

AT RISK STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: MEASURING ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOLS AND DISCOVERING MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

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Abstract: The term “student at risk” came into common use in educational field in the early 1980’s, used to describe the students who are not successful, those who did not seem to fit in school. Although the issues of at risk students have been realized by many people especially among educators for decades yet, lately, the problems related to at risk students become more visible elsewhere. Moreover, identifying those at risk and how best to provide help appropriate their needs have come to the forefront. Thus, this study seeks to provide insight into helping students at risk by considering their perspectives of schooling and discovering their multiple intelligences. This was documented from a set of questionnaires. The targeted subjects consisted of 40 at risk students in three secondary schools. One of the most startling results is at risk students’ responds indicating that they have fairly positive attitudes towards their schools. However, the peers and parental factors and not the learning variables may be the prominent causes that influence their positive attitudes and their reasons for attending school. Thus, the research suggests a call for transformation of schooling system from typical classroom to a new one, which caters diversity of interest, talents, skills and intelligences. There are also the needs for comprehensive academic and non-academic programs that highlight the importance of having a collaborative partnership between home, school and community.

Keywords: At Risk Students, Multiple Intelligences, Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the leading developing countries in term of political, social and demographic aspects. Similarly the development can be seen in educational field. In fact, the developments in political, social, economic and demographic aspects affect the educational reforms (Rossi et al., 1994) [6]. Yet, despite the efforts of educators, policy makers, formulation of numerous strategies for change and improvement, new knowledge about teaching and learning the overall pattern of achievement for some students remain largely unchanged. In fact in many communities, there are still some students who are school dropouts and students with social problems, which later on bring about some social illness. They are termed as ‘at risk’ students. The term “student at risk” came into common use in educational field in the early 1980’s. In general, the term is used to describe the students who are not successful, those who did not seem to fit in school (Russell, Grandgenett & Lickteig, 1994) [7].

One of the most important issue concerning at risk students that should also be addressed by educators is attitudes towards schooling and learning. This is because, students’ attitudes towards school and learning play an important role in determining to what extent the students learn and how they put their efforts in school activities and accordingly, make them attend and stay in school. This is because, the most common reasons for dropping out, include not liking school and poor school performance (Roderick, 1993) cited in Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003) [8]. Another important issue that can be raised here is regarding their educational goals. What are the factors that make the students attend schooling despite their low academic achievement? Does the factor stem from peers or parents or some positive attitude toward school or does it comes from the students themselves like reasonably high self esteem and expectation for future academic success.

Several studies, such as (Zainal et. al 1991) [9] reflect the deficiencies of Malaysian traditional classrooms, in which great emphasis is given to specific kinds of intelligences such as in the area of linguistics and mathematics. Unfortunately, this kind of system has been practiced for decades and continues to be used in almost Malaysian schools.

In school, students are expected to perform well scholastically, and for those who fail to meet that expectation, are at severe risk. And, for most cases, those students who fail to do well in school, become the victims of labelling, constant discrimination that at last, lead them to fall miserably in later life. But, many educators forget that the fact that people as well as students are different in their own ways, such as in term of personality, intelligence, family background and the like. Thus, that is probably one of the reasons why school make little recognition to these differences and hence to some extent, fail to make the adequate accommodations to meet the diverse needs of the students. Research on learning (Gardner, 1983, 1993 cited in Brualdi, 1996) [1] suggests human posses at least seven types of intelligences, each to varying degree. Those intelligences are logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences (Gardner et al., 1996) [4].

