

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

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Abstract

Mental health disorders are major causes of disability in those affected, to their families and the wider society. Absence of mental illness or, more ambitiously, presence of psychological well-being is key to the optimal functioning of individuals, for them to lead fuller lives and to contribute actively to society. Previous studies have explored the links between psychological well-being and emotional intelligence. However no such study has focussed on rural and poor school students in Malaysia. Our study looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being of rural students in Sabah, Malaysia. This was a cross-sectional study of 430 students and we found that 73% of students rated their emotional intelligence as moderate and 90% rated their psychological well-being as moderate. Regression analysis showed that emotional intelligence could predict psychological well-being. Findings of our study are useful to policy makers if they want to improve the mental health and psychological well-being of adolescents. There is need for mental health education in schools to raise awareness about the importance of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being to minimise the impact of depression and stress faced by secondary school students.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence; Psychological Well-Being; Rural School Students

Introduction

Mental disorders are very common across the world; 300 million people suffer from depression and 260 million suffer from anxiety [1]. Malaysia is a South East Asian country with a population of 32.4 million people, and the picture here is no different: 29.2% of those aged 16 and over suffer from mental illnesses - amounting to 4.2 million people [2]. According to National Health and Morbidity Survey (2015) the prevalence was highest in Sabah and WP Labuan (42.9%) followed by WP Kuala Lumpur (39.8%) and Kelantan (39.1%); and women were slightly more affected than men (30.8% vs. 27.6%). This survey also noted that adolescents from low household income families had higher prevalence of mental health problems as compared to those from higher income families.

According to the Malaysian National Health and Morbidity Survey [3] one in five adolescents was depressed, two out of five were anxious and 1 in 10 was suffering from 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 - year- olds) had the highest prevalence of all three conditions.

Mental health is associated with emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to monitor self-emotions and of others, distinguishing them and using them as guides in thinking and behavior [4]. However, this aspect has not been adequately studied among rural students (from low-income families) in Malaysia.

Mehmood and Gulzar [5] conducted a study of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among Pakistani teenagers and showed that emotional intelligence has a negative relationship with depression and positive relationships with self-esteem. Those with high emotional intelligence tend to have an optimistic attitude towards self and society. Samaie and Sepahmansour [6] and Ramya [7] also found that there was a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological wellbeing.

The purpose of our study was to look at the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, and the influence of emotional intelligence on the psychological well-being of rural (and poor) students in Sabah, Malaysia. Sabah is the second largest (by geographical area) and the second most populous state in Malaysia, with a population of 3.9 million population [8]. 1.6 million people live in rural areas of Sabah and 53% of them are categorized as poor - this is the highest in Malaysia.

Methodology

We employed a cross-sectional study design using pen and paper self-completion questionnaires among 13 to 18 - year - old students in five schools from five large regions around Sabah. The schools were selected using cluster sampling technique and respondents were randomly selected. A power calculation found that a suitable number of respondents required for this study would be 383. Hence a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed - 120 questionnaires per region. Prior permission was sought and was obtained from each of the schools for participation in the study. The survey was carried out over a period of two months. Researchers only choose 430 students from poor families as defined as those with income below RM 1180 (according to Malaysia Department of Statistics [9]). Institutional ethical approval was received from the Ministry of Education and Sabah Educational Department, and administrative approvals were obtained from the school authorities prior to the survey.

The questionnaires assessed socio-demographic information, emotional intelligence (Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT)) and psychological well - being (Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being [RSPWB]). 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 psychological well-being of students.

Results

Variable	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	0.5

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents (N = 430).

Level of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being

We found that emotional intelligence of the majority of rural students was moderate (n = 314; 73%). 105 students had high emotional intelligence (24.4%) and 11 students (2.6%) had a low emotional intelligence. Majority of the students rated their psychological well-being as moderate (90%), 7.4% rated as low and 2.6% as high.

The influence of emotional intelligence on psychological well-being

The results of the regression analysis 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 wellbeing ($F (1,429) = 97.203, k < .01$).

Psychological Well-being	R ²	F	Beta	t	Sig.
Overall	.185	97.203	.430	9.859	.000**

Table 2: The influence of emotional intelligence on psychological well-being.

Discussion

Our study of 430 rural school students in Sabah, Malaysia found that their emotional intelligence and psychological well-being were at moderate levels. Our findings are similar to that of Zaiton, *et al.* [10], who showed that rural students had low emotional intelligence. They said that this could be due to rural students being separated from their families for the first time and being forced to be independent. This suggests that the well-being of rural youth is a matter of concern. Good mental health is extremely important for young people as mental health problems can result in negative consequences for the individual, family and society. Immediate and robust actions need to be taken to improve and nurture emotional intelligence and coping skills of these students.

It is not acceptable to have emotional intelligence and psychological well-being at moderate levels as such vulnerable adolescents are more likely to develop various mental health problems as they go through adolescence. This finding was also supported by the Indeks Belia Sabah report [11] which concluded that adolescent emotional intelligence at moderate levels was not sufficient and that improvements needed to be achieved. This, they said, is essential for adolescents to positively and effectively face day-to-day challenges in their lives.

Our study also found that emotional intelligence influences the psychological well-being of students. Emotional intelligence plays a key role in helping make better decisions when under stress and this indirectly affects psychological well-being. This observation has also been noted by others: Mehmood and Gulzar [5], Raina and Bakshi [12] and Urquijo, Extremera and Villa [13]. They found that students with positive emotional intelligence tended to have better psychological well-being.

We also noted students in our study having to face many difficulties in their lives in areas of finances, learning, relationships with others, and social demands. Poverty experienced by students can negatively impact students' lives. According to students, their financial problems give rise to other difficulties such as parental conflict, which stressed students and eventually disturbed their learning. If these challenges are not well dealt with, it can indirectly affect the formation of their personalities, self-esteem, and even the necessary life skills to lead fulfilling lives as adults. On the contrary, if properly addressed, emotional intelligence can act as an appropriate force to eliminate or reduce the negative effects of stress [14].

We argue that our research findings are in alignment with Seligman's theory [15] in that emotional intelligence is similar to positive emotion. So too, positive relationship, meaning of life and achievement all have similarities with the elements of psychological well-being as proposed by Ryff [16].

Findings of our study are useful to policy makers if they are to improve the mental health and psychological well-being of adolescents. There is need for mental health education in schools to raise awareness about the importance of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being to minimise the impact of depression and stress faced by secondary school students [17].

Our study having been cross-sectional in design had obvious limitations. Hence we suggest future studies be longitudinal or qualitative in nature. Another limitation of our study was that it was limited to rural school students. Future studies should compare school - attending students and drop outs, and urban and rural students. We also acknowledge the limitation that as this study was conducted in a rural population, the results may not be applicable to non-rural populations.

Conclusion

Our study, has for the first time, looked at the emotional intelligence and psychological well-being of rural students in Malaysia. These are important from current and future policy perspectives. We hope our results inform and benefit a range of stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, schools and parents in developing programs to build, enhance and sustain emotional intelligence to help ensure the psychological well-being of the country's future citizens.

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