

Research Article:

Comparing Students' Perceptions on Quality of School Life: Voices From Malay and Chinese Ethnic Students

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ABSTRACT

While the quality of school life is expected to be cultural and context-specific, fewer studies have been conducted to investigate the conceptualisation of quality of school life in a multiethnic and multicultural context. This study aims to compare Malay and Chinese primary school students' perceptions on the quality of school life in Malaysia. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey research design. Survey data were collected from 594 Grade 5 students. Findings revealed that both Malay and Chinese students ranked the highest score on the opportunity dimension and the lowest scores on the negative affect dimension. The Malay students scored higher means in all dimensions of quality of schools than the Chinese students, except the findings revealed cultural differences in the perceptions of quality of school life.

Keywords: Culture, emotion, Quality of School Life (QSL), subject well-being

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INTRODUCTION

"What makes a good school?" is an important question embedded in educational effectiveness research (Reynolds et al., 2014; Kyriakides et al., 2019). In this respect, students' quality of school life (QSL) has been highlighted as an important aspect of schooling within the context of school effectiveness and school improvement (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2000). Despite a relative lack of emphasis in the literature (Tangen, 2009), QSL is crucial to improve students' classroom learning experience, achievement, and socialization (Kong, 2008; Thien & Razak, 2013).

Students' QSL revolves around students' general sense of positive and/or negative feelings of their experiences, sense of well-being, and satisfaction as well as their involvement in formal and informal lives in schools (Ainley et al., 1990; Epstein & McPartland, 1976; Karatzias et al., 2001; Malin & Linnakylä, 2001; Williams & Batten, 1981). However, the perception of QSL is expected to be cultural and context-specific; considering that individuals' perception of QSL is associated with the context of the culture and value systems in which they live (The WHOQOL Group, 1995). As such, it is expected that students' conceptualisation of QSL is different across schools and ethnic groups.

With respect to this concern, few researchers have examined students' QSL within a multicultural and multiethnic context. In this regard, the unique educational system in Malaysia offers a good investigation platform to examine the cultural effects on the conceptualisation of QSL. Malaysia is a multiethnic and multireligious country in Southeast Asia. The major ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese and Indians, where each race has its own identity in broader Malaysian society. There are three different types of public-funded primary schools in Malaysia, namely (1) National Primary Schools, (2) National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools, and (3) National-Type (Tamil) Primary Schools. Being public-funded schools, these three types of primary schools are centrally administered by the Ministry of Education and therefore they share similar school systems and curriculum (Thien & Razak, 2014). QSL research across different school contexts in a multicultural and multiethnic context remains scarce in the literature. In bridging the research gaps, at a fundamental stage, this study attempts to investigate and compare the diversity of Malay and Chinese students' conceptualisation of their QSL who studied in two types of public-funded schools in Malaysia, namely National Primary Schools (dominantly Malay students) and National-Type (Chinese) (dominantly Chinese students) primary schools by using Ainley, et al.'s (1986) version of QSL scale.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE

The conceptualisation of QSL can be discussed from affective and cognitive domains. The affective domain is mostly dominated in the school context (Karatzias et al., 2001; Thien et al., 2019) whereas the cognitive domain is dominated in the higher education context (Cheng & Sin, 2020; Sirgy et al., 2007). The current study is contextualised in the primary school context. Thus, the focus of QSL is restricted to the affective domain, referring to

students' emotional and well-being. QSL scale with the application of the concept of quality of life to a school setting was developed by Epstein and McPartland (1976) in the United States. Epstein and McPartland's (1976) QSL scale comprised three dimensions of student reactions: attitudes towards teachers, commitment to school work, and satisfaction with school in general. Students who responded as having a high level of satisfaction with their QSL were those who were happy with the demands of the school setting, hard-working, received positive messages from teachers and parents; and had more positive self-evaluations (Epstein & McPartland, 1976).