In general, the present study was designed to probe the students' at risk perspectives of schooling. As the students' perceptions on schools comprise of so many variables, which are impossible to be measured in a single study, the elements like students' attitudes towards school and learning, their perception of the important of schooling and grades are some of the variables that are used in this study. Another important objective of this research is to identify at risk students strength in different kind of intelligences based on Gardner's Theory. The identification can serve as one of explanations for the students' attitudes toward schooling and feeling of alienation from school context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was done in three schools located in Kota Bharu Kelantan. The schools are Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Putri, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Ismail Putra and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Long Gafar. Forty Form 4 students considered as at risk of school failure are selected to complete the set of questionnaire, which includes items, related to their personal background, attitudes towards schools and multiple intelligences. Their selections were based on their school records and recommendation by counsellors of the respective schools. Demographic information provided by the respondents indicates that 70% (28 respondents) were males and 30% (12 respondents) were female students, and, 100% of them are Malays. Out of forty students, one of them is identified as having reading problem thus, the questionnaire have to be read to him.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Attitudes Towards Schooling

This section will measure the at risk students attitudes towards schooling based on the following referents: schools, classrooms and learning Attitudes towards Schools and Classrooms:

Table 1 shows the result of at risk students' attitudes toward school and classrooms. Among the most appealing result is that about 37.5% of the students agreed and 62.5% strongly agreed with the fact that they enjoy going to school. In sum, almost all participants view schools as pleasant places to be. It supports the result that shows approximately 30% of the participants strongly disagree that they like the school holidays or schools being closed. The second aspect, vital to be uncovered here, is the students' attitudes towards the classrooms in which they spent about half of their days in it. Data also indicate that at risk students have quite positive views about their classrooms. This is proved by the fact that only about 10% of these students agree with the statement that classrooms are dull places. However, the data shows that about 47.5% of the students do agree and 7.5% strongly agree that they are thinking of what is going on after they finish the school session reveals the fact that school itself is not that attractive as what is perceived by the students in the first place. With the percentage of 12.5% of students strongly agree and 45% agree with the statement which says that there are better things to do than going to school serves as an evidence that there are some external forces that may influence the way they view school and the importance of schooling.

Table 1: Attitudes Towards School And Classroom

Attitudes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Enjoying school	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)	-	-
Classroom is a dull place	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	20 (50%)	14 (35%)
There are better things to do than going to school	5 (12.5%)	18 (45%)	11 (27.5%)	6 (15%)
Thinking of what is going on after school	3 (7.5%)	19 (47.5%)	12 (30%)	6 (15%)
Like if the school are closed/ holiday	4 (10%)	11 (27.5%)	13 (32.5%)	12 (30%)

Attitudes Towards Learning

The students' attitudes toward learning are shown in Table 2. Result indicates that the at risk students have quite positive attitudes towards learning. They see learning as important aspect in their lives. About 47.5% of them strongly agree and 42.5% agree study is the most important things of all. The result also in agreement with the statement in which about 55% of the students agree that they do study hard. About 42.5% disagree with the fact that they do not have fun in studying and 50% of them do not perceive study is a bother for them. Fifty five percent of the students do not agree and 35% strongly disagree that they dislike learning.

Table 2: Attitudes Towards Learning

Attitudes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I dislike learning	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	22 (55%)	14 (35%)
I study hard	11 (27.5%)	22 (55%)	7 (17.5%)	-
There isn't any fun in studying	2 (5%)	7 (17.5%)	17 (42.5%)	14 (35%)
I put study above most other things	19 (47.5%)	17 (42.5%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Studying interferes with some other plans	-	4 (10%)	26 (65%)	10 (25%)
Study is a bother	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	20 (50%)	15 (37.5%)

In general, at risk students who participated in this study have moderately positive attitudes towards three variables mentioned above. Such finding comes as a pleasant surprise as it does not seem to square with reports of some previous findings. For instance, Mc Call et al., (1992) [5] described the underachievers or at risk students attitudes towards school as "bored", "hate school", "disinterested", "do not participate" and "indifferent to failure". Perhaps such discrepancy may be explained by several enlightenments.

In the first place, students' positive reactions may be affected by the socially acceptable responses that the students reflect in their questionnaires. They may response positively to the variables in the items related to their attitudes towards schooling to picture their good image to the researcher and thus fail to reflect their real beliefs and behaviours related to schools. Secondly, the discrepancy may be a function of the fact that the samples were not selected according to appropriate criteria to guarantee representativeness of the true severe at risk students.

