

**SELECTED PRE-VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM****Lili Mariam Ismail****Teng Leong Koay***University Brunei Darussalam*

*There is a lack of studies on the school experiences of students in the pre-vocational programme in Brunei Darussalam. The aim of this study is find out what are the students' experiences at school, what they go through at school and so on. A qualitative approach was utilized whereby in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven students from two local secondary schools. Some of the findings included overall positive views of school and the acquiring of daily living skills which they felt was important to them. It was found that success and happiness is associated with their favourite subjects and interests. It appeared that there is a good camaraderie between teachers and students indicating that friends and more importantly teachers play a vital role in their lives. Also, the students seem to have a strong sense of family and ambitions. The students encountered some problems related to bullying by classmates and other students and trouble-makers which affect them negatively. In addition, the students faced punishments and one student complained of negative teacher attitudes. It was concluded that lessening their problems could help make school more pleasant for them. Finally, there should be more emphasis on family involvement and that the importance of school to work transition to realise their dreams and ambitions should not be taken lightly.*

**Background**

The pre-vocational programme in Brunei Darussalam has been implemented for just over 10 years. Though there have been some studies carried out in order to evaluate the programme as well as on the perceptions of the stakeholders involved, there has been little research regarding the actual school experiences of the students who are under the programme itself. It is crucial to know the students' thoughts and experiences of school because it is these students who are directly affected by it.

The purpose of this study aims at getting insights from the pre-vocational students themselves regarding their experiences about school which include what they learn, what they think about it and on friendship. In Brunei Darussalam, there have not been many studies done on the experiences of pre-vocational students' schooling life. By finding out their thoughts and experiences, it could be helpful in ways that may improve the students' experiences of school. It is vital to delve into the pre-vocational students' minds because it is they who are experiencing the pre-vocational programme that has been specially designed for them.

This study attempted to answer four research questions. They are as follows:

1. What do the students think about what they learn in school?
2. To what extent is their social participation in school with friends and teachers?
3. Do students have a positive view of school?
4. What abilities or skills have they acquired from their schooling?

**Vocational training in other countries**

Vocational training in many countries is focused on transition from school to work; it is to prepare students to work. In the US, the education system is geared to empower students with the skills needed for employment. In Finland, there is the Activity School of East Finland. According to Komonen (2002, p.45) it is defined as 'a project-type unit constructed within the framework of vocational education, in

which objectives related to education and life management are combined with the completion of a vocational qualification (as cited in Jahnukainen & Helander, 2007, p.473).

In Switzerland, according to Haefeli (2000, p.6) the predominant form of vocational education is the apprenticeship: on the job training in a firm which is accompanied by attendance at a vocational school (dual system) or by attending a vocational school and an introductory course (triad system). Similarly, in Liechtenstein, there is also a dual/triad system of initial vocational training. According to Josef, Dieter, Christoph and Karl (1997, p.13) the system is based on an interaction between practical training on the job and school lessons, which are more theoretical.

As cited in according to Fabian (2007) and Livelli (1999), due to the known positive outcomes associated with vocational training and transition planning for adolescents with disabilities, it has been hypothesized that preparation of students in the early grades for entrance into the work force when they are adults may be critical, potentially making students more likely to be productive members of society. According to Evers (1996) *...students with learning disabilities who receive some experience in vocational education or paid outside work during high school are more successful in the job market than those who had no vocational or work experience* (p.70). Additionally, Wagner (1991) stated that vocational training resulted in a compounded 8% chance of dropping out versus 15% for students who had not participated in vocational education (as cited in Jones & Williams, 2011).

#### *Studies on the perceptions of students with disabilities on their schooling*

There have been studies done on the perceptions of vocational training with parents, teachers and elementary special education students. In a study by Jones and Williams (2011) the students were asked specifically on their perceptions of the effects of their training on their knowledge, performance and self. According to the study based on Dutch primary school children, the majority of students have a satisfactory degree of social participation. However, when compared to students without special needs, a relatively large portion of students with special needs report difficulties in social participation.

Meanwhile, for students who are in secondary school, Newman (2007) has found that little is known about what (autistic) students experience in high school. Referring to the statistics from the US Department of Education, Newman (2007) stated that 77% of students with autism also take vocational courses. They are also more likely to take non-academic courses too such as Physical Education in a general education setting than to take academic or vocational courses.

#### *The Pre-Vocational Programme in Brunei Darussalam*

The pre-vocational programme is relatively new. According to Adanan and Wong (2006) the pre-vocational programme was originally designed to meet the needs of students with high support needs (HSN), but for the first few years, it was expected to be part of a rescue operation for over-aged children in primary schools. At that time, usually students who failed their primary school years were not promoted to the next year.

