

Schooling From The Perspective Of A Group Of Female Students

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ABSTRAK

Satu tumpuan penyelidikan pendidikan yang semakin mendapat perhatian para penyelidik adalah berhubung dengan tanggapan pelajar terhadap pengalaman mereka bersekolah. Tumpuan ini adalah sejajar dengan anjakan yang berlaku dalam penyelidikan keberkesan guru. Anjakan ini adalah dari pendekatan proses-produk yang dominan pada suatu ketika dahulu kepada pendekatan proses perantara yang menekan peranan proses kognitif pelajar sebagai perantara di antara pengajaran guru dan pembelajaran pelajar. Kajian yang berasaskan pendekatan ini adalah berguna untuk mengetahui tanggapan pelajar terhadap pengalaman bersekolah kerana ia boleh memberi kesan kepada tingkah laku dan prestasi mereka.

Artikel ini melaporkan hasil analisis 100 eseи (50 dari pelajar Tingkatan I dan 50 dari Tingkatan II) mengenai makna bersekolah kepada mereka. Dapatkan kajian menunjukkan dua tema yang utama dalam eseи-eseи ini adalah 'Pengetahuan' dan 'Sosial'. Dapatkan ini membayangan bahawa pelajar mengaitkan bersekolah dengan tujuan untuk mendapat pengetahuan dan untuk mendapat kawan.

Tema-tema lain yang pelajar kaitkan dengan bersekolah termasuklah 'Mendapat Pekerjaan', 'Masa Depan', 'Kejayaan Am', 'Kejayaan Akademik', 'Kejayaan Material', 'Cita-Cita', 'Moral', 'Disiplin', 'Bina Diri', 'Jangkaan', 'Tanggungjawab Agama', 'Berseronok' dan 'Tekanan'. Tema 'Berseronok' dan tema 'Tekanan' yang disebut oleh ramai pelajar menunjukkan bahawa pelajar seronok bersekolah, namun mereka juga berasa amat tertekan kerana kurikulum dan beban tugas yang berat, tingkah laku dan cara guru mengajar yang mereka dapati kurang menarik dan peraturan di sekolah yang mereka rasa terlalu ketat.

Akhir kata, pandangan pelajar mengenai pengalaman bersekolah merupakan suatu sumber yang kaya dengan maklumat tentang tanggapan dan tafsiran mereka terhadap kehidupan mereka di sekolah. Maklumat ini diharap dapat membantu orang dewasa memahami bukan sahaja proses pembelajaran pelajar tetapi isu yang lebih luas, iaitu isu berhubung dengan proses pembentukan identiti remaja.

Introduction

In Malaysia, going to school is a major and consuming activity for many children, their parents as well as their teachers. Witness the flurry of activities at the beginning of each year when school reopens for the new semester as new entrants are initiated into the school life and returnees find their places in the school system. Witness again the annual excitement when public examination results are announced in the media.

Table 1 shows the school enrolment in the public schools for the year beginning 1998.

Table 1: School Enrolment In Public Schools

SCHOOL LEVEL	STUDENTS		TEACHERS	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Primary Level	1474322	1398105	58519	96310
Secondary Level	931802	957790	40699	61440
Total	4,762,019		256,968	

Source: <http://www.eprd.kpm.myEbil2.htm>; 12 August 1998

According to the Statistics Department, Malaysia (1997), the estimated figure of individuals below 19 years old is 9,649,700 or about 44.5% of the total population. Out of this figure, 4,762,019 or 49.3 % were attending primary or secondary schools.

School children normally spend about 13 years moving from primary school (6 years) to lower secondary school (3 years) and then to upper secondary level (2 years). The period is considerably longer for the students who go to kindergarten before starting formal schooling and, at the end of their secondary education, spend another year or two before commencing tertiary education.

School time varies from 5 to 6 1/2 hours daily, the shorter period being for pupils in the primary school while the longer period being for the secondary school students. Thus, it can be seen that the time the children spend in school is a long period.

