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EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS IN SELECTED NATIONAL SCHOOLS IN FOUR STATES IN MALAYSIA[1]

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ABSTRACT

The juxtaposition of education and social mobility is based on the proposition that education plays an important role in mobility. This is particularly true in Malaysia as selection of students into premium classes, boarding schools, universities, for scholarships and for employment is still predominantly based on academic achievement. In an article featured by a national newspaper, the Prime Minister of Malaysia was quoted as saying that one of the government's achievements is in creating an environment of substantial social mobility and that the education system has enabled children to lead better lives than their parents. Is this sentiment, that education increases social mobility vis-à-vis to lead better lives, shared by the direct stakeholders of education, namely the school students? This paper sets out to investigate the perceptions of students in selected national primary and secondary schools in four states in Malaysia. A questionnaire survey consisting of eleven constructs was conducted to elicit responses on whether education allows them to lead better lives. A total of 331 school students in 9 primary schools and 297 school students in 8 secondary schools in Selangor, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak were randomly selected and surveyed. Findings reveal that there are significant differences in mean scores between rural and urban schools in terms of the role of education in increasing knowledge, expanding potentials, achieving ambition and becoming useful people. Between Sabah and Sarawak with Peninsular Malaysia, significant differences in mean scores are recorded in the constructs that education helps to improve class position, expanding potentials, securing better jobs and achieving ambitions. More interestingly, in a comparison between primary and secondary schools, results reveal that there are significant differences in mean scores on the constructs that education helps to increase knowledge, realize potential, obtain higher salaries, have more comfortable lives, achieve ambition, be loved by family, be loved by teachers and be loved by friends, with primary schools recording higher mean scores in all of these constructs. Does this mean that students become dis-illusioned as they go up the schooling ladder? Implications of results will be discussed.

Keywords: education, social mobility, national schools, Malaysia, academic achievement

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INTRODUCTION

Education appears to be the top priority of the Malaysian government as it normally gets the largest share of funds every year from the national budget. In 2014, 21 per cent and in 2015, about the same percentage (20.45% or RM56b) were allocated to the education sector (http://web10.bernama.com/budget2015/textbudget.php). This, in a way, demonstrates the government's commitment in enhancing education excellence, in accelerating academic achievement, competencies and skills. In becoming a developed and high-income country, development of the education system to produce talented, highly-skilled, creative and innovative workforce is crucial.

Even though the idea that education leads to eradication of poverty thus increasing social mobility persists, it is still very much debatable as there are exogenous factors to be considered such as the outcomes of education, changes in the labor market, opportunities for employment and distribution of wealth. Nonetheless, this paper takes the stand that educational non-achievement appears to be one of the main barriers which stop people moving out of poverty. This is because the juxtaposition of education and social mobility is based on the proposition that education plays an important role in mobility (Neelsen, 1975).

It is universally accepted that knowledge, or in contemporary terms, continuous learning, is the pillar of civilization and the foundation for excellence. However, the notion of knowledge has to be operationalized. When Malaysia was actively *meta*-morphosizing (transforming from agro-based) into an industrialized nation, conventional societal development approaches tended to focus on economic aspects such as wealth and income. Subjects and majors in the pure sciences such as physics and engineering were the beck and call of the nation's war cry. Subjects and majors in the *pseudo* sciences such as arts and literature were considered illusive or at most, irrelevant. The unintended consequence of this emphasis was that economic progress leaves behind a trail of moral decay and social decadence. Days without news of social impropriety, robberies, murder or assaults were an exception (The Malaysian Insider, 2013). As a result, Malaysia's education system is now *anthropo*-morphosizing (humanizing) to include societal development with concerns for social and ecological aspects such as quality of life, moral and ethics and ethnic studies. Thus the idea of societal development has embraced the wider living conditions which the concept of quality of life (QOL) or well-being[2] attempts to capture.

Education can be a blessing or a curse, a threat or an opportunity. In its purest sense, the education system is a *sine qua non* of life chances. It plays a key role in determining future life chances and in mitigating or exacerbating social inequalities. Social indicators like number of school drop-outs, rate of crime and depression have been found to be linked with these inequalities (Siah et al, 2010; Pemadam, 2008; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; The Borneo Post, 2006).