Previous studies in the Western settings have extended Epstein and McPartland's (1976) QSL scale by introducing more dimensions of QSL. For example, in Australia, Williams and Batten (1981) identified five specific dimensions of QSL and two general dimensions of global feelings of the school experience. The five specific dimensions were: (1) teacher-student relations, (2) social integration, (3) opportunity, (4) achievement, and (5) adventure. The two global feelings of QSL were: (1) general satisfaction (referring to general positive feelings about school), and (2) negative affect (referring to general negative personal reactions to school). After extensive empirical testing, the current QSL questionnaire has been revised to 40 items, tapping seven dimensions of school life: (1) positive affect, (2) negative affect, (3) status (sense of worth), (4) identity (learning and getting on with others), (5) opportunity (relevance of schooling), (6) adventure (in learning), and (7) achievement (Ainley et al., 1990). Table 1 shows the dimension descriptions of Epstein and McPartland's (1976), and Williams and Batten's (1981) QSL versions. These two QSL scales were further extended and revised by several previous studies as shown in Table 1.

Cross-cultural research using QSL questionnaires revealed differences in the dimension manifestations, which pointed to differences in the conceptualisation of QSL by cultural groups of students. For example, in a Scottish secondary school context, Karatzias et al. (2001) realised that QSL was conceptualised by the Scottish secondary school students as a general sense of well-being resulting from the students' involvement in school life and their engagement in the school environment. On the other hand, in a Finnish study that involved Grade 8 students, Malin and Linnakyla (2001) found that the students conceptualised QSL as (1) provision of learning opportunities, (2) development of personnel and social identity, (3) strengthening of social esteem and sense of responsibility, and (4) fostering student social integration for beneficial educational effect. Overall, most studies synthesised the conceptualisation of QSL as students perceiving school life based on their feelings towards school satisfaction from diverse perspectives.

Table 1. Conceptualisation of students' quality of school life and its dimensionality across different studies

| Scholars (Year) | Conceptualisations | Dimensions | Descriptions |
|-------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Epstein and McPartland (1976) | A measure affected by both the informal and formal aspects of school: social and task-related experiences, and relationships with authority figures and peers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Satisfaction with school• Commitment to school work• Reactions to teacher | <p>Students' general reactions to school.</p> <p>The level of students' interest in work is prompted by the educational opportunities available.</p> <p>The nature of teacher-student relations.</p> |
| Williams and Batten (1981) | The degree of overall happiness, well-being, or satisfaction in terms of their present circumstances. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• General satisfaction• Negative affect• Teacher-student relations• Social integration• Opportunity• Achievement• Adventure | <p>General positive feelings about school.</p> <p>General negative personal reactions to school.</p> <p>The quality of interactions between teachers and students.</p> <p>Students' relationships with classmates and other people.</p> <p>Students' perceptions of the relevance of schooling to his or her experience.</p> <p>A sense of being successful in schoolwork.</p> <p>A sense of self-motivation in learning and a sense that learning is enjoyable for its own sake.</p> |

(continue on next page)

Table 1 (Continued)

| Scholars (Year) | Conceptualisations | Dimensions | Descriptions |
|---------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Ainley, Batten, & Miller (1984) | Not reported | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction • Negative affect • Teachers • Status • Identity • Opportunity • Achievement | <p>The satisfaction of the students with school work.</p> <p>The feeling of alienation against the school.</p> <p>The awareness of supportiveness of teachers.</p> <p>The status accorded to the student.</p> <p>The sense of identity of the student.</p> <p>The opportunity for future life is created by schoolwork.</p> <p>The sense of achievement in school work.</p> |
| Flynn (1993) | Students' personal, experiential general well-being at school is reflected by students' level of satisfaction towards their daily school life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General affect • Negative affect • Status • Identity • Teachers • Opportunity | <p>Students' overall positive feelings about schools.</p> <p>Students' negative experiences of school.</p> <p>Students' sense of self-worth and importance to the school.</p> <p>Students' awareness of themselves and their ability to relate to others at school.</p> <p>Teacher-student relations.</p> <p>Students considered school work to be relevant to their future lives and creates opportunities for them.</p> |
| Malin & Linnakylä (2001) | The students' overall satisfaction in terms of their positive and negative experience concerning the characteristic functions of schooling. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity • Identity • Status • Teacher-student relations | <p>Opportunities for learning and achievement.</p> <p>Students' personal and social identity.</p> <p>Students' social esteem and sense of responsibility.</p> <p>Teacher-student relations for beneficial educational effect.</p> |

