A comparative study of school environment for students' skills development in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract

The cultural support and school environment for students' skills development in Malaysia and Indonesia were examined. School environment in this study consisted of cultural support and classroom activities in both countries. Students' skills in this research referred to soft skills gained from daily experiences in schools. The focus of this paper was to evaluate the levels of school environments and students' skills as well as the differences in variables in both countries. In total, 400 Indonesian students and 528 Malaysian students were involved in this study. The instrument used was validated via a pilot study where the Cronbach alpha values showed that all items had high reliability and could be used in the actual study. Data collected were analyzed focusing on descriptive and inferential statistics. The results showed that overall, the school environments and student's skills were at the moderate level. This means that the school environment in both countries requires strategic actions for promoting a high level of soft skills. The inferential statistics demonstrated that students in Malaysia seemed to have better support compared to Indonesian students. However, the results indicated that Indonesian students have better soft skills than Malaysian students, especially in leadership communication and cooperation. Students from both countries had similar levels of thinking, interpersonal, management, and ICT skills. The SEM data showed that students in Malaysia were more likely to have better soft skills as they have been positively supported by school and classroom activities. The data showed that classroom activities had a direct impact on soft skills development among Indonesian students. Based on these findings, specific planning is urgently needed to provide holistic support to improve school environments as a way to promote students' skills.

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Introduction

Soft skills and school environments are two aspects that have been discussed in many past studies. However, the links between these aspects are commonly investigated in one community only. Thus past studies based on comparative analysis are limited. This has led to the current study

where the issues of soft skills and school environment were examined in two countries, namely Malaysia and Indonesia. The importance of soft skills has been highlighted in recent studies as the fourth industrial revolution requires a high level of soft skills among workers. Dewiyani (2015) and Marcel (2012) found that many industries require high skill levels of workers in terms of hard and soft skills to ensure that they have multiple skills in performing various tasks given in order to improve productivity and competitiveness. In this study, soft skills refer to generic skills aspects which involve cognitive elements related to non-academic skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, positive value, and continuous learning. Soft skills are identified as a highly critical element in the working world which is becoming globalized rapidly in line with technological advancement.

Literature Review

Soft skills including teamwork, communication, and traits such as emotional intelligence are among of the attributes of greatest importance in the current labor market (Rima, Syeda, & Lubna, 2017). One of the vital requirements for human resources is being competent enough to meet the global needs which can be achieved by having a good set of soft skills traits (Mathur, 2017). This is linked with the goals of the National Education Philosophy to produce a balanced human capital considering emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical aspects (Baharom & Idris, 2017). In achieving success in terms of job and life excellence, students need to possess such soft skills (Fauziah & Rozita, 2014) as employers nowadays put high expectations on soft skills as the main criteria in selecting workers (Azim, Hazrul Izuan, Mohd Sofiean, 2013; Mohd Hafeez Al-Amin, 2013). Therefore, students need to prepare themselves to reduce any mismatch of their soft skills in order to meet the requirements of industry.

The environment is one of the important aspects required to produce this type of competent individual. The school environment can be defined as a set of internal features that differentiate one school from another and that influence the behavior of staff and students. The environment in general plays a vital role in the life of every individual including students, teachers, employers, or employees (Chukwuemeka, 2013). The aims of education today are to offer experiences to provide the students with chances and opportunities to develop the necessary understanding, skills, and attitudes to become lifelong learners, capable of identifying and solving problems, and dealing with change.

Nevertheless, the school environment is much wider and is not limited to the classroom only through the relationship between students and students and also students and teachers (Susan & Ruth, 2015). Culture can be seen as behavior, values, and attitudes in the environment and the way of an individual life to make adjustments to the environment. The school environment also refers to a system of values, beliefs, and norms which are commonly accepted and implemented with full awareness that natural behavior is shaped by the environment (M. Awang, 2012). As a formal institution that focuses on education, the school is capable of shaping the students' characters through knowledge and behavior via the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The classroom is a place for education as well as the center for human development. In the classroom, the role of teachers is very important to inculcate the values for positive character formations through expertise, competence, and skills and using appropriate strategies and methods of teaching and learning (Poekert, 2012).