Wong and Mak (2007, pp. 9-10) stated:

The Pre-Vocational Programme is a programme designed to meet the needs of students with High Support Needs (HSN) in the secondary schools. The programme is designed to provide opportunities for these students with moderate to severe learning impairments to achieve their full potential and learn various independent living skills. The more able among this group of students may acquire some basic academic, living and social skills, basic vocational and work skills which will equip them for the world of life and work after school. The programme is delivered over a five year period with distinct goals for each year:

Year 1, 2 and 3: Career Awareness, Exploration and Preparation

Year 4: Career Placement

Year 5: Career Specialization and Follow-up.

Now, however, under the new SPN-21 education system, year 1 is now known as year 7, year 2 as year 8 and so on. All the students have their own Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) and an advantage of this program is that it is flexible and the curriculum depends on the students' level of abilities.

According to Adanan and Wong (2006), the programme aims to assist Pre-Vocational students to: a) develop their potential to acquire some basic academic, basic social, daily living, and pre-vocational skills; b) to prepare them for adult life; and c) to become useful, contributing members of society.

How are the lessons carried out? Adanan and Wong (2006) explained that the lessons are taught in an across-curriculum format and that the lesson plans are built on basic competencies in four main areas which are basic academic skills, basic vocational skills, life skills and social skills. One could see that the lessons are not based on a narrow and specific topic but incorporates a variety of skills and a holistic approach. Another advantage, which is probably the most important of all, is that the students study vocational skills, which will no doubt help them become more independent in the future and become more marketable. The fact that the pre-vocational programme is vocation oriented, is in line with Abosi and Koay's views which stated that *education of children with disabilities should aim at assisting the children to acquire survival skills* (Abosi & Koay, 2008, p.8).

Adanan and Wong (2006) stated that this programme has been in effect since 1998 and that even though an annual review and evaluation of the programme as a whole is carried out, there have been no comprehensive studies conducted specifically on the job training provided and its effectiveness in equipping the pre-vocational students with the necessary work skills. The same can be said about research done that focuses on the experiences of these students in the programme.

Generally, there is a definite lack of studies on the experiences of pre-vocational students at the local level. A study by Taibah Ahmad sought to assess the relevance of the local pre-vocational programme because as that time there had not been any evaluation of it yet. She conducted surveys and interviews with the parents, home-room teachers as well as the 33 students involved. The questions for the students were based on academic achievements, social skills, and perceptions about school, self-concept and pre-vocational skills. Generally, the results were positive.

A study was carried out by Adanan and Wong (2006) in which interviews with pre-vocational students were conducted to discuss the programme and the outcomes. The results were also mostly positive and included information such as they liked school and enjoyed the learning activities there. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, the two studies mentioned above are related to find out about these students' experiences of school. Since there are not many in-depth studies based on the pre-vocational students' experiences of school and seeing that it has been around for slightly over ten years, the researcher feels that this is an appropriate time to conduct such a study.

### **Methodology**

Through conducting interviews and surveys, special education students in rural Kansas offered their views concerning the effectiveness of the special education services. Among the themes that emerged included life goals of independence, desire to participate in non-competitive school activities and sense of being different and misunderstood by both school personnel and other students.

Curtin and Clarke (2005) interviewed students with disabilities to find out their life stories particularly educational experiences and found that they had mixed views about their education, whereby participants who attended a mainstream school indicated positive and negative experiences compared to those who attended special schools who mainly reported positive experiences.

Shah (2007) used semi-structured interviews, with prompts and follow-up questions to generate accounts of the young, disabled people's educational experiences. His research shows the importance of the children's insights which can be used to better the system.

Lindstrom, Paskey, Dickinson, Doren, Zane & Johnson (2007) used in-depth interviews (including young adults with disabilities) to find out what makes the transition of students from school to work successful. Some of the recommendations based on the research were for the students to participate in career exploration and multiple work experiences during high school and to display motivation and persistence.

Francis and Muthukrishna (2004) used unstructured interviews to examine the life experiences of ten disabled students in a rural secondary school in South Africa. Among the information gathered were the students' perceptions of cultural attitudes towards disabilities and being included. Francis and Muthukrishna (2004) stated that one of the findings was that there is a critical need for a systemic

approach to inclusion, and the need to continually probe issues of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and social relations in schools and communities (p.116).