On the positive side, it can be inferred that students' positive responses towards schooling may indeed imply their true perspectives of schooling. Such perspective would probably be best clarified by the fact that these students possess a "reasonable" degree of "resilience" within themselves that make them stay at school compared to their counterparts, the drop out students. Resilience refers to results in a heightened of success in school and in other aspects of life despite environmental diversities (adapted from Eggen & Kauchak, 1999) [3].

One important issue arises, while discussing the students' positive attitudes towards schooling. If they have such a positive attitudes towards schooling, why so many of them have the records of tardiness, absenteeism and the like? The answer for this question will be probably best described in a single point. The explanation focuses on the question main concern here, does the positive attitudes towards schooling as reported by at risk students in this study imply the degree of students' learning and the love of learning or it is just a matter of peers? As John Dewey said, "The most important attitude can be formed in schools is that of the desire to go on learning" (cited in Covington et al., 1996) [2]. Yet, the responses given by at risk students somehow reflect main concern here, does the positive attitudes towards schooling as reported by at risk students in this study imply the degree of students' learning and the love of learning or it is just a matter of peers? As John Dewey said, "The most important attitude can be formed in schools is that of the desire to go on learning" (cited in Covington et al., 1996) [2]. Yet, the responses given by at risk students somehow reflect that the main reasons for attending school are highly related to peers and school itself is perceived as a place of escapism from parental pressure (see Table 3).

Reasons For Attending School

At risk students' response on the reasons for attending school is presented in Table 3. One of the most appealing reasons why these at risk students attend school despite their low academic performance is because they believe that school is a very important place for them. The result shows that almost all of the respondents attend school because they want to be successful in school. Despite their low achievement in the academic aspect, about 55% of them strongly agrees with the fact that they can do better if they try harder.

The reason for attending school can also be attributed to the external factors. About 93.5% of them do admit, with 32.5% strongly agree and 60% agree, that they come to school because they want to be with their friends. The students' family background also serves as a crucial and deciding factor why the at risk students stay in school. Thirty nine students report that they come to school because their parent want and expect them to do so and because they have some awareness that they need education to get a good job and help their family as well. The institutional aspect like classes and teachers is not a paramount cause for them to be present at school. This is because only 67.5% of them agree that they like some of their classes and 50% like some of the teachers. In addition, 22.5% strongly agree and 27.5% agree, that made up 50% of the students which is about half of them come to school because they do want to be dismissed from school. Undoubtedly, as it is discussed before, these at risk students do have reasonable degree of positive attitudes towards school and they see the importance of attending school for their future. This may provide the answer why some of the at risk students still take some of their responsibilities to attend school although they are very unsuccessful in academic aspect. However, the result do not really provide a concrete ground that the school factors such as teachers and classes become the prominent reasons for them to be present in school. We can derive an assumption that the positive attitudes may be caused by the factors such as to be with their peers and friends. Pressure from parents that expect them to stay in school can also be the crucial reason. These reasons can be combined with fact that they do not want to be dismissed for chronic absenteeism and also to get school certificate.

Table 3: Reasons for Attending School

Reasons for attending school	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
For academic success	29 (72.5%)	11 (27.5%)	-	-
I can pass if I try harder	22 (55%)	16 (40%)	2 (5%)	-
I like to be with my friends	13 (32.5%)	24 (60%)	3 (7.5%)	-
My parents want me to go to school	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	1 (2.5%)	-
I need education to get a good job	17 (42.5%)	22 (55%)	1 (2.5%)	-
I like some of my subjects	3 (7.5%)	27 (67.5%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)
I like some of my teachers	12 (30%)	20 (50%)	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)
School is a very important place	26 (65%)	11 (27.5%)	3 (7.5%)	-
I don't want to be dismissed	9 (22.5%)	11 (27.5%)	5 (12.5%)	15 (37.5%)
I want to get a school certificate	3 (7.5%)	7 (17.5%)	15 (37.5%)	15 (37.5%)

