard et al., 2004).

More than three decades ago, Epstein and McPartland (1976) conceptualised school satisfaction as an outcome of schooling. Baker et al. (2003) also proposed school satisfaction as one measure of positive school outcomes. Ramsey and Clark (1990, as cited in Konu & Rimpela, 2002) argue that the importance of student feelings of well-being in school is more critical than formal academic achievements. Noddings (2003) contends that happiness should be the aim of education. The implication is that happiness and educational experiences should be addressed together. In other words, academic and affective aspects are not regarded as a contradictive or competing constructs. Noddings' notion is in line expectations most parents have for their children; that is, their children's well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009) or enjoyment of school experiences (Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008).These expectations are also in agreement with the concept of positive education defined as education for academic skills and for happiness (Seligman et al., 2009). However, student well-being in school has not gained central attention in school programs, because it is still mainly regarded as subsidiary – as separate from the comprehensive goal of education (Konu & Rimpela, 2002).

The term *school well-being* is used in some studies to describe satisfaction with school or education (e.g., Engels et al., 2004; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2000; Tian, Liu, et al., 2013; Van Petegem et al., 2008; Vyverman & Vettenburg, 2009). As a domain-specific aspect of SWB, school well-being consists of three components: school satisfaction, positive affect in school, and negative affect in school (Long et al., 2012; Tian, Liu, et al., 2013). Drawing from conceptualisations of school-well-being by Tian et al. (2013), this paper refers to school satisfaction in terms of a global cognitive evaluation of school experiences, whereas affective components are measured by the experience of positive affect and negative affect in school. Positive affect in school refers to student experiences of the frequency of positive emotions in school, such as

feeling pleasant, relaxed, or happy. Negative affect in school refers to the frequency of experiencing negative emotions, such as feeling bored, depressed, upset, or bored.

Current research on well-being is derived from two distinct general perspectives (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tian, Chen, et al., 2013; Waterman, 1993). The first is the hedonic approach, which focuses on subjective happiness and defines well-being in term of attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain (Ryan & Deci, 2001). 2013). Most research of well-being from hedonic perspectives also typically uses the term Subjective well-being (SWB) to measure the index of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). Thus, increasing well-being can be viewed as optimising feelings of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). The second perspective of well-being is eudaimonic, and concerned with living well and fulfilling or actualising one's human potential (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Waterman, 1993). Eudaimonic Well-being (EWB) has been defined as the extent to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). From a eudaimonic perspective, subjective happiness is not sufficient in describing well-being because well-being consists of more than happiness. Individuals who experience EWB will necessarily also experience SWB; however, experience of high levels of SWB does not necessarily correspond with high levels of EWB. People who feel happy may not necessarily feel psychologically well (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Waterman, 2008).

In addition to SWB, this study uses the eudaimonic concept of well-being embraced by Self-determination theory (SDT) that focuses on the principal factors that foster personal growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008b; Reeve, 2004; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2004). SDT focuses on the social environment that either facilitates or thwarts the fulfilment of basic psychological needs: need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Because of this, SDT has strong implications for educational practice and policies, especially

in the context of schools that apply pressure and focus on student outcomes (Ryan & Brown, 2005). SDT assumes that satisfaction of basic psychological needs fosters two types of well-being: SWB and EWB. SDT posits that there are different types of positive experience and that some conditions may yield SWB only, but may not necessarily foster EWB (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Taking my concern about Indonesia educational context described above, this study was conducted to explore student perspectives on their learning experiences. Focus of the this study was to identify what factors of the school and learning environments lead to students being satisfied or not with their school experiences and having positive and negative emotions about school. Design of this study considered the voice of students in expressing their feelings and thoughts about their experiences in all aspects of their school experience. The education research on student voice has been guided by the premise that first, young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, second, their insights not only warrant the attention but also the responses of adults, and third, they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359). Levin (2000) argues that classroom and school processes can be made powerful by talking and listening to the students.

RESEARCH METHOD

Design of this study can be described as mixed method research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This study used sequential timing: the quantitative phase incorporating the questionnaire comprised Phase 1, followed by the qualitative phase which aimed to collect in-depth information from the perspective of student. In order to a gain deeper understanding and a comprehensive picture of student satisfaction and emotions in schools, the qualitative findings complement the quantitative findings.