Extending Epstein and McPartland's (1976) QSL scale, the most widely used version is Ainley et al.'s (1986) QSL scale, which is multidimensional in nature and has been used commonly at the school level. Ainley et al.'s (1986) QSL scale consisted of seven dimensions: (1) positive affect, (2) negative affect, (3) status, (4) identity, (5) opportunity, (6) teacher-student relations, and (7) achievement. The conceptualisation of these seven dimensions of QSL is presented in Figure 1.

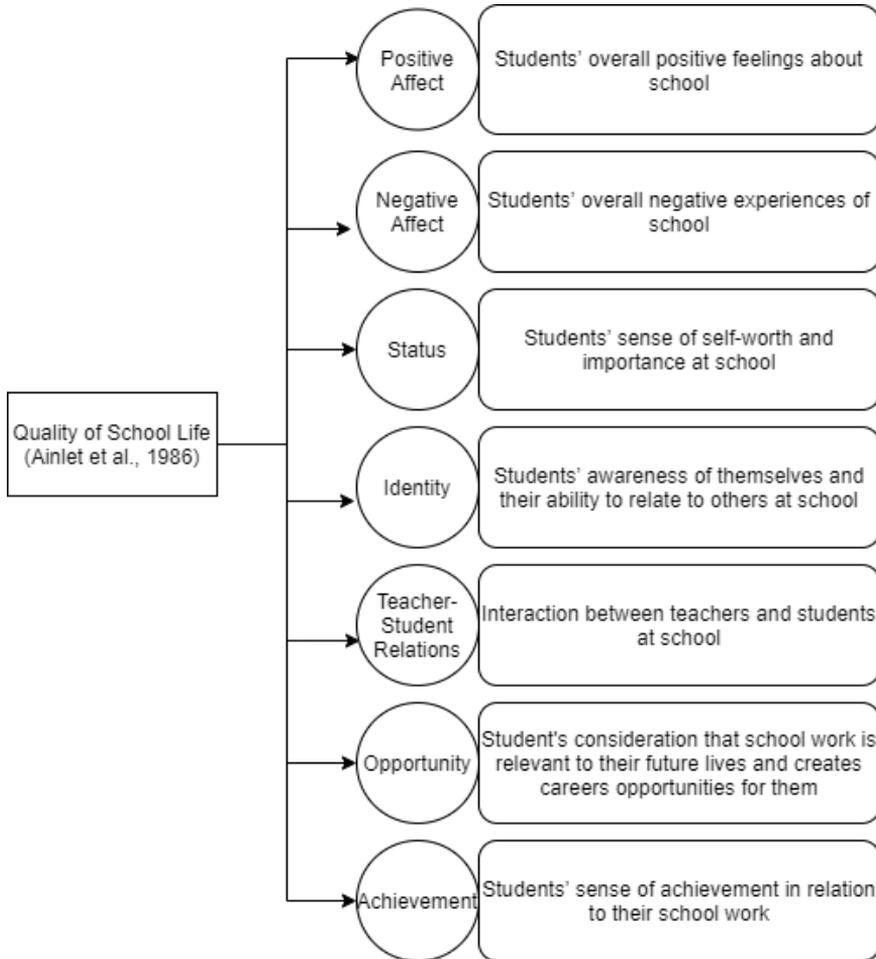


Figure 1. Quality of School Life Scale (Ainley et al., 1986)

In a recent Malaysian study, Thien (2018) employed Ainley et al.'s (1986) QSL scale to examine Malaysian Grade 5 students' conceptualisation of QSL. Malaysian Grade 5 students conceptualised QSL as a multidimensional construct with six underlying dimensions: (1) positive affect, (2) negative affect, (3) self-recognition, (4) achievement, (5) opportunity, and (6) teacher-student relations. These six dimensions contributed 58.2% of the variance

explained on students' QSL. However, it has not been explored to what extent that cultural differences and diversity have effects on the conceptualisation of QSL amongst Malaysian students.