Research Question

Although Malaysian school children spend a considerable portion of their lives being in school and being involved in activities arranged for them, there is much to learn about their perceptions of their schooling and classroom experiences. For instance, what are their perception of their teachers, their teachers' instructional behaviors and the intended teaching outcomes? Further, what are their perceptions of the activities organized for them, particularly in terms of their learning and how motivated are they to participate in these activities?

As their time in school is also spent interacting with their peers, what are their perceptions of their peers and the importance of peers in their daily lives? In short, the central question of this research is what is the meaning of schooling to the students? Particularly, how do all these school experiences relate to the students' understanding of themselves and to the development of their selves?

Why The Need To Know Students' Perceptions Of Schooling

In terms of sheer number, the students easily outnumber the school staff in any school. As Tucker (1979) noted, the students form the major consumers of the teachers' teaching. As such, information about students' classroom experiences can provide useful feedback about the teachers' instructional strategies.

In a similar vein, Weinstein (1983) emphasized the importance of knowing the world of school from the students' perspective. Students are active interpreters of classroom events and are constantly evaluating, forming opinions and making inferences about the causes and effects of teachers' behaviors as well as their friends' and their own behaviors. However, students' perceptions of classroom reality may not always be the same as their teachers' perceptions.

Thus, feedback from the students about their classroom experiences are important not so much from the point of view of teacher evaluation, but more importantly for the purpose of finding out the degree of agreement or lack of it between students' interpretation of teachers' instructional behaviors and what teachers really intend. A perceptual gap could lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between them that could hinder the students' learning.

Finally, students' perceptions and interpretations of classroom reality can provide us some ideas of how these experiences relate to their ideas about themselves. They are like windows through which students share their frustration and joy as struggle in their process of self-definition and of 'becoming somebody'.

Research on Students' Perceptions of Schooling

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest among educators and researchers on students' perceptions of their classroom experiences. Within the research on teacher effectiveness, this interest reflects a shift from traditionally predominantly process-product approach to studying teaching to an increasing focus on mediating process approach. The shift highlights the growing emphasis on the role of students' cognitive process as mediator of the effect of teachers' teaching behaviors on students' learning and achievement. As Good & McCaslin (1992) note, students do think and their thinking

mediates teachers' instructional behaviors. They observe that however, there is insufficient solid information for understanding student mediation and they stress that more systematic research on student perceptions is needed.

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of work on students' views of classroom life. Weinstein (1983) provides a good overview of research on students' thoughts about various aspects of schooling. The studies reviewed show that students were actively struggling to make sense of the social and cognitive aspects of schooling. They were very sensitive to teacher differential treatment of various student groups, which they used to make inferences about their teachers' expectations of their academic performance. Beside observing and interpreting teachers' behaviors, students were also engaged in monitoring their peers' behaviors, which they used to compare and evaluate their own performance and abilities.

Thus, knowledge about students' perceptions of their classroom reality is useful as it provides the teachers with information about their instructional strategies as well as about pupil-pupil relationship in their classrooms, which can affect the behavior and performance of their students.

Studies In Malaysia

There has been some effort to study students' perceptions of schooling. For instance, Leong (1982) explored the objectives of schooling among 540 secondary school students, 60 parents, 60 teachers and 3 principals. Leong found that among the objectives of schooling, the majority of the respondents highly endorsed 'success in examination' and 'vocational preparation'.

Maznah Ismail (1992/93) explored indirectly the students' views of schooling through examining their perception of an effective teacher. She found that five teacher attributes highly ranked by the students were:

- (i) Knowledgeable
- (ii) Responsible
- (iii) Caring
- (iv) Humane
- (v) Fair

With respect to teacher teaching skills, 82.4% of the students stressed teacher's ability to provide clear explanation of the lesson.

With regard to teaching outcomes of an effective teacher, the students indicated the following five highly ranked outcomes:

- (i) Pupils' success in the examination
- (ii) Pupils are well disciplined
- (iii) Pupils understand what the teacher teaches
- (iv) Pupils are hardworking
- (v) Good teacher-pupil relationship

Results from these studies clearly indicate strong students' support for the instrumental role and vocational preparation of schooling. While these studies have provided some information of the students' view of schooling, there is a need to address the issue in more depth and more directly from the perspectives of the students.