THE RESEARCH

[2] The Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQOLI), developed in 1999, is now known as Malaysian Well-being Index (MWI). From 11 components for MQOLI, the MWI now has 14 components for both economic and social categories. Education Component Index is listed under the Economic Well-being category (Economic Planning Unit 2013).

To be effective, the goals of education set forth in the Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education 2013) have to be shared by those going through it. For instance, is the aspiration "to create a system whereby students have opportunities to build shared experiences and aspirations that form the foundation for unity" as highlighted in the National Education Blueprint or the view of the current Prime Minister that the education system has enabled children to lead better lives than their parents, shared by the direct stakeholder namely the students? On the same note, do these students share the aspiration of five system outcomes of access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency, as outlined in the Education Blueprint?

Hence, the main objective of this paper is to examine the perceptions of students in selected national primary and secondary schools in four states in Malaysia. Eleven constructs were examined which were, if the education they are receiving helps them to:

i. increase their knowledge
ii. improve their position in class
iii. expand their potentials
iv. obtain good jobs
v. get high salary
vi. become a useful person
vii. be loved by family
viii. be loved by teachers
ix. be loved by friends
x. live happily
xi. achieve ambitions

These eleven constructs, according to this research, enhance students' social mobility. Here, social mobility is further divided into four domains:

i. improved human capital
ii. improved livelihood
iii. self-actualization
iv. social acceptance

The constructs making up each domain are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Research Constructs and their Respective Domains

Increase knowledge	IMPROVED HUMAN CAPITAL
Improve position in class from year to year	
Expand potential	
Get high salary	IMPROVED LIVELIHOOD
Secure good jobs	
Live happily	SELF-ACTUALIZATION
Achieve ambition	
Become useful person	

Loved by family	SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE
Loved by teachers	
Liked by friends	

Education and Improved Human Capital

After the industrialization wave, we are now challenged with another great wave of social mobility, that of knowledge economy and technological revolution. This wave calls for a 'win-win' for economic efficiency and social justice and the Human Capital Theory puts in place the notion that as workers become better educated, they are equipped with knowledge, skills and attitude that would make them more productive and as they are more productive, their incomes will rise.

Education and Improved Livelihood

Education, as eluded earlier, is a way out of poverty. It provides means to create new sources of income and improve the students' livelihood and economic mobility.

Education and Self-Actualization

"Self-actualization is what educated existence is all about" (Brooks, 2000). Education, in its purest form, fits into the notion of education as an intrinsic "social good", seeking to further one's knowledge of self and one's environment.

Education and Social Acceptance

Consistent with the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual [JERI]) values espoused in the national education philosophy of Malaysia, academic achievement should not come with social cost. However, with the lack of emphasis on the 'social' aspect of values, the education system needs to ensure that students do not become like *humpty-dumpties* who are inept in social relationships. Students must feel they are included and loved in the community and society. How else does one explain the fetish of number of likes they receive in the social media? It is important to note that the current cohorts of students in schools belong to Generation Z (born 1995-2009), the first generation never to have experienced the pre-internet world.

RESEARCH METHOD

A total of 331 school students in nine primary schools and 297 school students in eight secondary schools in Selangor, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak were involved in this research. A stratified purposeful sampling approach was used in selecting the schools. A questionnaire survey together with focused group discussion (FGD) was used. For the questionnaire, the school students were asked to rate from a scale of strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree.

Testing Goodness of Data

Internal Consistency Reliabilities

The Cronbach's Alpha (α) value indicates the consistency level for each construct. The α values for Improved Human Capital, Improved Livelihood, Self-Actualization and Social Capital are 0.55, 0.65, 0.67 and 0.78 respectively. Since an α value of above 0.50 (Kline, 2005, 2009) is considered acceptable for internal consistency, the constructs measured are therefore, reliable.

Normality

The univariate normality is confirmed for the eleven constructs with the skew estimates lower than the absolute value of 3 and kurtosis estimates less than the absolute value of 7 (West, Finch and Curran, 1995).

Multicollinearity

To test for multicollinearity, the association between exogenous and endogenous constructs using correlation coefficient is measured (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). Here, Pearson correlation is used as correlation measurement. The Pearson correlation matrix demonstrates that none of the coefficients is greater than 0.85, indicating that no significant violation to the non-collinearity assumption.