In fact, there are limited studies on the conceptualisation of QSL in the Chinese school communities compared to the Western context (Thien et al., 2019). One available study is conducted by Pang (1999) in Hong Kong. Pang (1999) used Ainley et al.'s (1990) version of QSL questionnaire to investigate the conceptualisation of QSL amongst Hong Kong primary school students. Pang's (1999) study revealed the existence of two general dimensions: general satisfaction and negative affect, and five specific dimensions: (1) teacher-student relations, (2) social integration, (3) opportunity, (4) achievement, and (5) adventure. Considering that Pang's (1999) study was only conducted two years after the end of British colonialism in 1997, it is not surprising to find a high extent of similarities between Hong Kong students and students in the West.

Likewise, literature remains scarce with respect to the Malay students' QSL. To our best knowledge, Thien and Razak's (2013) was one of the limited QSL studies which had involved Malay secondary school students. Their findings revealed that school environment, character building, and relevancy of what they have learnt in schools are three domains in explaining their QSL. Meanwhile, Thien et al. (2019) have conceptualised Malaysian Chinese primary school students' quality of school life with six dimensions: (1) positive affect, (2) teacher-student relations, (3) friendship, (4) opportunity, (5) negative affect, and (6) achievement. A limited methodological study by Thien (2020) has specified and measured a second-order formative QSL scale with its six dimensions using a Malaysian primary school student sample. The literature review provokes the need for an investigation into the conceptualisation of QSL amongst the Malay and Chinese students in Malaysia.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Malaysia is a multiethnic country in Southeast Asia with an estimated total population of 32.5 million in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Its ethnic composition is 69.6% Malays, 22.6% Chinese, and 6.8% Indians, with the remaining 1.0 % having other ethnic affiliations (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2020), there are a total of 7,780 primary schools in Malaysia: 5,875 National Primary Schools (75.5%), 1,299 National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools (16.7%), and 527 National-Type (Tamil) Primary Schools (6.8%). The remaining 1% are Special Education Schools, Special Model Schools, and Government-Aided Religious Schools. As Malays and Chinese are the two major ethnic groups in Malaysia, this current study is limited to compare Malay and Chinese students' perception of QSL in National Primary Schools and National-Type (Chinese) Primary schools only.

Within the multicultural and multiethnic context of Malaysia, each Malaysian who belongs to an ethnic group has his or her own value system (Razak, 2007). Through the process of upbringing and socialisation, these values are reinforced within the family, religious bodies,

school, and workplace for each ethnic group. Over the years, individuals of each ethnic group have adopted these values as part of their cultural make-up. According to Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution, Malays are Muslims and habitually speak the Malay language and conform to Malay customs (Asma, 1996). Islam constitutes a key element in the Malay identity and contributes a critical impact on the Malay culture, particularly their values and behaviour (Thien & Razak, 2014). From the religious angle, Malays believe strongly in the religious concept of a "Supreme Being, Allah the Almighty" (Thien & Razak, 2014).

Meanwhile, from the cultural angle, Asma (1996) discussed three important underlying assumptions that determine the values of Malay culture. First, Malays believe that people must live in harmony with nature. This orientation tends to promote a healthy coexistence with those around them as well as a willingness to accept things the way they are. It stipulates that Malays have to adapt and take whatever comes and thus induces an attitude of humility, non-confrontation, adaptability, and even submission that allows community life to function smoothly. Second, Malays believe in hierarchical relationships where the unequal distribution of power is seen as natural and proper. This leads to a ready acceptance of unequal, even authoritarian relationships between old and young, superior and subordinate. The values of filial piety and respect for elders and authority are emphasised. Third, Malays have a strong sense of interdependence that leads to harmonious relationships with others and enable Malays to become members of a social network. Hence, it can be drawn that Malays strongly believe in the importance of living in a community of harmonious relationships.