Working from the perspective that students are active participants and interpreters of their classroom experiences, the study sought to understand their views by inviting them to write essays to express their opinions freely about their schooling.

Purpose Of The Paper

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of the analysis of a group of female students' responses on the meaning of schooling to them.

METHODOLOGY

The study of students' perceptions of schooling involved 1368 Form I and Form II students (aged between 13 to 15 years; 798 boys and 570 girls) who were attending three schools in the state of Penang. They were invited to write on the meaning of schooling to them. They were free to express their opinions in any language they wished and many of them wrote their essays in Bahasa Malaysia [the Malaysian National Language] or in English. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their opinions and oral permission was obtained from them to quote verbatim from their essays for publication purposes.

From 1368 essays, 300 (21.9%) were selected randomly for analysis. To code the students' responses, a coding scheme was devised based on a sample of the responses from the students. 15 themes were identified. Table 2 shows the themes and the examples to illustrate each theme.

Table 2: Themes In Meaning Of Schooling

Themes	Examples Of Responses
1. Social	• Can get to know many friends
2. Knowledge	• To get more knowledge
3. Vocational	• To get a good job
4. Future	• So that my future is guaranteed.
5. Gen. Success	• For my success
6. Academic Success	• To get excellent results in examinations
7. Material Success	• How to manage your money; enjoy prosperity
8. Ambition	• To go to the university
9. Moral	• Become a useful person
10. Discipline	• Can discipline us with school rules
11. Self-Development	• Become healthy and motivated
12. Fun	• Fun
13. Tension	• School gives me tension
14. Expectations	• I want my parents to be proud of me
15. Religious Responsibility	• To minister the words of God

A research assistant was trained to use the coding scheme to code the students' responses. To check for intercoder agreement, the researcher independently coded 30 essays written by Form 1 students and 30 essays written by Form 11 students. Intercoder agreement obtained was slightly over 85%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results to be presented are based on the analysis of 100 essays written by a group of female students from one of the schools involved in the study. 50 of the essays were written by Form I girls and 50 essays by Form II girls. For illustration purposes, students' statements were included and where necessary, were translated into English.

This school was and is well known for academic achievement. The students are under pressure to live up to the school and parents' expectations of doing well in the examinations. However, the school also provides various kinds of co-curricular activities. Although the school is located in a rather congested area, the school compound is well maintained. Tree and shrubs beautify the school ground and provide shade for the students to gather or to sit around. The classrooms are spacious, airy and pleasant.

Students' Views of Schooling

Table 3 shows the distribution of the students' responses analysed according to the themes.

Table 3: Distribution Of Responses By Themes

Themes/ Form	Form I (N=50) N	Form I (N=50) %	Form II (N=50) N	Form II (N=50) %
Social (So)	32	64	31	62
Knowledge (Kn)	43	86	41	82
Vocational (Vo)	21	42	15	30
Future (Fu)	25	50	18	36
General Success (Gs)	12	24	13	26
Academic Success (As)	9	18	4	8
Material Success (Ms)	3	6	0	0
Ambition (Am)	16	32	7	14
Moral (Mo)	21	42	11	22
Discipline (Ds)	6	12	7	14
Self-Development (Sd)	14	28	11	22
Fun (Fn)	20	40	13	26
Tension (Tn)	18	36	23	46
Expectations (Ex)	4	8	2	4
Rel. Responsibility (Rr)	0	0	1	2

The results reveal that two themes that were frequently mentioned by both Form I and Form II students were 'Knowledge' and 'Social' themes indicating that the students tended to associate schooling with two functions, which are to get knowledge and to make friends.

'Knowledge' Aspect Of Schooling

86% of Form I and 82 % of Form II students associated schooling with the purpose of getting knowledge and of becoming educated. They mentioned that they learned many new things that were related to academic, social and personal aspects of their lives. For instance, Form I students said that in school, they:

- Get to learn more things
- Learn to count, write, think, get knowledge...