RESULTS

Analyses were carried out on:

- comparison of means between students in primary (SK) and secondary schools (SMK)
- comparison of means between students in Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak
- comparison of means between male and female students
- comparison of means between students in rural and urban schools

Demography of Schools

The breakdown of the nine primary schools and eight secondary schools (identified by number) with the number of respondents are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Number of Students in SK and SMK

School	Name of school	Number of Student Respondents	Total number of respondents
Primary Schools	SK 1	25	331
	SK 2	40	
	SK 3	41	
	SK 4	37	
	SK 5	39	
	SK 6	40	
	SK 7	37	
	SK 8	40	
	SK 9	32	
Secondary Schools	SMK 1	40	297
	SMK 2	40	
	SMK 3	40	
	SMK 4	33	
	SMK 5	38	
	SMK 6	41	
	SMK 7	44	
	SMK 8	21	
Grand Total			628

Source: 1R+3r fieldwork data (2013)
Note: SK = sekolah rendah kebangsaan (national primary school)
SMK = sekolah menengah kebangsaan (national secondary school)

Ethnic Composition

Figure 1 displays the ethnic groups of students in both SK and SMK. Majority of the students are of Malay ethnicity.

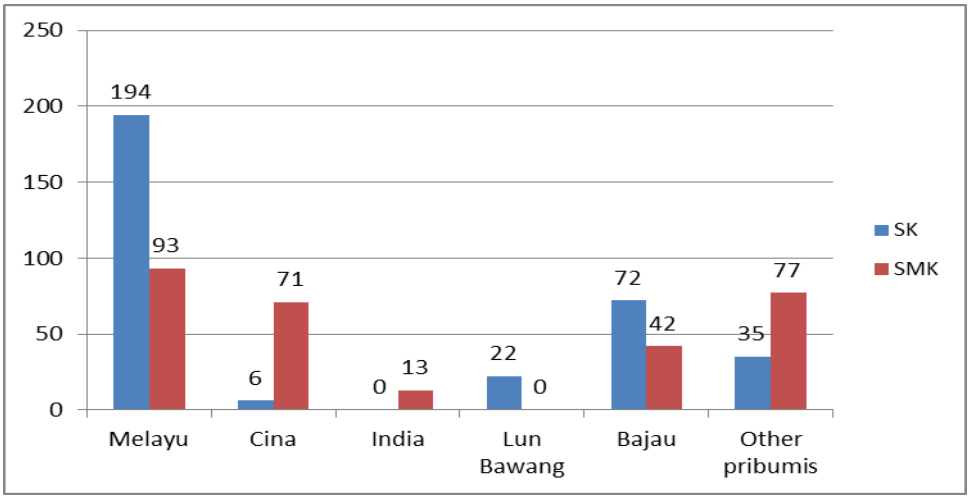

Figure 3 Ethnic Composition of Students (N= 625, 3 Missing)

Comparison of Means between Students in SK and SMK

Table 3 Comparison of Means between Students in SK and SMK

Construct	School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
Increase knowledge	SK	331	4.71	.49	.003
	SMK	297	4.57	.70	
Improve position in class	SK	330	4.33	.85	
	SMK	297	4.11	.77	
Expand potential	SK	328	4.14	.81	.007
	SMK	296	3.96	.81	
Obtain high salary	SK	328	3.93	1.06	.003
	SMK	297	3.68	1.05	
Secure good jobs	SK	326	4.43	.72	
	SMK	297	4.21	.79	
Live happily	SK	328	4.21	.86	.000
	SMK	297	4.10	.82	
Achieve ambition	SK	330	4.57	.67	.000
	SMK	297	4.35	.78	
Become useful person	SK	331	4.66	.56	
	SMK	297	4.54	.68	
Loved by family	SK	331	4.66	.56	.000
	SMK	296	4.41	.72	
Loved by teachers	SK	329	4.40	.76	.000
	SMK	296	4.20	.81	
Liked by friends	SK	331	4.48	.70	.014
	SMK	295	4.25	.73	

Data in Table 3 above shows that students from both SK and SMK share the same perception that education in Malaysia serves, first and foremost, to increase their knowledge. While the other constructs show degrees of variability in terms of importance between the two cohorts, they also share the common ground that education in Malaysia serves the least to obtain high salaries. The mean scores of all constructs were higher among students in SK than students in SMK. Students in primary schools scored significantly higher means in eight constructs than students in secondary schools – increase knowledge, expand potential, obtain high salary, live happily, achieve ambition, loved by family, teachers and friends. There are no significant differences between these two groups of students in their perceptions towards the role of education to improve position in class, secure good jobs and become useful person.