Participants

In this study, 345 students from eight primary schools in Jakarta participated in the phase 1 (the quantitative phase), and the 10-15% of s67 students were selected to engage in the focus group interviews (FGI) in the phase 2 (the qualitative phase). Students selected to participate in FGI were the 10-15% of student with the highest level and the 10-15% students with the lowest level of school satisfaction. Participants in the phase 1 consisted of 157 (45.51%) male students and 188 (54.49%) female students, while in the phase 2 consisted of 28 (41.79%) male students and 39 (58.21%) female students. The age range of student participant was 10–13-years (Mean= 11.08, $SD = .35$)

Data collection methods

In the quantitative phase, data were collected in a survey, measured by the School Satisfaction Scale (SSS) and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PNAS). These instruments were developed by modifying existing instruments from similar studies, followed by testing in a pilot study. The SSS measures the students' level of satisfaction with school. Response sets in each item consist of a 5-point Likert response: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). All statements in the SSS in this study are positive items, so there are no inversely-scored statements. The final SSS instrument consists of 15 statements in Bahasa Indonesia. The reliability coefficient of the final SSS instrument reveals a *Cronbach's Alpha* value of .86. The PNAS consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. In this study, the response set of the items were: 1 (none of the time), 2 (a little of the time), 3 (some of the time), 4 (most of the time), and 5 (all the time). The final PNAS in this study comprised 18 items of positive emotions (Positive Affect Scale/PAS) and 17 items of negative emotions (Negative Affect Scale/NAS) in Bahasa Indonesia. All items are arranged in a balanced order with two positive items followed by two negative items. The reliability coefficient of the final instruments of the PAS and NAS reveal a *Cronbach's Alpha* value of .85 and .86,

respectively.

In the phase 2, the focus group interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview approach. Both closed and open-ended questions were used (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Using this technique, the participants can move the discussion into related areas, but it was also possible to keep the interviews focused on the main topic.

Data analysis

In the quantitative analysis, the level of student satisfaction of their school experience and positive and negative emotions were addressed through the computation of the mean score of each scale. The mean score of school satisfaction and the mean score of experiencing positive emotions, and negative emotions were created by adding of all item of the SSS, PAS, and NAS, and dividing by number of items of each scale, respectively.

The focus group interview results were transcribed into narratives and digital text. The technique of data analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is used as the overarching process guiding analysis for the focus-group interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing the data in order to identify patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). In the process of searching for the themes, this study used an inductive as well as a deductive approach. An inductive approach means that the themes emerge directly from the data (this form bears some similarity to grounded theory). The deductive approach means that the themes were developed based on the research questions and the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The mean score of school satisfaction is 3.60 (N=333, SD= 0.45). This indicated that generally students are satisfied with their school experience. The mean score of positive emotion is 3.74 (N= 325, SD=

.54) and the mean score of negative emotion is 2.65 (N=333, SD=.56). This means that students positive emotions in school more often than negative emotions in school. Positive emotions most frequently experienced are: joyful, lively, delighted, and happy; whereas the negative emotions are: tired, confused, upset, and jittery.

The findings from the quantitative data in this study show that student levels of well-being are comprised of school satisfaction, with emotions indicating happiness. As the SSS examines student satisfaction of school experience as a whole; hence this scale does not inform specific aspects of schools or learning environments that relate to student feelings or thoughts. Generally feeling happy at school does not mean students feels well at all moments in school. In the focus group interviews, many students expressed dissatisfaction with their experiences in school. These findings confirm that schools or classrooms are not the same place for every student. Psychological outcomes, such as school satisfaction or emotional experiences, are influenced by individual differences in perceiving the environment and by the average perceptions of the student body in a classroom (Baker, 1998; Frenzel et al., 2007).

The qualitative inquiries are used to identify specific situations that make students feel specific positive and negative emotions in school. Based on the student voices in the FGI, factors in the learning environment impacting on student emotions in school can be divided into school conditions and psychosocial environment.