Getting good results was important to one student. She used her grades to gauge her ability in comparison with her friends. She said:

- I like to get good results as I like to see how much better or worse compared to other people

Like Form I students, Form II students also viewed school as a place for acquiring various kinds of knowledge. Apart from academic knowledge, they also mentioned about learning the facts of life and how to get along with other people. For instance, they said that in school they:

- (Got) a preview of the kind of people you would meet later in life
- Learn how to share
- Learn how to behave ...learn the ups and downs of a normal human, how to cook, sew, clean and stuff
- Learn to share, share your knowledge with others

In short, as one Form I student noted:

- School will teach you all you need to know.

Social Aspect Of Schooling

For many students, schooling meant being with their friends and making new friends. 64% of students of Form I and 62 % of Form II students indicated that the purpose of going to school was to be with their friends. A Form I student clearly echoed the sentiment when she said:

- I can spend time with my friends. Having friends in school means a lot to me.

According to the students, friends were important for several reasons. Some of the reasons as indicated in the following statements are:

Friends As Sources of Information

- Help you in your studies [Form I student]
- Share my views and opinions [Form II student]

Friends Provide Emotional Support

- ...di sekolah ketika saya bersedih, gembira, kawan saya tetap berada bersama saya. Masing-masing buat lawak ketika saya sedih

[Form I student]

- ...tell them problems, solve our problems [Form I student]
- Friends cheer you up [Form II student]

Friends Help Avoid Loneliness

- ...share your thoughts and feelings; would not feel alone or desolated

[Form I student]

- ...tidak berasa sunyi [From I student]

Friends Make You Happy

- I enjoy spending time with friends [Form I student]
- *Di sekolah saya berasa seronok di samping kawan saya.* [Form II student]

In short, for many students school was a social place to meet and interact with their friends who served as sources of information, stimulation, social and emotional support for them. Above all school was a fun place as indicated in the following statement:

- School is fun [Form I student]
- Friendship; place to socialise; place to joke around with friends; place to build special bond with fellow friends [Form II student]

What makes school a fun place to be in? The answer can be gleaned from the students' responses coded under the theme 'Fun'. The students indicated that beside meeting friends, they could participate in various kinds of co-curricular activities in school. For instance, Form I students had this to say:

- School is very fun; we can join activities
- Clubs or society to join according to our interest

For Form II students, schooling also means fun like:

- ...having fun with my classmates, schoolmates, everybody, joking with teachers after exam, telling dirty jokes, laughing, talking, gossiping with friends, having fun, lots of sporting activities, to exercise

Thus, the students liked being in school because they could have fun time with their friends in school-organised activities or in various chit -chat and gossip sessions. Other students liked the facilities available in their school. For example, Form I students said:

- ...enjoy beautiful surroundings and nature
- ...great activities; great facilities; great food

Moral, Self-Development And Discipline Aspects Of Schooling

These three aspects of schooling are related to the development of the self in non-academic areas such as development of moral values, self-discipline and self-confidence. Form I students placed much emphasis on the function of schooling in instilling in them moral values and good character. They associated schooling with development of good behavior, self-discipline and self-confidence. The following statements illustrate their perceptions of these aspects of schooling:

- Build my confidence; improve myself
- *Sekolah mengajar kita bersopan santun, jujur, peramah dan mendidik kita ke jalan yang benar.*
- *...saya berasa lebih berani kerana mengikut jejak kawan saya seperti tinggal seorang diri di rumah, memasak, mencuci pinggan mangkuk dan tidak selalu mengharapkan bantuan daripada orang lain; membuat kerja dengan lebih sistematis; berfikir secara positif.*
- School teaches us to be disciplined because even though we are smart, without discipline and good manners we will be hated by people. In moral classes, we learn about these and other moral values such as being kind-hearted, generous and may others. These are all very important in our lives.