De Schauwer, Van Hove, Mortier, and Loots (2009) also conducted a study that examined the experiences of inclusive education in Flanders. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and observations of 15 students aged 5-17, with varied disabilities were conducted. It was concluded that 'it is important to meet the children and find out their views about education' (p. 109). De Schauwer et al. (2009) also mentioned that working with children in a positive way on what they can and want to do can be an important tool (p. 109).

As mentioned above, most of the studies employed a mixed methods approach, usually consisting of both surveys and interviews. Koster et al. (2010) used instruments to measure self-perception and surveys to assess acceptance of classmates and they used the reciprocal friendship nomination to assess friendships. Koster et al. (2010) used observations in class to determine interactions of the students.

This study employs a qualitative approach. According to , the methods used by a qualitative researcher demonstrate a common belief that they can provide 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena when compared to purely quantitative data. The researcher feels that due to the nature of the research which seeks to be an in-depth study, examining students' thoughts and experiences, a qualitative approach would be most appropriate in order to collect relevant and accurate data. Mertens and McLaughlin (1995) stated that many of the criteria that establish the appropriateness of choosing qualitative methods parallel the conditions in special education. In special education, low incidence conditions, such as deaf-blindness, cause samples sizes to be either restricted or too small (p. 45).

#### *Subjects*

Seven students who are currently in various levels in the pre-vocational programme were interviewed from two secondary schools. Four students were from school A, whereas three students were from school B. Table 1 shows the background of all the students involved in the study.

**Table 1. Background information of the students involved in the study**

Name*	Gender	Year	School	Diagnosis
Aiman	Male	8	A	Noonan Syndrome
Hazim	Male	10	A	Hydrocephalus
Nawfal	Male	10	A	Cerebral Palsy and developmental delay
Fikri	Male	11	A	Down syndrome and speech impairment
Jasmine	Female	7	B	Severe slow learner, LD
Liza	Female	9	B	Down Syndrome
Najwa	Female	9	B	ADHD, speech delay

\*Fictitious names

According to Table 1, all four male students are from school A whereas the three female students are from School B. All of the students are within the 14-18 years old age range.

How the students were chosen was quite tricky. explained that interviewing students with disabilities can be challenging because of their capabilities or communication needs of the respondents. Prior to the interviews, the researcher met the students from both schools and then discussed the interview questions (See Appendix 1) with the Home Room Teachers and to ask for their opinion on which students would be suitable candidates for the study.

#### *Instruments*

Semi-structured interviews were used for this study. Though semi-structured can be considered formal, the researcher took care in making the interviews as informal as possible. explained that semi-structured interviews start with a pre-determined set of questions, but allow some latitude in the breadth of relevance and that to some extent, what is taken to be relevant to the interviewee is pursued. Semi-structured interviews allow for room to talk about other topics which could be related to the purpose of the research but not foreseen by the researcher, whilst sticking to the questions that were set out in advance so as not to stray too far off topic.

### *Procedure*

Prior to the study, a letter was sent to the Department of Schools, Ministry of Education through University Brunei Darussalam asking for permission to conduct the study. The letters were then sent to the principals of the schools involved. In the letters, the purpose of the study and the list of the schools involved were clearly stated. A personal letter was also written to the Head of the Special Education Unit detailing the purpose of the study and asking for permission for access to the relevant resources pertaining to the pre-vocational programme.

Also, consent forms were given to all the students involved as well as their parents. In the consent forms, the researcher indicated the purpose of the study, the researchers' contact details and assurance that all information given would be treated appropriately and that no real names will be used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All the parents and the students signed the consent forms indicating agreement to participate in the study.

### *Pilot Study*

The purpose of the pilot study was to see if the semi-structured questions could be easily understood by the students and to determine whether any difficulties could arise from the questions. Following the transcription analysis from the pilot study, some changes were made to the instrument. A few more questions were added to better address the research questions. There were also some added questions that reflected the curriculum for the pre-vocational programme, which would be related to the abilities and skills acquired from their schooling.

### *Main Study*

After receiving the parents' consent forms and after the students signed their consent forms as well, the researcher asked the Home Room Teachers for a good time to conduct the interviews. Once that was agreed upon, the students were interviewed in a quiet place in the school. Prior to the interview, the researcher explained that their real names would not be needed and that the interview would have to be transcribed.