The eleven constructs are collapsed into the four domains stated in Table 1 and the comparison of the mean scores obtained by the primary and secondary students is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 Comparison of Means by Domains

					Independent samples t-test		
Domain	Type of School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p	t	df
Improved Human Capital	SK	330	4.36	.48	.001	3.37	581.20
	SMK	296	4.21	.57			
Improved Livelihood	SK	326	4.12	.84	.007	2.69	619
	SMK	295	3.95	.81			
Self-Actualisation	SK	328	4.53	.52	.000	4.35	585.45
	SMK	296	4.33	.61			
Social Acceptance	SK	328	4.51	.52	.000	4.72	566.19
	SMK	296	4.29	.65			

Students in primary schools obtained significantly higher mean scores in each of the four domains than those in secondary schools. As this is not a longitudinal study, it is interesting to question if secondary students experience unmatched expectations as they continue up the education ladder. Could this be a reason why school dropout rate is higher in secondary schools than primary schools as reported by Talent Corp? (Borneo Post online, 2012).

Comparison of Means between Students in Sabah and Sarawak with Peninsular Malaysia

Table 5 Means of Constructs in Peninsular and Sabah/Sarawak

Construct	Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
Increase knowledge	Sabah/Sarawak	595	4.66	.55	
	West Malaysia	590	4.58	.63	
Improve position in class	Sabah/Sarawak	594	4.04	.92	0.002
	West Malaysia	590	3.96	.90	
Expand potential	Sabah/Sarawak	593	4.08	.86	.007
	West Malaysia	589	3.99	.86	
Obtain high salary	Sabah/Sarawak	595	3.65	1.17	
	West Malaysia	589	3.80	1.06	
Secure good jobs	Sabah/Sarawak	589	4.25	.855	.041
	West Malaysia	587	4.18	.908	
Live happily	Sabah/Sarawak	593	4.23	.841	
	West Malaysia	590	4.17	.858	
Achieve ambition	Sabah/Sarawak	592	4.40	.79	.014
	West Malaysia	589	4.35	.77	
Become useful person	Sabah/Sarawak	592	4.55	.65	
	West Malaysia	590	4.49	.70	
Loved by family	Sabah/Sarawak	592	4.37	.83	
	West Malaysia	590	4.41	.831	
Loved by teachers	Sabah/Sarawak	591	4.16	.90	
	West Malaysia	589	4.17	.90	
Liked by friends	Sabah/Sarawak	592	4.23	.81	
	West Malaysia	590	4.23	.86	

From Table 5, students from either Sabah/Sarawak or Peninsular Malaysia perceived that education primarily allows them to increase their knowledge. These students also share the view that education least allows them to obtain high salary.

Among these eleven constructs, only four have significant differences. They are ‘improve position in class’, ‘expand potential’, ‘secure better jobs’ and ‘achieve ambition’. Students from Sabah/Sarawak scored higher means in all these four constructs than their peers from Peninsular Malaysia.

Comparison of Means between Gender

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Table 6 Means of Constructs by Gender

Construct	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Increase knowledge	Male	524	4.55	.64
	Female	661	4.67	.54
Improve position in class	Male	523	3.87	.97
	Female	661	4.10	.84
Expand potential	Male	523	4.0	.90
	Female	659	4.07	.83
Obtain high salary	Male	523	3.69	1.19
	Female	661	4.26	.87
Secure good jobs	Male	519	4.15	.90
	Female	657	4.26	.87
Live happily	Male	522	4.14	.89
	Female	661	4.25	.82
Achieve ambition	Male	522	4.33	.79
	Female	659	4.41	.77
Become useful person	Male	521	4.45	.72
	Female	661	4.58	.62
Loved by family	Male	521	4.34	.93
	Female	661	4.43	.73
Loved by teachers	Male	529	4.12	.95
	Female	659	4.20	.86
Liked by friends	Male	521	4.19	.89
	Female	661	4.26	.792

It can be seen from Table 6 that both the male and female students perceive that education serves to increase their knowledge first but least serve to obtain high salaries. It is interesting to note that the female students scored higher means in all constructs than their male peers.

