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Emotional Intelligence of at Risk Students in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstract: At-risk students in this study are those with low academic achievement and with behavioral problems. The study utilizes the descriptive survey method. The sample of this study comprised of 688 secondary school students who are at-risk and their average age was sixteen. Findings indicate that the mean EQ of at-risk students were rather low (mean= 57.67, SD=0.26). The mean scores for the three sub-scales of EQ among the students were 18.91 for Emotional Self-Awareness (ESA), 14.94 for Emotional Expression (EE), and 24.18 for Emotional Awareness of others (EAO). Based on the scoring grid suggested by Cooper and Sawaf (1996), both ESA and EE students were found to be vulnerable (ESA:19-23;EE:13-16), except for EAO which was found to be proficient (22-27). Research findings also indicate significant gender differences ($t=4.103, p<.05$) in EQ scores among at-risk students with female students obtained a higher mean compared to the males. In addition results also found positive and significant correlations between EQ and the following variables namely academic achievement ($r=.195, p<.05$), self-esteem ($r=.361, p<.05$), achievement motivation ($r=.354, p<.05$), Mathematics self-efficacy ($r=.310, p<.05$) and English self-efficacy ($r=.498, p<.05$). The implications of the findings are discussed in terms of educational opportunities for at-risk students.

Keywords: Emotional Quotient, At-risk Students, Academic Achievement

Introduction

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS a combination of the terms emotion and intelligence. A theory that combines emotion and intelligence was first developed by Peter Salovey, a psychologist from the University of Hampshire (Goleman, 1997). Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000b) viewed emotions as one of the three fundamental classes of mental operations which include motivation, emotion and cognition. The connection between emotion and cognition can be explained by examining how emotion interacts with cognition. A person who is in good mood tends to think positively and productively and vice versa. In brief the term EQ implies that emotion and intelligence are interrelated and complementary giving rise to emotional intelligence (Mayer, 2001).

Emotional literacy is the first cornerstone in the Four Cornerstone Model of emotional intelligence proposed by Cooper and Sawaf (1996) which is known as the 'executive EQ'. The other three cornerstones of EQ are emotional fitness, emotional alchemy and emotional depth. This study focuses on emotional literacy as the basis of emotional intelligence. According to Cooper and Sawaf (1996), execu-

tive EQ begins with the cornerstone of emotional literacy which is comprised of three emotional abilities namely, emotional self-awareness (ESA), emotional expression (EE) and emotional awareness of others (EAO). Emotional literacy centers on learning everything about EQ and recognizing, respecting and valuing the inherent wisdom of feelings. As such emotional literacy is addressed as EQ which is said to be able to build a locus of personal efficacy and confidence through emotional honesty, energy, awareness, feedback, intuition, responsibility and connections (Cooper and Sawaf, 1996). Goleman (1995, p.4) emphasizes that emotional literacy or EQ is a different way of being smart. He argues that IQ contributes only about 20% to success in life, and other forces contribute the rest. According to Goleman (1995) EQ includes knowing what one's feelings are and using one's feelings to make good decisions in life. It is also the ability to manage distressing moods and control impulses. Being able to remain motivated, hopeful and optimistic when one experiences setbacks in working towards goals is another element of EQ. The other elements of EQ include having empathy, knowing the feelings of the people around you, social skills, getting along well with

others, managing emotions in relationships and being able to persuade and lead others. On the other hand, violent behaviors such as committing crimes and suicide, social problems, depressions, delinquencies and aggressiveness displayed by youngsters and adults are signs of deficits of emotional competencies.

In simpler terms, emotional intelligence might be defined as the set of skills people use to read, understand and react effectively to emotional signals sent by others and oneself. These are skills such as empathy, problem solving, optimism and self-awareness which allow people to reflect, react to, and understand various environmental situations (Salovey and Mayer, 1993).

A study conducted by Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2000) on 503 adults (164 men, 333 women) with a mean age of 23 years (range: 17-70) showed that women were found to outperform the men on the 12 tasks of the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scales (MEIS) in all the scoring procedures. Other studies that yield similar results are studies conducted by Tapia (1998), Schutte et.al. (1998) and Sutarso (1998). According to Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2000), women and men perform about the same on most intelligence-related mental tests, but there are some regular differences in the profiles of the two groups particularly their performance related to tasks. For instance women are somewhat better on tasks of reading comprehension, perceptual speed, associative memory, while men are found to be better in tasks related to mathematics and science knowledge. Emotional intelligence is included in the tasks that women are good at. The fact that women are slightly superior to men in perceiving emotion has been shown through tests of nonverbal perception such as Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity which includes emotion (cited in Goleman, 1998). Another reason why girls show higher level of emotional intelligence compared to boys was due to the fact that girls receive significantly more education of emotions from their parents than do boys and that make them more emotionally competent than boys (Schilling, 1996). Boys are always perceived as a stronger person compared to girls and as a result their emotional needs are often neglected and more attention is given to the needs of girls.