After each interview was conducted, transcriptions of each interview were translated to English where necessary and typed out. The transcriptions were then subjected to a content analysis where codes were listed out one by one and then carefully put into the appropriate categories. In referring to how this may be done, according to the researcher becomes very familiar with the descriptive information collected and allows categories to emerge as the analysis continues. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) explained that one of the reasons a researcher may want to do a content analysis would be to formulate themes (i.e. major ideas) that help to organize and make sense out of large amounts of descriptive information. This was exactly what the researcher did. Recurring themes or key points were listed out and as the process of coding continued, these themes were listed under bigger themes or categories thus culminating into the different sections of the results.

## **Results and Discussion**

After analyzing the data gathered from the interviews, there were 12 main themes that stood out. These are their abilities and skills, friendship, socialization, daily living skills, fears/problems, relationship with teachers, family, their achievements, their future, their likes, their thoughts about school and about the subjects learnt.

### *Abilities, skills and achievements*

There is a wide variety of skills and abilities that the pre-vocational students have acquired from their studies at their respective schools. Many of these abilities and skills reflect their functional academics and curriculum that focuses on daily living skills. According to the pre-vocational curriculum, knowing how to use a calculator is one of the skills that these students need to acquire. Most of the students interviewed know how to use a calculator.

*I can use a calculator. It can help with Maths.* (Liza, year 9).

*I know how to use a calculator.* (Aiman, year 8).

In addition to that, most of the students are able to mentally compute basic mathematical equations like simple addition without the use of calculators.

Most of the students interviewed could read. Some of the slower readers employed a step-by-step approach by spelling out the words slowly first and then saying out the words as a whole. Their attitude shows that they do not give up, even though they cannot read fluently, they try by spelling out the words first, no matter how long it took. Liza can not only read but likes reading. She always reads storybooks particularly about the mouse, Geronimo Stilton. When asked what the book was about, Liza stated the main characters and what Geronimo does in the book. She also reads Malay novels and stories about Barbie.

Computers play a significant role in these students' school life. Most of the students know the basic knowledge about computers such as how to switch them on and off, typing out their names and so on. Najwa mentioned that she knows about the wiring too. Both Najwa and Liza stated that they know how to use the internet.

Part of the pre-vocational curriculum involves teaching students how to introduce themselves. Liza was able to introduce herself clearly, stating her name, her age, address, and her parents' names. Hazim was able to give his full name and even his nickname. When it comes to gardening, Liza stated that it is easy while Fikri stated that it is fun. It also appears that all the students do not take up gardening at home, adding that they only do gardening at school.

Jasmine is an athletic girl. She is good at running, discus throwing and long jump. She has participated in competitions and recently won first place in a relay running competition. Although Jasmine is a severe slow learner, she is an excellent athlete. She recently joined the sports day for the pre-vocational students. She participated in the long jump, 100-meter sprint and relay. She stated that her relay team consists of students from her school and other schools and they won first place. Jasmine was the first runner and her along with her teammates received medals. She also mentioned that she loves to exercise. She also participated in long jumps and discus throwing.

#### *Friends and socialization*

Having friends is normal for everyone and it is the same for the pre-vocational students. Overall, the students commented that the friends they have from the Home Room class are good people. Nawfal explained that he also has friends from the Religious School that he attends. However, almost all of the students apart from Jasmine stated that they do not have friends from other classes except the Home Room class. Jasmine pointed to one class near the canteen and listed out the names of the five friends that she knows from that class. When asked which friend she liked the most, Najwa listed out the names of three friends.

There also seems to be a 'helping' culture there with the students in the Home Room class. Hazim mentioned that he and his friends like learning and they help each other with cleaning and sweeping the room. Jasmine also mentioned that when it comes to gardening and cooking, they all help each other. She added that some help her to read, since she cannot read very well. Some of the students noted that their friends like to help them with their problems. Aiman, Fikri and Nawfal all mentioned about a particular classmate who likes to help them with maths.

*If I don't know something, they will teach me. Sometimes for Maths, I'm not good at it, so they will help me. (Aiman)*

The activities that these students like to take part in with their friends include playing tic-tac-toe, playing monopoly, telling funny stories to each other and eating together. Liza said, *we always tell stories*. When asked if the students look forward to seeing their friends every day, they all said yes. When asked why this was so, Fikri said that he was shy to answer the question. Liza's response was *They are good to me. They give me presents for my birthdays and my projects*.

Most of the pre-vocational students socialise only within the Home Room itself. Apart from one or two classmates who disturb them, the students appear to get along well with each other. It appears that at school A, there is more interaction among the students and teachers when compared to school B which seems to have less student-teacher interactions. Both Hazim and Fikri are friendly. Whenever Hazim meets his friends, he greets them. He does the same to his teachers. Hazim is also known for visiting his teachers' houses during *Hari Raya*. What is interesting is that at school A, the students jot down the name and contact number of the people they meet.