As for the second main ethnic group in this study, the ancestors of Malaysian Chinese migrated from the People's Republic of China to British Malaya to meet the labour demands in the sectors of mining, plantation as well as ports and harbours in the early 19th century (Ang, 2017; Goh, 2012). The massive influx of Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s had brought about the establishment of Chinese-medium schools in British Malaya, which were later converted into National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools as advocated in *The Razak Report*¹ in 1956 before the declaration of Malaysian independence. National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools retained the use of Mandarin as the medium of instruction in schools. The use of Mandarin as the language of literacy and instruction in this school type plays a major role in preserving the traditional Chinese values and cultures among the generations of Chinese people in Malaysia.

The traditional Chinese values of loyalty and obedience, respect and deference, permission and restriction, trust as well as self-reliance are critical cultural values which the Chinese try to preserve within the family and community. Like all Chinese parents globally, Chinese parents in Malaysia value education as it is seen as the gateway to greater career opportunities and improvement in lifestyle (Tan et al., 2013). Chinese parents hold affirmative opinions about children's education and they usually expect their children to succeed in education. In this regard, the Chinese community also upholds the belief that hard work will lead to academic excellence (Chen, 2016; Tan et al., 2013).

To the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated cultural differences in students' perception on the quality of school life amongst Malay and Chinese students in a multicultural context in Malaysia. Such an investigation is important as it provides insights on cultural influences on students' interpretations of quality of school life and their expectations towards their educational experiences in schools. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the primary school students' perceptions towards QSL in the contexts of National Primary Schools and National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools in Malaysia. Next, similarities and differences in their perceptions were examined to identify the relevance of cultural influences on their QSL perceptions.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research survey design to examine the Malay and Chinese primary students' conceptualisation of QSL. QSL questionnaires were administered to the participants who studied in National and National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools in Penang and Selangor. A multistage stratified cluster sampling technique involving two stages of sample selection was employed in this study. Due to cost constraints, only 10 National Primary Schools and 10 National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools were selected from each metropolitan, producing a total of 20 National Primary Schools and 20 National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools (A total of 40 schools). Next, 20 Grade 5 students were selected from each school, which then produced a total desired number of 800 students. The questionnaires were distributed to these students via various methods as specified in the data collection section. The number of returned questionnaires was 335 and 259 from National Primary Schools and National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools, respectively, which produced an overall return rate of 74.3%. In total, there were 170 boys (50.7%) and 165 girls (49.3%) from National Primary Schools, whereas 121 boys (46.7%) and 138 girls (53.3%) from National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools participated in the survey.

Instrumentation

Ainley et al.'s (1986) QSL scale was used to measure students' conceptualisation of their QSL. Ainley et al.'s (1986) version of QSL scale consists of seven subscales with a total of 40 items: positive affect (5 items), negative affect (5 items), teacher-student relations (6 items), status (6 items), identity (6 items), opportunity (6 items), and achievement (6 items). The 40 items were measured by a four-point Likert scale from 'definitely disagree' (1) to 'definitely agree' (4). There are two reasons why the current study used the 4-point Likert-scale. First, we adopted the 4 Likert-point of the original Ainley et al.'s (1986) QSL scale. Secondly, the inclusion of an odd number with a neutral response option such as 5-point Likert-scale could create ambiguous meaning that leads to an increase in the measurement error (Kulas & Stachowski, 2013). This is because responding to the neutral option might not reflect their real perceived standing on the characteristic being measured (Kulas & Stachowski, 2013).