People with high emotional competence will be able to recognize, accept and manage their emotions. This is one of the most important aspects in achieving self-esteem. High self-esteem refers to a highly favorable global evaluation of the self. To be emotionally competent the focus is on emotional well being and self-esteem (Goleman, 1998), which is a search for ways that help an individual realize his potential. Similarly, Baumeister (2003) agreed that self-esteem is the evaluative component of self-knowledge

meaning that people who are in the state of well being will evaluate themselves more favorably. Carr (2000) also suggested that students with a high emotional competence will have more accurate self-esteem. They will have better self reflection and self regards compared to other students who have low emotional competence but high self-esteem. The group of students with low emotional competence will tend to overestimate themselves. Baumeister et.al (2003) concluded that self-esteem has a strong relation to happiness. Although the research has not clearly established causation, there is a tendency that high self-esteem does lead to greater happiness. Low self-esteem is more likely than high to lead to depression under some circumstances. Overall, the benefits of high self-esteem fall into two categories namely enhanced initiative and pleasant feelings.

Emotion is an intentional feeling (Helm, 2001). Emotion can affect motivation through the interconnection between emotion and judgment. There are two different ways how people make judgments based on the emotional state. These are 1) Forward looking emotion, such as hope and fear to anticipate something good or bad in the future, 2) Backward looking emotion, when people reflect something good or bad that has happened in the past. Helm (2001) suggested that both judgment models can affect motivation to do something. People's judgment on their prior experiences and imagination of the future can affect their motivation. If they evaluate their prior experiences and their future imagination as positive, they tend to undertake the activity.

On the other hand they will do otherwise if their evaluation on their prior experiences and future imagination is negative.

As mentioned earlier, Helm (2001) found that emotional state can also affect motivation. There are in general two emotional states, which are 1) positive emotion, such as satisfaction, hope and happiness, that will drive people to repeat something that they have done, 2) negative emotion such as disappointment, fear and sadness that will drive someone to avoid doing something. In relation to Thorndike's Law of Effect postulate, people tend to repeat a response if it produces a state of satisfaction and in contrast, people tend to stop the response if it produces a state of dissatisfaction.

According to the above concept, it can be concluded that people with good emotional competence will tend to have positive feelings towards others (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006). Emotional Competence will lead people to judge the external world more positively. As a result, as agreed by Helm (2001), the positive state of emotion will lead people to be more motivated to work or conduct their activities.

Relationship between EQ and self-esteem was evidenced in a research conducted by Ciarrochi,

Chan and Caputi (2000) who found that EQ as measured by the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) correlated moderately with self-esteem ($r=.31, p<.05$), personality traits such as extroversion ($r=.26, p<.05$) and openness to feelings ($r=.24, p<.05$) among research subjects. This indicates that subjects with low EQ also have low self-esteem. The relationship between EQ and self-esteem is logical as individuals who have low self-esteem experience mood swings and negative emotions more frequently resulting in a more fragile sense of well being (Saarni, 1997). Subjects with high EQ tend to be extroverts and more open in their feelings towards others.

Besides self-esteem, self-efficacy of a person is closely related to EQ. Saarni (1997) defined EQ in terms of emotional competence as *the demonstration of self-efficacy in emotional-eliciting social transactions*. What he implies is in emotional-eliciting social transactions, a person can respond emotionally well, and at the same time apply his knowledge about emotions and emotional expressiveness in his relationships with others. In this way he can negotiate through interpersonal exchanges and regulate his emotional experiences. Emotional self-efficacy refers to the capacity of individuals to view themselves as being able to feel the way they want to feel. This also means that one accepts one's emotional experience, in line with their beliefs about what constitutes desirable emotional balance.

With emotional self-efficacy one feels relatively in control of one's emotional experience from the standpoint of mastery and self-regard (Saarni, 1997). With emotional self-efficacy, one does not feel overwhelmed by the enormity, intensity, or complexity of an emotional experience, nor does one react negatively to one's feelings. The other elements of emotional self-efficacy include subjective well-being and positive appraisal style.