Form II students expressed similar views when they said:

- I learn moral values in school; I learn to be more kind, friendly and caring
- be independent
- discipline is instilled in one
- saya juga dapat mendisiplinkan diri

Being good children also means fulfilling parental expectations and religious obligations. Under the themes of *Expectation And Religious Responsibilities*, are statements about going to school in order to meet parents' expectations. For instance, Form I students said:

- *Keluarga mengharapkan saya*
- *Untuk memenuhi kehendak kedua ibu bapa*

It is interesting that schooling was also associated with fulfilling religious responsibility. A Form II student said:

- It also means to study hard that I might glorify God's name.

Thus, for both Form I and Form II students, schooling played an important role in instilling good moral values, self-confidence and self-discipline. They endorsed this role of schooling because they also associated schooling with a broader objective of nation building when they said:

- *menunaikan tanggungjawab kita sebagai anak kepada kedua orang tuanya, tanggungjawab sebagai rakyat kepada masyarakat dan negara, menjadi seorang yang berguna.* [Form I student]
- *Tanpa sekolah, kita mungkin tidak mempunyai tamadun atau masyarakat yang maju.* [Form II student]

Aspects of Schooling Related to Future, Ambitions, Vocational, General Success, Material Success and Academic Success

Students from both Form I and Form II emphasized the instrumental aspect of schooling. They expected that going to school should help them achieve their ambitions and get a good job.

Form 1 students conveyed their views of the instrumental purpose of schooling in the following manner.

- get a good job
- a secure future;... successful in my future
tanpa persekolan, kita tidak akan mendapat pekerjaan yang baik
- *jika kita tidak dapat pekerjaan yang baik, tidak sesiapa yang dapat membantu memberi kita makanan, pakaian dan tempat tinggal yang selesa.*

Like Form I students' descriptions of schooling, Form II students' views of schooling also contain many references to instrumental value of schooling as exemplified in the following statements:

- schooling is for better future
- can mean a good work or easier to get work
- *jika saya tidak bersekolah tentu saya tidak dapat bekerja di masa depan*

In short, the instrumental aspect of schooling emerged as a significant factor in the students' motivation for schooling. The association between schooling, vocational aspirations and future life is clearly established in the minds of the students.

Tension Aspect of Schooling

Schooling can be fun. But schooling also can be a source of much of tension to the students. The respondents' essays reveal many factors that contributed to the students' unpleasant experiences in school. Among the factors are the emphasis on academic achievement, school curriculum, teachers' behaviours and teaching strategies, school rules and school system.

Emphasis On Academic Achievement

Being in the school culture that emphasises academic excellence has channelled the students' energy to focus on the pursuit of academic achievement. Many of the students indicated feeling pressured to be conscientious in their lessons and to perform well in the examinations. For example, several Form I and Form II students said:

- When you say 'schooling', I think of studying and endless exams.
[Form I student]
- ... because I tend to feel agitated and worried I cannot beat my classmates in certain subjects and top the whole form. I try very hard, and plan my studies properly but still to no avail. Gee, that really depresses me sometimes.
[Form I student]
- Suffer
Jail ! (When you haven't done wrong)
Education!
A place where the mind is overworked
[Form II student]

The Curriculum

Several students expressed their dislike towards certain school subjects and the school workload.

- *Perkara yang paling saya benci ...jasmani* [Form I student]
- *Sekolah juga bermaksud 'menyusahkan'... banyak latihan yang hendak dibuat, peperiksaan, ujian dan banyak lagi yang harus dilakukan. Folio, projek dan macam-macam lagi* [Form II student]
- *Mata pelajaran yang saya benci adalah K.H.seperti elektronik dan kayu. ... Dahlah beban dengan kayu ni, kena buat bangkulah...* [Form II student]

Teachers' Behaviors And Teaching Strategies

Beside the curriculum, another source of tension for the students was in the form of teachers' behaviours and teaching strategies. The following statements illustrate some of the specific comments offered by them.