Jasmine has a unique opportunity to make new friends because she participates in track and field competitions. She has friends from other schools whom are members of her relay team. Upon meeting the researcher, Aiman was shy at first but quickly showed that he was friendly and talkative.

#### *Daily living skills*

The students are aware of general cleanliness. Aiman sweeps at home without anyone telling him to and cleans his room. When asked what happens if the floors are not swept he replied that it would be 'dirty'. Most of the students are able carry out to tasks like washing the dishes and cups, sweeping and so on. When asked if it was beneficial to learn about washing plates and sweeping, Hazim replied in agreement and that he helps his mother at home with the cleaning. In addition, activities like putting on socks, shoes and buttoning shirts are simple tasks that most of the students are able to do. Fikri is able to wear a tie by himself.

Cooking is a major theme that all the students identified with. The type of food that almost all the students are able to cook is foods that require frying. Other types of food that some of the students could cook are pizza, rice, nasi lemak, kebabs and breakfast food.

Jasmine, who seemed happy to answer the question and even showed the researcher pictures of the food she has cooked, excitedly answered in an air of confidence: *I can cook cucur, prawns, egg, chicken and I can cook pizza too.*

Jasmine also mentioned that they used the vegetables that they planted as ingredients in their cooking. Some of the students cook at home too. Najwa affirmed that she also is taught how to cook at home by her mother and sister. Aiman mentioned likeness for cooking but that he could only cook fried mee. When asked what he could cook, Fikri responded with Nasi Lemak, fried chicken and kebabs.

Some of the students, especially the girls, can sew material and sew beads. When asked if Liza could sew beads she said yes and that she could sew the hems of sleeves too. One student, Jasmine, is taught how to bead from her mother and even sew beads on to her own *baju kurung*. She also sells her beadwork: *I can bead in the shape of leaves and flowers. I sell them too* (Jasmine, year 7).

#### *Fears/problems*

As the interviews progressed, it became apparent that these students also experienced some problems or fears at school ranging from being told off for being late to school to classmates who got them into trouble. Liza explained that she sometimes was scolded by the teachers for being late for school. When asked if there was something that he could change about his school, Nawfal mentioned that he would like to be in the normal classes instead of the Home Room class. He could not give a reason why but when asked if it was fun being in the Home Room class he replied in agreement. Jasmine talked about the other students bothering her and also about bullying.

*He likes to disturb people, he likes to eavesdrop on people during conversations* (Jasmine, talking about a classmate)

*There are good people in school but there are also mean ones too. There are some who bully people and say bad things* (Jasmine)

Jasmine added that there were people who said bad things to her. When asked if she could change something about her school, she stated that because of the bullying she would want to change schools, to one where one of her relay team mates goes to.

One of Liza's problems was one that any teenage girl could relate to. Liza stated she did not like boys. She mentioned that boys did not want to look at her and that she did not like boys who were flirty. In her opinion, boys should pay attention to their studies instead of flirting with girls. In addition, Liza has a friend that frequently got her into trouble and was reprimanded by the teachers. On the matter, Liza stated:

*Usually I go with Amy, but she always asks me to go to the canteen and sometimes when we are about to start class or during class...so we are reprimanded for that.*

The same friend often got angry at her. This is what happened when Liza tried to tell their teachers about her situation.

*Sometimes she gets angry at me if I lose some stuff. I can't do anything because I'm new here and she always pesters me. I go with her to the canteen during lesson time so the teachers get angry at me and her so I wanted to tell the teacher but Amy got angry at me, she wrote nonsense on my books and on my face. So I cried. (Liza)*

Liza also feared that she would be told to stand outside in the sun. It seems that her and her classmates were told to stand outside in the sun because they were *walking around*. Due to his health problems, Hazim sometimes did not attend school and he mentioned not going to school recently because he had to go to the hospital for his blood test.

#### *Relationship with teachers*

Teachers appear to impact the students in positive ways. Most of the students described their teachers as good to them and viewed them highly and with respect.

*Teachers A, B, C, D, E, F and G are the best teachers in this world and their subjects are important (Liza)*

Teacher attitudes also came up from the interviews. Though most of the teachers showed positive attitudes, some did not. Najwa implied that some of the teachers were angry. When asked if she wanted the teachers not to get angry, she said "yes". When asked why school was boring, Najwa stated, "The teachers got angry". All students indicated that their teachers were helpful. Najwa listed the teachers who always helped her with her homework. Jasmine talked about how the teachers liked to help with cooking and gardening, that the teachers were nice, fun, help with important matters and that they laughed a lot. This suggests that Jasmine appears to get along very well with her teachers.