Subjective well-being functions much like a mood state that helps us buffer when we endure taxing or

adverse circumstances. Positive appraisal style functions like a dispositional 'filter' through which we attribute meaningfulness to events in our life.

On the basis of the theoretical background outlined, a study was conducted to determine the level of emotional literacy of at risk students in Malaysian secondary schools and to examine the relationship between emotional literacy and several psychological variables namely, achievement motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy among at risk students.

Methodology

The sample comprised of 688 low achievers in 25 secondary schools identified as at risk by the Ministry of Education. At risk students in this study are confined to students who are low in academic performance and with discipline problems. The schools were selected by cluster sampling method based on five zones (North, Central, South, East and Sarawak). The instruments used in this study were adapted by the researchers based on literature. Four instruments were developed and adapted to measure emotional literacy, self-esteem, achievement motivation and self-efficacy. Self-esteem was measured by a modified Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and Coopersmith (1981) Self-esteem scale. Emotional Literacy was measured by the Emotional Literacy Scale by Cooper and Sawaf (1996). Achievement motivation was measured by the adapted Mehrabian Achievement Scale (1969). Self-efficacy was measured by the adapted self-efficacy scale by McIlroy, Bunting and Adamson (2000). The instruments were pilot tested and their reliability were assessed. Cronbach alpha values for the instruments were as follows: Emotional Quotient (.72); self-esteem (.57); achievement motivation (.77) and self-efficacy (.83).

Results and Discussion

Emotional Quotient of At Risk Students

Table 1: EQ of At Risk Students

	Mean	SD
Emotional Literacy(EL)	57.66	10.43
Emotional Self-awareness(ESA)	18.9	3.44
Emotional Expression (EE)	14.94	3.23
Emotional Awareness of others(EAO)	24.18	5.7

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of EQ for at risk students. Findings show that the overall mean score for Emotional Quotient which is represented by Emotional Literacy (EL) of 688 low achievers is 57.66 (SD= 10.43) indicating that low Achievers in the study obtain a low level of EL.

Since this construct has 33 items and the scores for each response are arranged consecutively from 3 (maximum score =99, response: very well), 2 (maximum score=66, response: moderately well), 1 (maximum score= 33, response: a little) and 0 (maximum score = 0, response: not at all). The mean

score (57.7) shows that the EQ of the low achievers is between 'moderately well' and 'low'. This shows that the low achievers have considerably low emotional intelligence.

The mean score for the three subscales of EQ among low achievers are found to be 18.91 for Emotional Self-Awareness (ESA, $n=679$), 14.94 for Emotional Expression (EE, $n=686$) and 24.18 for Emotional Awareness of Others (EAO, $n=686$). Based on the scoring grid suggested by Cooper and Sawaf (1997), both ESA and EE of all the low achievers are found to be vulnerable (ESA: 19-23; EE: 13-16), except for EAO which is found to be proficient (22-27). When the EQ measurement is analyzed further into three subscales, it was found that the low achievers have low scores for emotional self awareness and emotional expression. However

they have quite high scores for emotional awareness of others. This finding could be explained by their culture which encourage children to respect others.

Results also found significant gender differences ($t=4.103$, $p<.05$) in EQ scores among the low achievers. Female students (mean=60.14) are found to obtain a higher mean scores for EQ than male students (mean=57.37). Female students (mean ESA=19.49, mean EE=15.38 & mean EAO=24.69) also obtain higher scores for all the subscales compared to the male students (mean ESA=18.48, mean EE=14.62 & mean EAO=23.81). This shows that female students in the low achievers group have higher EQ compared to the males.

The findings support studies conducted by Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2000), Tapia (1998) Schutte (1998) and Sutarso (1998).

Table 2: Correlation between EQ and Psychological Variables

	Emotional Intelligence	Sig. (2-tailed)
Achievement Motivation	.354	.00
Self-esteem	.361	.00
Self-efficacy in Mathematics	.310	.00
Self-efficacy in English	.498	.00

Correlational analysis showed significant and positive relationship ($r=.195$, $p<.05$) between EQ scores and academic achievement (PMR results) among low achievers. Academic achievement was also found to correlate significantly and positively with two EQ subscales. (ESA: $r=.162$, $p<.05$; EE: $r=.163$, $p<.05$). These findings support the notion that having positive quality emotions and feelings help students achieve and to give their best potential in the classroom (Fazura & Ghazali, 2003). As such teachers should understand that the stress on the affective domain cannot be separated from the cognitive domain in classrooms.