On Teachers' Behaviors:

- *Setiap hari... adakah guru akan marah? adakah cikgu dalam 'mood' yang baik?; harap-harap guru yang garang itu tidak hadir... [Form I student]*
- *...setengah cikgu bersifat mulut laser dan membocorkan rahsia pelajar; guru patut mengurangkan projek sekolah supaya pelajar dapat memberi perhatian pada perkara lain. [Form II student]*

On Teachers' Teaching Strategies:

- Schooling to me is sometimes boring, sometimes very nice. Depends on which teacher will come into the class. Some teachers will talk non-stop, don't care whether we are yawning or not. ... Some of the teachers will come in and they will ask us to take out our textbooks. They will read and we will have to copy down in whatever they read from the textbooks. Why must they ask to copy whatever that is already in a textbook? [Form I student]
- Why are we taught English like preschoolers? Do the teachers really think we don't know our nouns from our adjectives? And instead of reading bridged version of 'Sherlock Holmes' we should read classics like Darcula, or Wuthering Heights. (Form II student)

School Rules And School System

The students remarked that the school rules and regulations were too strict. They would like to have more leeway in many areas of their school lives. Some of their comments are as follow:

- *Sekolah mempunyai undang-undang yang ketat; cikgu yang tidak tahu lawak, sentiasa serius; masa rehat terlalu singkat, masa bersekolah terlalu lama. [Form I student]*
- *Memberi tekanan kepada pelajar seperti saya terpaksa belajar untuk maju; ia 'boring' dan terpaksa memakai uniform yang amat bosan warnanya. Kami sebagai pelajar patut diberi kebebasan untuk memakai pakaian sendiri ke sekolah; sekolah juga panas kerana tiada penghawa dingin; masa sepatutnya dipendekkan dan keadaan sekolah terutamanya tandasnya patut dibersihkan dan nampak 'presentable'... [Form II student]*

The word ‘boring’ was often used to describe schooling as in the following statements:

- School is boring. [Form I student]
- Boredom, a dull monotone that repeats itself. [Form II student]
- Schooling bores me a lot; tons of homework. [Form II student]

Tension caused by boredom can make students unmotivated with schoolwork. A Form II student’s remark illustrates the point when she said:

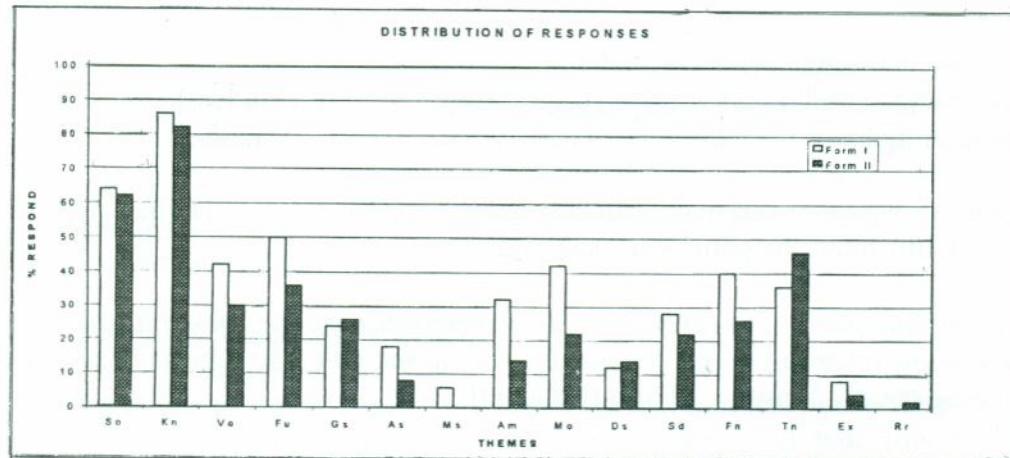
- *Saya bencikan guru yang cerewet, mementingkan diri sendiri, memilih, suka jeling ... buat masa sekarang ni saya malas nak datang sekolah sebab gurunya dan buku-buku yang terlalu banyak.* [Form II student]

In brief, the students found several aspects of their schooling very stressful. The sources of stress ranged from examination-oriented curriculum, teacher instructional strategies and the school system generally.