School conditions

School conditions are the physical conditions inside and surrounding of school (Konu & Rimpela, 2002). The differences in the school settings led to different perceptions. Therefore, factors in the learning environment related to positive view in one school may be regarded by students in other schools as factors associated with negative perceptions about school. School buildings, furniture, cleanliness, school

facilities, such as toilet, canteen, and playground are common themes emerging from FGI. While students did not mention these characteristics as directly affecting their specific emotions, the characteristics influenced their perceptions about school positively and negatively respectively. Even though the students did not express their emotions in relation to school conditions, according to Pekrun et al. (2007), there is a short-circuit between perceptions and emotions, so perceptions themselves are sufficient to stimulate emotions. With regard to the effect of physical environment, Konu and Rimpela(2002) argue that external and internal physical environments of schools are a key indicator of school well-being.

Psychosocial environments

This study found three aspects of psychosocial environments influencing student well-being in school: academic demand, student-student relationships, and teacher-student relationship (TSR). This paper focuses the discussion on TSR.

Teachers are a significant factor in the learning environment, stimulating positive and negative perceptions about school. "How students like school" can typically be inferred from the student answers to the question "how students like teachers" (Sabo, 1995 as cited in Konu & Rimpela, 2002, p. 84). When students evaluate whether or not their teacher is a good teacher, the interpersonal qualities of their teacher becomes a focus (McGrath & Noble, 2014). Every teacher has different interpersonal behaviours: some teachers are seen as friendly, whereas others are thought of as distant and aloof; some are dominant, while others are more democratic.

Generally, the students perceived that teachers in their schools showed caring behaviours towards them. They indicated on a number of occasions how the teachers took care of them. For example, when students were not well at school, the teacher would send them home, or when a student could not attend school because of sickness, the teacher would visit and help them to catch up and complete their assignments. Students also described teachers as nice, funny and caring, representing personal characteristics of the teachers and reflecting what students like about school. While students perceived that some of their teachers were firm, the attribute of being firm can be interpreted as a positive personal attribute as well as a negative attribute. It was seen as positive because the teachers encouraged the students to achieve higher marks; however, some students viewed it negatively because it related to strict discipline. According to Ang and Goh (2006), in Asian society, strictness can be perceived as a positive characteristic that means caring, concern or involvement; whereas for other cultures, it may be equated with negative characteristics, such as hostility, aggression or dominance.

However, students also considered teachers as a source of unpleasant experiences in school. Many students voiced negative feelings related to interpersonal teacher behaviours. Teacher interpersonal behaviours that influenced negative experiences in school were grumpiness and favouritism/pet phenomenon.

The students identified grumpy teachers based on their bad-tempered facial expressions, rare smiles and getting angry too easily. The students did not like teachers who were too serious when teaching, did not have a sense of humour, and got angry easily. The situation in the class was perceived as annoying when a teacher got angry with one student, then reprimanded all students in the class. This finding aligns with a study by Hopkins (2008), that when a teacher screams at all students in the class because of only a few students who are being naughty, the situation is perceived by the students as creating a terrible classroom climate. Grumpy teachers inhibited students from asking questions, or even disclosing their feelings to the teacher. Sometimes, the teacher got angry when a student asked an inappropriate question, even though it was because they did not understand the lesson content. In these situations, the students preferred to not ask questions, despite not understanding the lesson. There were also instances of the teacher reprimanding

students during the whole lesson. In another situation, a student observed a teacher who was angry and threw away the student's book because the student did not do their homework.

The students also remarked that teachers got angry with students who got bad scores in a test or had difficulty understanding the lesson. The teachers lost their patience when the students still did not understand despite being given further explanation. This finding confirms the finding from Stipek (2006) that teachers tend to display less patience with students who achieve less, particularly when there is pressure for the students to reach a particular standard. The students reported that the teachers told students that they were 'stupid' when they did not understand, or used other sarcastic words when students showed inappropriate behaviours in class.

> When there is a student who does not understand, the teacher gives comment on him as 'stupid'

> The teacher often mentioned students' names that got bad score in test, and then the teacher gets mad at them. When students still did not understand the lesson, the teacher got more mad … Teacher seems to like comparing students to each other and did not take into account those students.