As the original version of QSL scale is available in English, all the 40 items were translated into the Malay and Mandarin languages respectively using forward and backward translation methods. Two language experts in English, Malay, and Chinese were involved in this study to ensure the readability and comprehensibility of the items. Inconsistencies between the resulting Malay, Mandarin, and original version were examined with caution. The Malay and Mandarin versions were then revised accordingly. A pre-test was conducted with three National Primary Schools and three National-Type (Chinese) Primary School students to ensure the suitability of the wording of the items. The face validity was warranted.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedure

Prior to the research implementation, this study had secured human ethnic approval from a local as a funder of this study (JEPeM Code: USM/JEPeM/19020139) and consent from the Ministry of Education to conduct both the survey and focus group interviews. This study emphasised the ethical issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Questionnaires were either distributed personally by the researchers or by mail attached with the consent obtained from the Malaysian educational regulatory authorities, and the informed consent for the selected school principals. To ensure the survey instruction is well-understood by the students, authorised teachers in each school administered the survey and explained the instructions to the students. Students had about 30 minutes to respond to the questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were either returned by mail or collected by the researchers. The data from the questionnaires were transferred to IBM SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics and t -test were applied to examine the means and mean differences of the seven dimensions of QSL.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows that the mean of each dimension of QSL based on the overall dataset. The mean of opportunity has the relative highest mean ($M = 3.570$, $SD = 0.500$) compared to the remaining six dimensions. This followed by positive affect ($M = 3.348$, $SD = 0.556$), teacher-student relationship ($M = 3.345$, $SD = 0.550$), identity ($M = 3.216$, $SD = 0.555$), achievement ($M = 3.136$, $SD = 0.560$), and status ($M = 2.719$, $SD = 0.621$). Meanwhile, the overall sample reported the lowest mean on the dimension of negative affect ($M = 1.691$, $SD = 0.602$). The Cronbach's alpha of each dimension was above the cut-off of 0.700 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating high internal consistency. The correlation between any two respective dimensions was significant at the level of 0.50.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation (N = 594)

| | Mean | SD | Alpha | PA | NA | TS | ST | ID | OP | AC |
|----|-------|-------|-------|----|----------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| PA | 3.348 | 0.556 | 0.837 | – | -0.4338* | 0.557* | 0.404* | 0.508* | 0.497* | -0.649* |
| NA | 1.691 | 0.602 | 0.802 | | – | 0.464* | -0.292* | -0.435* | -0.300* | -0.336* |
| TS | 3.345 | 0.550 | 0.832 | | | – | 0.396* | 0.563* | 0.538* | 0.542* |
| ST | 2.719 | 0.621 | 0.705 | | | | – | 0.589* | 0.282* | 0.526* |
| ID | 3.216 | 0.555 | 0.794 | | | | | – | 0.475* | 0.587* |
| OP | 3.570 | 0.500 | 0.701 | | | | | | – | 0.512* |
| AC | 3.136 | 0.560 | 0.816 | | | | | | | – |

Notes: PA = positive affect, NA = negative affect, TS = teacher-student relations, ST = status, ID = identity, OP = opportunity, AC = achievement. *All the correlation are significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that both Malay ($M = 3.652$, $SD = 0.370$) and Chinese students ($M = 3.371$, $SD = 0.594$) scored the highest mean on the dimension of opportunity. The mean difference of opportunity dimension between Malay and Chinese students was significant ($M = 0.280$, $SD = 0.042$) at the significant level of 0.50. The Malay students have scored higher mean value in six dimensions than the Chinese students except negative affect (see column 2 and 4), i.e., in the dimensions of positive affect ($M = 0.550$, $SD = 0.042$), teacher-student relations ($M = 0.388$, $SD = 0.044$), status ($M = 0.290$, $SD = 0.050$), identity ($M = 0.246$, $SD = 0.046$), opportunity ($M = 0.280$, $SD = 0.042$), and achievement ($M = 0.544$, $SD = 0.043$). The only dimension that the Malay students scored lower mean value ($M = 1.552$, $SD = 0.528$) than Chinese students ($M = 1.871$, $SD = 0.644$) was negative affect. The mean difference was significant at $p < 0.05$ ($\Delta M = -0.319$, $SD = 0.049$). The results are graphically presented in Figure 2.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and t -test results