Comparison Between Form I and Form II Students’ Perceptions of Schooling

There is much overlap in Form I and Form II students’ views with respect to ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Social’ aspects of schooling. However, they differed somewhat with regard to most of the other aspects of schooling.

Table 2 and the diagram on distribution of students’ responses show similarities and differences between Form I and Form II views of schooling.



So	:	Social	Mo	:	Moral
Kn	:	Knowledge	Ds	:	Discipline
Vo	:	Vocational	Sd	:	Self-Development
Gs	:	General Success	Fn	:	Fun
As	:	Academic Success	Tn	:	Tension
Ms	:	Material Success	Ex	:	Expectations
Am	:	Ambition	Rr	:	Rel. Responsibility

Compared to Form II students, more Form I students endorsed those aspects of schooling that were future oriented such as 'Vocational', 'Future,' 'Academic Success' and 'Ambition'. Other aspects of schooling mentioned by more Form I students are 'Moral' and 'Self-development'. In addition, more Form I students found schooling a fun experience.

Form I students' opinions of schooling might be seen as upholding the traditional views of education espoused by the adults. Being recently promoted from the primary level to the secondary level in a highly regarded school, the students would be very aware of their parents' and school's expectations of them. At the same time, they also derived a certain amount of pride being placed in a school well-known for outstanding academic achievement. Thus, throughout their essays, there were clear indications of striving for academic excellence, which was seen as a prerequisite for career advancement, and for personal and social development. The struggle to be successful in both areas had also left many of them in stressful situations.

Like Form I students, Form II students also strived to excel in academic field as well as in personal development. However, their most pressing concern was getting ready for the

national examination, Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah (PMR) that they would be sitting the following year. The examination grades obtained would decide in which school, streams and classes they would be placed. Therefore, it is imperative to get good grades in PMR for placement purposes. The effect of the impending examination can be clearly seen in the data on 'Tension' aspect of schooling. Compared to Form I students, more Form II students reported incidences of mental and emotional strains.

For Form I students, the PMR examination was a couple of years away. Besides, their immediate attention was focussed on getting adjusted to the new school environment, new demand and expectations. These external demands came at a time when these students were at a point of undergoing rapid biological and psychological changes. Hamburg (1993) earlier observed that the collision of the external and internal changes could make adolescence a stressful time for many youngsters and their families. Hence, the tension that they were experiencing would be of more general kind, rather than being solely focused on examination.

Schooling In Relation To The Development of The Self

Adolescence has been characterized as a period of active engagement in the search and formation of identity (Erikson, 1960; Harter, 1990). The adolescents' struggle to establish an identity is well captured in the term 'becoming somebody' introduced by Wexler (1992). In this regard, school is an important place as it provides the adolescents the opportunity to interact with their friends in their effort of searching, defining and testing their identities, that is to 'become somebody' in the eyes of their peers.

However, Wexler also notes that the identities that the students are struggling to achieve are different for students from different social-economic backgrounds. Thus, in a social group that places a high premium on academic achievement as reflected in the school culture in this study, the school system becomes a viable path for academically oriented students to acquire a self-image as a successful person. The system, however, does not cater to the needs of the students who are academic failures. As Tan (1994) has shown, these non-academic youths have sought other avenues to become somebody, avenues which more often than not are in collision with the norms and values of the school. They have become somebody in the eyes of their peers but to the public, they are 'deviant' or 'anti-school.'

For those students who subscribe to the school culture which emphasizes the pursuit of academic and vocational success and the acquisition of the qualities of a good person, the task of juggling among these demands can make their lives very stressful.

CONCLUSION

The students' essays on the meaning of schooling are rich sources of information about their perceptions and interpretations of their lives in school. Through their writings, they have provided us with an insight into their struggles, triumphs and hopes in their labour of learning. When seen in a broader perspective, their views of schooling help us to focus our attention on the larger concern of adolescents, which is negotiating the process of becoming somebody in the eyes of people who were significant in their lives.

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