These situations led to negative feelings, such as shame, hate or annoyance towards the teachers. These teacher responses indicate that they do not show genuine caring behaviours to students. Caring happens when one can accept and respect others regardless of any particular talent others have (Elias et al., 1997). Moreover, Goldstein (1999) argues that caring can be demonstrated by using scaffolding techniques, for example, teachers matching each task demand with student needs and interests, and providing instrumental support to maximise student opportunities for success. Thus, it appears that the teachers in this study were not taking a developmental perspective in understanding student development. According to Horowitz et al. (2005), teachers

have adopted the perspective of development when they understand that an individual has a number of different dimensions – physical, cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic – and that development along these dimensions does not occur in the same time within the same person, or at the same age for each child.

Generally, the students perceived that their teachers did not have most loved or best liked students. However, the students recognised that the teachers still showed differential behaviours towards high and lower-achieving students. The students noticed that the teachers were more likely to maintain closer relationships with the clever students. The teachers tended to offer more opportunities for clever students to do everything in class and gave them praise. On the other hand, the teachers seemed impatient when explaining the lesson to lower-ability students. When students needed more time to understand the lesson, the teachers easily got angry with them. The teachers also often compared high and low-ability student achievement. In an attempt to motivate students, the teachers used high-achiever results or efforts as a model for other students. Instead of being motivated, the low-ability students felt that the teachers showed favouritism only to high-achieving students.

> When there are many students who do not understand the lesson, teachers ask us to imitate the clever students in class. Teachers always talk about him or her.

These findings contrast with Baker (1999), who found that teachers strive to treat students equitably when giving academic support to both students who are highly satisfied with school and those who are dissatisfied. Teacher behaviours in this present study confirm previous studies showing that teachers show differential behaviours to high and low achievers (Babad, 1993; Stipek, 2006). These studies found that even though teachers attempt to provide more learning support to low-achieving students, the students perceive that teachers express warmer emotional support

towards high-achieving students and are more negative towards students who are low achievers. Roeser, Midgley and Urdan(1996) found a similar result: students who perceive that teachers only recognise the most able students and give rewards and support to them feel that the quality of the TSRs in the school is less warm and supportive.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

High-level school satisfaction and frequent positive emotions, and infrequent negative emotions cannot be exclusively used as a marker of school well-being. Despite students generally feeling satisfied with their school and experiencing positive emotions, negative emotional experiences in school are critical phenomena to be further explored. Feelings of dissatisfaction with school experiences are not only expressed by students with low-levels of school satisfaction, but also by those with the highest level of school satisfaction. Teacher interpersonal behaviours are perceived by students as a source of dissatisfaction. This indicates that students may experience happiness in schools as SWB, but may not necessarily yield EWB.

Student expressions of dissatisfaction of school experiences indicate that schools contexts studied do not afford much opportunity for students to satisfy their basic needs: feel academically competent, experience a sense of autonomy, and participate in caring and respectful relationships. It therefore seems logical that exposure to this kind of school environment would influence a negative appraisal of school experience in terms of negative feelings, beliefs and behaviours (Eccles & Roeser, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Strobel, 1998).

Student expression of negative affect in relation to their school experiences provides a valuable and potentially helpful source of information for teachers wishing to improve overall outcomes and effectiveness of their teaching. Teachers should understand the importance of student positive emotions in learning, and to do this they must have the skills to create learning environments that facilitate positive feelings about school in their students. In teaching practices, therefore, teachers can simultaneously teach well to achieve optimum academic results while also ensuring that students are happy in their learning (Seligman et al., 2009).

To develop a positive school, school settings should be designed to sustain high levels of positive interaction among *all* school participants: teachers, school staff and students (Huebner et al., 2009). To achieve this, schools need to establish norms of mutual respect expressed by teachers showing their respect to students, displaying warm affection, and showing care and consideration of student learning. Moreover, teachers should provide more time for listening and talking with students about their academic and personal problems. Conversely, teachers should not show any kind of rejection, or hostile and uncaring behaviours towards students. When students feel that their teachers care, are warm and supportive of them – what Wenzel (1997) called pedagogical caring – they more generally experience a sense of school well-being (Baker, 1998; Eccles & Roeser, 2004).

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