Research on resilient children and anger management strategies for at risk youth have found a crucial link between a child's emotional well being and their academic achievement (Harrington-Lueker, 1997). As such, teaching emotional and social skills at school is important as these skills have long term effects on achievement. Finnegan (1998) claims that schools should help students learn the abilities underlying EQ as these abilities can lead to achievement from childhood through adulthood's competency in being effective.

Relationship between EQ and Psychological Variables

Research findings indicated positive and significant relationships between EQ of low achievers and their self-esteem ($r=.361$, $p<.05$), achievement motivation

($r=.354$, $p<.05$), Mathematic self-efficacy ($r=.310$, $p<.05$) and English self-efficacy ($r=.498$, $p<.05$). This indicates that low achievers with high EQ also have high self-esteem, high achievement motivation and high self-efficacy for mathematics and English. However those students with low EQ will also have low scores in self-esteem, achievement motivation and self-efficacy in mathematics and English language.

Positive and significant relationships were also found between ESA and self-esteem ($r=.235$, $p<.05$), achievement motivation ($r=.268$, $p<.05$), Mathematics self-efficacy ($r=.216$, $p<.05$) and English self-efficacy ($r=.324$, $p<.05$). This shows that low achievers who have high emotional self-awareness tend to have higher self-esteem, achievement motivation and self-efficacy in mathematics and English language.

There are also positive and significant relationships between low achievers' EE and their self-esteem ($r=.094$, $p<.05$), achievement motivation ($r=.191$, $p<.05$) and mathematics self-efficacy ($r=.168$, $r<.05$). This means that low achievers who are good at emotional expression tend to have high self-esteem, achievement motivation and self-efficacy in mathematics.

Finally there are positive and significant relationships between low achievers' EAO and their self-esteem ($r=.238$, $p<.05$), achievement motivation ($r=.326$, $p<.05$), Mathematics self-efficacy ($r=.283$, $p<.05$) and English self-efficacy ($r=.295$, $p<.05$).

This shows that low achievers who have high scores in Emotional Awareness of others tend to have high self-esteem, achievement motivation, self-efficacy in mathematics and English language.

The above findings support studies conducted by Ciarrochi, Chan & Caputi (2000) and Saarni (1997) regarding the relationship between EQ and self-esteem as well as self-efficacy.

Conclusions and Implications

With the exception of Emotional Awareness of Others (EAO) at risk students tend to have low emotional intelligence. Parents and teachers have a role to play in order to assist them in enhancing their emotional intelligence. With a higher EQ they will be more motivated to achieve excellence, have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy. With more positive psychological profile, they will be able to raise their academic achievement and be less involved in behavioral or social problems.

The important roles of schools in developing EQ has been addressed by researchers and educators. Goleman (1998) emphasizes that schools are the one place that communities can turn to for correctives to children's deficiencies in emotional and social com-

petencies. This is supported by Steve Hein (1996) who argues that the school environment is critical to both our emotional development and our self-esteem, as whatever characteristics we bring from home are reinforced at school. For example if a child is intelligent, confident and friendly, both teachers and students are likely to further enhance his positive self-image. On the other hand if the student is angry or insecure and a poor academic performer, students and teachers may label and ostracize the student, resulting in feelings of inferiority and rejection. As such schools offer a highly appropriate venue for teaching and enhancing the EQ domain and emotional learning should be made as much a priority in the classroom as concentrating on students' cognitive abilities.

Past research shows that children from troubled homes are the most likely to display early signs of low EQ such as emotional, academic, behavioral and social problems. Because of instability in the home, the child is afraid and insecure. These conditions make it difficult to concentrate academically as well as to fit socially. Academic and social success are major sources of confidence for children and self esteem is set at an early age unless addressed.

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Dr. Samsilah Roslan pursued her master study in UPM in the field of Educational Psychology and was upgraded to a Ph.D degree in 2001. She has been actively involved in numerous research projects, especially those related to education for children with special needs, including gifted children, at-risk children and children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and autism. She was involved in several IRPA and Fundamental research related to children with special needs. Her role as a researcher at the Children At-Risk in Education Research Center (CARE) has given her the opportunity to collaborate with the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Defense, BALKIS and other agencies in conducting various research and consultancy projects as well as organizing international conferences to increase the awareness of the importance of providing equal educational opportunities for these children. She was awarded "UPM Young Researcher Award" for the social sciences category in 2006. Findings from her studies has been presented in conferences and published in local and international journals. Dr. Samsilah is currently a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM.

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