At Risk Students' Multiple Intelligences

Table 4 demonstrate the means and standard deviations of eight intelligences. As it is shown in Table 4, out of the seven intelligences, interpersonal and bodily kinaesthetic intelligences are reported to show the highest score with the mean of 5.10 and 5.0 respectively (the standard deviations are 1.69 and 1.63 respectively). This is followed by the score of intra personal intelligence with the mean of 4.80 ($SD = 1.34$) and spatial intelligence with the mean of 4.72 ($SD = 1.55$). On the other hand, of all seven intelligences, logical mathematical intelligence shows the lowest scores reported by the respondents with the mean of 3.67 ($SD = 1.59$). Other intelligences such as linguistic and musical intelligences tend to reflect an average score among the seven intelligences with the mean of 4.60 ($SD = 2.12$) and 4.65 ($SD = 2.19$) respectively.

In sum, results of MI indicator reveal the unique combination of at risk students intelligences strength and weaknesses. It shows the fact that majority of the at risk students in this research were reported to have strength in interpersonal and bodily kinaesthetic intelligences. On the other hand, many of the respondents seem to be weak in term of logical mathematical intelligence. The students seem to have quite average abilities in term of linguistic, musical and spatial intelligences. Thus, the finding supports research by Zainal Ghani et al, (1991) [9] which suggest difficulties faced by students in coping with school is related to the students' poor performance in general intelligence, a strong predictor of school success. And the school success is typically described in terms of Logical Mathematical and Linguistic Intelligences.

Identifications of MI intelligences among at risk students do provide some important contributions in understanding the at risk students in the respective school. Firstly, the identification of students at risk weaknesses in logical mathematical intelligence and average performance in linguistic intelligence seem to meets the previous assumption that one of the core contributing factors to students riskiness of school failure is related to their inability to master the two scholastic intelligences. Secondly, the results indirectly, successfully uncover some of the at risk students preference on how the teaching and learning process should occur in order to meet their interests and talents. Lastly, by doing so students discover at least one of their strength and thus motivate them to put necessary efforts to master these talents. Conversely, if the students are not given the opportunities to find out an area of interest, they may never develop the love for learning.

The narrowly defined of the intelligence concept in school curriculum which stress only the two conventional intelligence and de-emphasized the other types of intelligences seem to be one of the important factors that have to do with the existence of at risk students population. These students who have weaker strength in school intelligence are often perceived as marginal students. These students in some cases receive low expectation and differential treatment from teachers and peers. Hence, negative experience in schools influence their attitudes towards learning and also increase the feeling of isolation from school. Thus, their attitudes and high degree of alienation from school will directly and indirectly put at risk students in higher degree of school failure and dropping out from school. In sum, the school curriculum's failure to discover the talents and also its failure to generate a practical ideas to take advantage of students' strength is one of the best answers of the existence and increasing numbers of at risk students elsewhere.

Table 4: Means And Standard Deviation of MI indicator

Types of Intelligences	Means	Standard Deviation
Bodily Kinaesthetic	5.000	1.633
Interpersonal	5.100	1.691
Intrapersonal	4.800	1.343
Linguistic	4.600	2.121
Logical Mathematical	3.675	1.591
Musical	4.650	2.190
Spatial	4.725	1.552

In sum, one of the most interesting results is at risk students' responds indicating that they have fairly positive attitudes towards the schooling variables namely school, classroom and study. However, the peers and parental factors and not the learning variables may be the prominent causes that influence their positive attitudes and their reasons for attending school. Results based on Multiple Intelligence Profile discover the students' weaknesses in Logical Mathematical Intelligence and average in Linguistic Intelligence, which serve as a ground for not doing well academically. Conversely, they possess strengths in other intelligences especially Bodily Kinaesthetic Intelligence and Interpersonal Intelligences, which are often disregard by schools.

Thus, the research suggests a call for transformation of schooling system from typical classroom to a new one, which caters diversity of interest, talents, skills and intelligences. There are also the needs for comprehensive academic and non-academic programs that highlight the importance of having a collaborative partnership between home, school and community. This may provide a solution for at risk students as it determine the students attitudes and engagement towards learning.

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