*I like them too because they are fun. They are good to me (Jasmine)*

From the researcher's point of view, it seems that the students at School A have better relationships with their teachers and vice versa. When asked about whom his favourite teacher was, Hazim gave the name of one teacher and said, "because he hugs me" and "he teaches me how to greet the other teachers and he teaches me sign language". This was particularly crucial for Hazim because apart from being hydrocephalic, he had some speech problems. Even through minor observations spent at school A before and after the interviews, the Home Room teachers and students seemed to act like one big family. The teachers got along well with their students and the students got along well with their teachers. Based on observations of the interactions of the teachers and the students, it was obvious that the teachers were really passionate about their work and genuinely cared about the students under their care. Another theme that emerged was that almost all the students identified their teachers were easy to talk to. Aiman has been known to call the Home Room teachers up to chat occasionally.

#### *Family*

Although no questions about family were included in the list of interview questions, information about the students' families came up often. For example, when justifying her reason for wanting to become a soldier, Najwa mentioned her sister who was a soldier. Hazim also explained about how he wanted to run a bakery business with his father.

Jasmine noted that not only did she learn beading at school, but that her mother taught her how to bead as well. Hazim also brought up how he helped his mother with cleaning. Liza spoke about playing Monopoly with her siblings. Najwa described her family fondly and told the researcher what she and her family liked to do, such as going to the beach, going swimming, buying books and going shopping with her mother and so on. It appeared that Najwa had a very strong bond with her family. Finally, Aiman told how his mother tended to the flowers outside their house.

#### *Their future*

The pre-vocational students had dreams and ambitions just like everyone else. Some of them also appeared to be sure of what they wanted to be in the future. Two of the students' ambitions were positively influenced by their family members. Najwa stated that when she would grow up she would like to be a soldier because she could wear a uniform just like her sister. Hazim very ambitious and had two things that he would like to do when he would grow up. He saw running a bakery with his father in the future and providing massage services on the side.

*Making bread, at home with my dad (Hazim)*

Hazim went on to describe the types of bread that he would like to make and how he would add chocolate to it. It seemed that he would like to run a home bakery. Besides that, he would like to massage people in order to earn money.

*Yes, I want to massage people. I can do that. Sometimes I massage the teachers when they are tired and at my cousins house. I massage them (cousins) and then they give me money (Hazim)*

On the topic of ambitions, Fikri replied something along the lines of a computer and that he wanted to work at the movies. Nawfal, who could cook and liked to watch cooking shows on television wanted to be a chef. His reason was that chefs have a big salary.

Jasmine would like to work with the navy, adding that working on a ship would be fun. When asked what kind of navy work she was interested in, she replied, "like writing anything, becoming a leader". Liza is interested in becoming a lyrics writer. Her fondness for the art of singing and music is clear from the way she talked about her favourite bands, artists and television shows. She wanted to be a lyrics writer because she liked songs. Aiman stated that he would like his future work to be something related to computers.

*Their likes/interests*

Many of the students interviewed expressed fondness for computers. Liza used the computer to go on the internet to search for her favourite artists. Fikri, Hazim and Aiman played games on the computers. Aiman added that what was nice about a computer were the games. Interestingly, Nawfal liked to lift weights at home while Fikri was a fan of football and enjoyed watching Manchester United play.

Liza liked to listen to music. She happened to like Science the most among all her subjects and got very excited about it, indicating that she always passed her Science exams. Jasmine loved exercising and exercised everyday at home by running. It was the researchers' belief that what these students liked might have significant implications as to how they could learn.

*Thoughts about school*

Many of the students indicated that they liked school and were excited to go to school. Overall, the students had a positive view of school and school was fun for them.

*School is fun, there is a discipline teacher who teaches me between good and bad (Jasmine)*

Although Jasmine liked school, she said that she did not look forward to it because sometimes she was told off by the teachers for being late for school. Hazim stated that school was important for learning and that he would not like it if he did not go to school anymore. When asked why Hazim liked school, he replied, "I can play the computer, we are taught how to cook and slice ingredients up".

Aiman answered a strong "yes" when asked if school was important and he said that it was because he learned a lot at school. Aiman also explained that he liked school because staying at home was boring. Fikri liked school and thought schools was fun because there were computers there. Nawfal said that he liked school because "we study, so we can be smart".