| Dimension | Malay ($n = 335$) | | Chinese ($n = 295$) | | Mean difference | SD | t -value | p -value | 95% confidence interval | |
|-----------|---------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------|-----------------|-------|------------|------------|-------------------------|--------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | | | | | LL | UL |
| PA | 3.588 | 0.378 | 3.038 | 0.595 | 0.550 | 0.042 | 12.980 | < 0.001 | 0.467 | 0.633 |
| NA | 1.552 | 0.528 | 1.871 | 0.644 | -0.319 | 0.049 | -6.470 | < 0.001 | -0.416 | -0.222 |
| TS | 3.514 | 0.445 | 3.126 | 0.594 | 0.388 | 0.044 | 8.775 | < 0.001 | 0.301 | 0.475 |
| ST | 2.841 | 0.583 | 2.556 | 0.631 | 0.290 | 0.050 | 5.793 | < 0.001 | 0.192 | 0.388 |
| ID | 3.323 | 0.481 | 3.078 | 0.612 | 0.246 | 0.046 | 5.316 | < 0.001 | 0.155 | 0.336 |
| OP | 3.652 | 0.370 | 3.371 | 0.594 | 0.280 | 0.042 | 6.655 | < 0.001 | 0.197 | 0.363 |
| AC | 3.373 | 0.440 | 2.829 | 0.570 | 0.544 | 0.043 | 12.714 | < 0.001 | 0.460 | 0.628 |

DISCUSSION

This study has compared Malay and Chinese primary school students' perception on QSL with its seven dimensions: (1) positive affect, (2) negative affect, (3) teacher-student relations, (4) status, (5) identity, (6) opportunity, and (6) achievement. Specifically, the dominant factors relevant to the conceptualisation of students' QSL in National Primary Schools (primarily represented by students from the Malay heritage background) and National-Type (Chinese) Primary Schools (primarily represented by students from the Chinese heritage background) were explored and compared, and cultural similarities and differences in their conceptualisation of QSL.

Overall, the findings showed that the dimension of opportunity was rated highest by the primary students in this study, from both the Malay and Chinese heritage backgrounds. The dimension of opportunity is related to the students' perceptions about the relevance of teaching and learning to their future lives. It is noteworthy that despite their relatively young age, the primary students are being rather practical and realistic in their expectations of education. The findings from this study indicated that when the school activities are more connected to what they desire to do in the future, they would report a higher QSL rating than the opposite. This finding is novel, and it shows that expectation on the practicability of education is relevant as early as in primary school. Thus, it is important that the school curriculum and the pedagogy approaches, in all school types, need to be relevant and progressive, in line with the latest industrial and technological advancements.

Regarding this, it is obvious that while we are in the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution, Information and Communication Technology and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education are important to integrate into all aspects of students' teaching and learning experience in schools (Hashim et al., 2016; Jajuri et al., 2019). Through the integration of STEM education, students learn to evaluate and respond to the social, economic, and political consequences of their learning experience in schools; and they also learn to incorporate perseverance, conscientiousness, team working and interpersonal skills to achieve academic resilience (Jajuri et al., 2019). The findings from this study supported this notion. Other than contributing to academic resilience and achievement as widely found in other studies (Wahono et al., 2020), the findings from this study offered novel evidence that such type of educational experience, which incorporates opportunity-oriented teaching and learning, is sought after by the students, as early as from the primary school level.

On the other hand, the lowest rating was recorded for the dimension of negative affect. This finding is also noteworthy as it indicated that the overall students reported a higher rating for the positive dimensions in the QSL scale than the negative dimension, namely negative affect. It reflected that in general, the students put a higher emphasis on the positive sentiments, and less on their negative sentiments, regarding their educational experiences in schools. The findings pointed to the importance of focusing on the students' psychological well beings. For the primary students in this study, it seems that as long as they are 'happy' to be in schools, they would care less about the negative sentiments, if any, that they are experiencing.