Comparison of Means between Gender in SK

When the means are compared, the construct ‘increase knowledge’ is significantly different between the two genders in SK (Table 7) while in SMK (Table 8), the constructs ‘improve position in class’, ‘high salary’, ‘better jobs’, ‘happy living’, ‘useful person’ and ‘loved by friends’ are significantly different. Could this be another reason why girls perform better in national exams and there is sharp decline in boys’ enrolment in secondary schools (UNGEI, 2012)?

Table 7 Comparison of Means in SK

Construct	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Increase knowledge	Male	163	4.62	.54	-3.37	306.22	.001
	Female	168	4.80	.42			

Comparison of Means between Gender in SMK

Table 8 Comparison of Means in SMK

Construct	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Improve Position in class	Male	108	3.95	.77	-2.69	221.20	.008
	Female	189	4.20	.76			
High salary	Male	108	3.52	1.05	-2.02	295	.044
	Female	189	3.77	1.04			
Better jobs	Male	108	4.05	.79	-2.80	293	.006
	Female	187	4.31	.78			
Happy living	Male	108	3.85	.83	-4.06	295	.000
	Female	189	4.24	.78			
Useful person	Male	108	4.39	.80	-2.63	174.17	.009
	Female	189	4.62	.59			
Loved by friends	Male	108	4.10	.75	-2.73	295	.007
	Female	189	4.34	.70			

Comparison of Means between Students in Urban and Rural Schools

Table 9 Mean of Constructs between Urban and Rural Schools

Construct	Sector	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
Increase knowledge	Urban	691	4.64	.54	.012
	Rural	494	4.58	.66	
Improve position in class	Urban	690	3.92	.93	
	Rural	494	4.12	.87	
Expand potential	Urban	689	3.97	.87	.026
	Rural	493	4.13	.84	
Obtain high salary	Urban	690	3.66	1.09	
	Rural	494	3.81	1.16	
Secure good jobs	Urban	688	4.15	.92	
	Rural	488	4.30	.82	
Live happily	Urban	691	4.12	.90	
	Rural	492	4.32	.76	
Achieve ambition	Urban	690	4.31	.79	
	Rural	491	4.45	.75	
Become useful person	Urban	691	4.49	.68	.039
	Rural	491	4.56	.66	
Loved by family	Urban	691	4.32	.89	
	Rural	491	4.49	.73	
Loved by teachers	Urban	691	4.06	.95	
	Rural	491	4.31	.81	
Liked by friends	Urban	690	4.17	.86	
	Rural	490	4.31	.79	

From Table 9, students from urban schools scored higher than those from rural schools in the construct ‘increase knowledge’ but had lower scores in all the other constructs.

When the means are compared, ‘increase knowledge’, ‘expand potential’ and ‘becoming useful person’ are significantly different

Implications of Results

The results of this research reveal that students in primary schools (SK) score higher means in all eleven constructs as compared to those in secondary schools (SMK). The four domains of social mobility are also significantly different between SK and SMK. Students from Sabah/Sarawak score higher means than their peers in Peninsular Malaysia in all constructs except ‘increase knowledge’, ‘loved by family’ and ‘loved by teachers’. Female students score higher means in all constructs than their male peers. Students in rural schools score higher means in all constructs except ‘increase knowledge’ than their peers in urban schools.

Of great concern are the results between primary and secondary schools. While primary education is compulsory, secondary schooling is not. If the Education ministry is serious about *kemenjadian* (Malay word for 'becoming') of students (i.e. becoming better persons through character development, knowledge acquisition, skills enhancement) (Ong et al., 2013; Ong et al., 2010), then education cannot be logically isolated from the context of society, from external normative and social influences (Rudner, 1977).

CONCLUSION

The signs are here to see – student dropout especially among the boys, the culture of *melepak* (idling), consistent failure of secondary students to meet the minimum proficiency level in Mathematics, Reading and Science in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and low achievement standards, far behind first tier, in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Ministry of Education 2013), increased criminal activities by students aged between 12 and 17 as reported by Malaysia Crime Prevention Foundation (MCPF) – these should be wake-up call for the authorities to seriously look into the matter.

Education is a serious business. Concerted efforts from the government, schools, parents and communities need to be strengthened in making our education system a success story: a story that encourages students to enjoy going to school, to learn and to become better and useful persons. Concrete strategies, which clearly have the students' interests at heart to boost the learning interest of boys and to maintain the learning momentum in secondary schools are urgently needed. Only then can education be the raison d'être for social mobility leading ultimately to better lives.

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