Liza liked school. When asked why, she replied, "because we learn important things that are important to me and this school has professionalism and learning things that suit me". When asked if school was fun, she stated, "yes, because I have a lot of good friends". Najwa, who looked forward to going to school, explained that school was fun because staying at home was boring.

Most of them liked their school just the way it was, except for Aiman who said he would prefer more pictures and Jasmine who implied that there should be more sports facilities.

*Subjects learnt*

The subjects that these students learned included science, home science, religious knowledge, physical education, English, art, ICT, mathematics, Malay, cooking, gardening and sewing. Liza's favourite subject was Science because she said it was important and because she passed science exams often. Liza

mentioned that she learnt about energy, about the human body and about health in Science and she explained that learning Science was essential for our health. Her least favourite subjects were Malay, religious knowledge and ICT, which she claimed, were hard subjects .

Most of the boys' favourite subjects were ICT (computer) because of the games that they were able to play on them. For Jasmine, gardening and cooking were the fun subjects. Aiman liked English and Malay but disliked mathematics as he said sometimes he was not so good at it. Nawfal disliked Malay because he said it was hard but he liked English, which was his favourite subject.

### **Discussion**

The first research question was what the students thought about what they learned in school? Overall, the results showed that the students thought that learning was vital. They also associated success and happiness with their favourite subjects. Similarly, difficult subjects turned out to be their least favourite.

Secondly, the interviews revealed significant details about their social participation in school with friends and teachers thus answering the second research question. Most of them explained that their friends in the Home Room class were good to them but a few students noted that there were one or two students in the class who either disturbed them or frequently got them into trouble. Almost all of the students, except one, did not have friends from other classes. They were also aware of events like birthdays where one student indicated her happiness at receiving presents from her classmates and teachers.

The students liked to take part in activities such as playing tic-tac-toe, monopoly and so on. They also liked to eat together and tell funny stories. Most of them stated that they looked forward to seeing their friends every day.

There seemed to be a helping culture which applied to the students as well as the teachers. At school A, there was one classmate who stood out as he frequently helped his other classmates. At school B, the students also helped each other with reading and cooking among others. It was noted that school A seemed to have teachers who were less angry when compared to school B where two of the students mentioned that some of the teachers always seemed angry. Despite this, all the students noted that their teachers were easy to talk to and helpful. Some students even visited their teachers' houses during the festive season of Hari Raya. The students greeted their teachers when they met them and they did the same with their friends. Overall, it seemed that students at school A had a stronger bond and relationship with their teachers compared to the students at school B.

Do students have a positive view of school? This was the third research question. Many of them showed that they were excited to go to school and they liked it because they learned a lot there. Many of them also stated that what they learned was important. All of them mentioned that school was fun and some gave reasons, such as because there were computers, they had friends who were nice to them, staying at home was boring and so on. Overall, despite some of the problems that they experienced at school, they seemed to have a positive view of school.

Fourthly, what abilities or skills have they acquired from their schooling? Most of them knew how to use a calculator, cook simple food, especially fried food, clean the dishes and sweeping, gardening, introducing themselves, the basics of how to use a computer, basic math, spelling and reading, writing and so on. All the girls could sew material and beads together. One of the students had unique abilities such as being very athletic. The results showed that these students had a wide variety of abilities and skills, which reflected their curriculum, which was more focused on functional academics and daily living skills.

Besides knowing how to clean, they were aware of what cleanliness is. Some of the students realized what would happen if they did not know how to cook, clean and so on. Some of them even helped with the cleaning at home. Despite gardening being a part of the syllabus just like cooking, none of them took up gardening at home unlike cooking where some students expressed that they cooked at home.

A key finding was the emergence of themes that were unexpected but came up from the interviews and what the students felt were significant to say. Family was one such theme and it was frequently cited by almost all the students indicating that they saw family as a crucial part of their lives and that being with their family was something that they enjoyed. Their problems were another theme. These students faced problems such as bullying, getting into trouble because of their classmates, being told off by the teachers

for being late, being reprimanded, loss of school time due to illness and so on. When it came to one of the students, her achievements of winning first place in a relay competition were valuable and that made her and her team mates happy.

Their future was important and many of them were quite ambitious. They liked to talk about their future especially those who seemed sure of what sort of job they would like to have in the future. They also mentioned their likes and interests which could help improve how they learn at school.

Some of these findings were similar to those of Primer and Brown's (1995) study where the students expressed life goals such as getting a good job, making money and being independent which mirrored the life aspirations of average youths.