This finding is important as self-reported happiness was found to be positively related to academic performance (López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018). However, there are diverse opinions on what composes happiness in school. López-Pérez and Fernández-Castilla (2018) studied primary- and secondary-school students' conceptualisation of happiness in a school context, and found that the students regarded "being with friends", "being praised", "getting good grades", "learning", "leisure", "enjoyment", and "helping" as sources of happiness in school. Particularly for primary-school students, "being with friends" and "helping" are the most highly rated sources of happiness in school. On the other hand, Göksoy (2017) found for an educational system that is based on examinations and grades, students become happy when they get higher grades and they become unhappy with low grades. The findings from the current study did not look into the sources of positive and negative sentiments, despite the findings pointed to positive sentiments as being more highly regarded by the students than negative sentiments. The identification of the sources of the students's positive and negative sentiments is recommended as a future qualitative research agenda, which would add insights to expand the findings from the current study.

When comparing students from different cultural heritage groups, the finding from the current study disclosed the potential influence of ethnic cultural values in conceptualising QSL by students from different cultural heritage backgrounds. Malay students in this study were found to report higher QSL ratings than the Chinese students. The finding might reflect that Malay students are more appreciative towards their educational experiences in schools, which aligned with the cultural traits of the Malay community which shown strong appreciation towards non-confrontation, adaptability and harmonious relationships (Asma, 1996). In comparison, Chinese students can be possibly more self-centric, and hence having higher expectations towards QSL.

This hypothesis was supported by the finding that Chinese students reported higher ratings towards negative affect than Malay students. The high expectation of academic achievement is a norm in the Chinese community (Huang & Gove, 2012). Correspondingly, many modern Chinese parents are known to place a high expectation on self-reliance and individual endurance to achieve academic excellence (e.g., Chen, 2016; Tan et al., Ngah, & Md Darit, 2013). Possibly, this could lead to the higher tendency for Chinese students to experience negative emotions in schools and therefore related more strongly to negative affect as documented in this study.

The findings from this study revealed cultural differences in the conceptualisation of QSL among Malay and Chinese primary students in this study. However, the interpretation of findings is limited in several ways. First, the sample who participated in the survey were selected without considering the socioeconomic factors. Thus, sample socioeconomic status or parental education level could be the intervening variable that might influence the findings of this study. Second, the sample was limited to primary school students from Penang and Selangor. Hence, the results of current findings could not generalise to a broader context. Thus, future studies could increase the sample size by considering more representative samples.

CONCLUSION

The current study explored Malay and Chinese students' perception on QSL. The findings supported that QSL is culturally dependent. The dimensions underlying the perception of QSL from both Malay and Chinese students were explained from the lens of the cultural values of the respective ethnic groups. For the implication of knowledge, the current finding has shown a need to develop a local-based QSL scale that can fully capture students' conceptualisation on QSL by considering the cultural perspective as school life is culture-specific. For practical implication, the current empirical evidence has informed school administrators and teachers, the relevancy of curriculum and instruction need to be prioritised in leveraging students' school life experiences. To achieve this, the school administrators should initiate training for the teachers to enhance or upskill effective pedagogical strategies, especially with the aid of technology teaching tools to help students develop 21st century learning skills.

This study has contributed and extended the QSL literature by comparing Malay and Chinese students' perception on QSL in the Malaysian primary school context. This study is relevant to the international community with the highlights that the school curriculum and pedagogical approach should start from the primary level needs to be relevant to the current industry demands and technological innovation. The current study underscores students' happiness in school from the perspectives of friendship and well-being provide new knowledge production to accelerate the positive psychology movement in a global education setting. This study has provided fundamental empirical evidence to continue the research conversation in QSL studies, either a local or international context.

NOTES

1. *The Razak Report* (1956) accepted all four existing streams of Malaysian primary schools into the national system.

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