### **Conclusion**

The students seemed to enjoy school and liked it very much in spite of the problems that they experienced. They looked forward to school because they got to learn there and they met their friends. These students were keen to take part in activities with their friends and they liked to help each other. They also acquired daily living skills needed for independent living now and in the future. Getting along with friends and teachers was normal for them, although almost all of them did not have friends from other classes. The teachers were very helpful, dedicated to their work, enjoyed fun, easy to talk to and caring. School A was more like a big, happy family. They also believed that what they learned was important.

There was a variety of problems that these students experienced at school. The ones that stood out were their classmates who got them into trouble, being scolded by teachers and angry teachers. These were some of the negative factors. School would have been more pleasant if they did not have to face these issues at school.

Their family, achievements, likes and their future were very meaningful to them. Many of their answers included snippets of their parents or siblings. Their achievements certainly made them happy. What they liked reflected a lot about themselves. Their ambitions were something that they looked forward to and liked talking about. The next section looked at the implications from the findings of the study.

### *Implications*

The findings have led to the discovery of some notable implications. What they liked could be used as tools in their learning process. Their interests could be incorporated into their syllabus or even their daily lessons. De Schauwer et al., (2009) explained how the students' interests and talents can be connected in their learning process and could help to make choices, add content to subjects, give direction to their study and spare time. Computers were significant in their lives, so computers should be incorporated a lot more as part of their activities. They were also fond of games like monopoly and tic-tac-toe and they enjoyed telling stories to each other. Through playing monopoly, for instance, they could be taught about the use of money, paying rent as well as paying bills, which could improve their math skills. When it comes to the teaching of English language, they could take turns telling stories to the whole class. This could also be applied to the Malay language. Students are more likely to enjoy what they learn if it is through an activity or something that they like to do. Since students associate difficult subjects with failure, and easy subjects with success, more opportunities should be included for the students to succeed in the subjects which they find difficult. Likewise, there should be more recognition of their achievements for the subjects that they do well in.

Being scolded and being told off is normal at schools especially with students who have discipline issues. The pre-vocational students however, stated that they do not like being punished and it is one of their problems or fears at school. They also complained about teachers being angry. Perhaps some of the teachers are frustrated as they do not know how to take care of these children. They could benefit from special education teacher courses.

The fact that they liked to talk about their family indicated that family is of great value to them. The implications for this are equally imperative. This information suggests that there should be more family involvement in the pre-vocational programme. Perhaps their family members could be invited to participate a lot more in their activities. Specific days could be allocated for the family members to come over and take part in the various activities conducted at the Home Room class. Family members could help the students with cooking or gardening. Once in a while, competitions could be held and this may

serve as an incentive to increase family involvement and commitment to being a part of their children's school life. Needless to say, it would also facilitate to foster ties between the school and parents. Parents could also be invited to come along to the job placements more often or even discuss about their children's future ambitions in order to make them a reality.

This leads to another significant implication which has to do with their future. These students speak with great ambition when it comes to talking about what they would like to be when they grow up. Hence, their dreams and desires for their future should not be taken lightly especially since many of these students find it difficult to find jobs once they leave school. To reduce the likelihood of the difficulty in securing employment, there should be a lot more emphasis on the transition between school and work. Although now there already is some form of liaison between the schools and workplaces, the researcher feels that there should be more effort and continuous communication between the schools and the prospective workplaces or companies. By establishing a network within the working community, this could help these students realize their dreams.

Becoming a chef, soldier, working with the navy and even having a bakery were some of these students' ambitions. Frequent visits to these places or even inviting speakers who are in those respective professions could not only prove beneficial for the students but it shows them that the community care about their future and recognize their potentials.

#### *Limitations*

A limitation to this study is that the results and findings do not reflect the whole population of students who are involved in the pre-vocational programme in Brunei Darussalam. This is simply because this study only involved some students from two schools that currently have the pre-vocational program in place. Hence, generalizations could not be made. Despite this, the findings offer interesting insights in to how these students experience school.

#### *Recommendations*

A recommendation for future research would be to interview more students with various disabilities from many other schools that offer the pre-vocational programme. For example, the sample for this study did not include students who are hearing impaired, autistic, visually impaired and so on. Perhaps it would be wise to interview pre-vocational students from all four districts in Brunei Darussalam.

The Home Room teachers should also be interviewed as they could provide additional and valuable information about these students since they would have known them longer than the researcher. Collecting information by means of observations could also be done or even by way of case studies in order to see how the students experience school, first hand. Finally, finding out about how these students feel about their job placements and attachments as well as their experiences of the job attachments could be another important topic for further research.

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