Hence, there have been a number of studies, efforts, and measures performed by the institutions to produce individuals that have awareness toward the importance of soft skills and who also equipped with the skills to ensure success in their future lives. Students' soft skills may be improved by integrating the elements of soft skills in extra-curricular activities where these activities offer students many informal learning opportunities which are suitable for their soft skills development and greatly contribute to their employment outcomes (Chmielewski-Raimondo, McKeown, & Brooks, 2016; Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson, & Walker, 2015; Lau, Hsu, Acosta, & Hsu, 2014).

The focus on students to master all the soft skills traits can be improved by applying soft skills in extra-curricular activities.

Research Conceptual Framework

The framework (Figure 1) was required to determine school environment support, such as school culture and classroom activities as well as soft skills among students in Malaysia and Indonesia, which is comprised of leadership skills, communication, thinking, management, and interpersonal aspects, and cooperation. A comparison was sought between students in Malaysia and Indonesia regarding aspects of cultural support and classroom activities that mostly affect the students' soft skills in each country.

Methods

Sample of Research

The research design used for this study was the quantitative method. The sample consisted of government high school students including daily secondary school, religion-based school, and technical and vocational schools which were randomly selected from one state of Malaysia and Indonesia, respectively. There were 400 students selected from Malaysia with 190 being male and 201 female. In total, 528 Indonesian students were selected with 218 males and the remaining 310 students were female. These respondents were provided with a questionnaire using a 5-level Likert-scale to obtain information about their school environment and soft skills. There were three types of school involved in this study: daily secondary schools, religion-based schools, and technical and vocational schools.

Instruments

School Environment

The school environment instrument in this study was built by researchers and was reviewed by experts for its validity. The school environment examined in this study
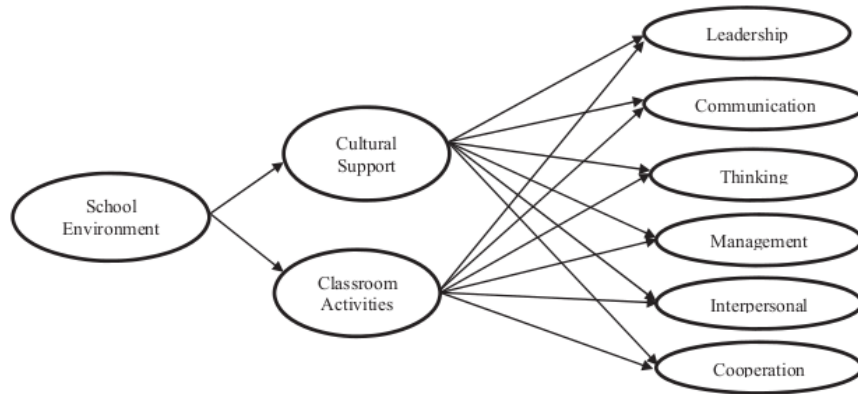
Figure 1 Research conceptual framework

refers to cultural support and classroom activities. The validity of the instrument in this study was based on a questionnaire with a 5-level Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) built by the researchers and referred to two experts to verify the validity of the content, language, and terminology used in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was improved based on the experts' recommendations. There were 21 items to measure the environmental support, 9 to measure the school's culture and 12 to assess classroom activities.

Soft Skills

Soft skills instruments were developed by the researchers using a 5-level Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree). There were 50 items of soft skills, namely 9 items for leadership, 9 for communication, 8 for thinking, 6 for management of technological transformation, 8 for interpersonal skills, and 10 items for cooperation.

Data Analysis

A pilot study was conducted involving 200 research samples from national secondary schools for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmation factor analysis (CFA) as well as the Alpha value for each variable studied that supported learning and soft skills. Overall the instruments used to measure the soft skills among the students had an alpha value of .95.

The descriptive statistic involved were the mean and standard deviation, while the inferential statistics involved SEM (Structural Equation Model) analysis. The SEM was used to determine the effect of school culture and classroom activities on the development of soft skills measured by students' leadership, communication, thinking skills, information technology, management skills, interpersonal, and collaborative skills. To perform this analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 and AMOS 18.0 software packages were used.

Results

Based on Table 1 below, the results showed that there was a slight difference in the students' soft skills in both countries because both Malaysia and Indonesia have similar cultures and classroom activities that have a strong influence on their attitudes and soft skills development based on self-directed learning. School environment and classroom activities are optimized when the students perceive those aspects in order to develop their needs for competence in soft skills (Rungchatdaporn & Dwi, 2017). The students' attitudes and skills are heavily influenced by the cultural practices and their surrounding environment. The mean score difference in detail indicated that the Indonesian students had higher mean scores for soft skills for all aspects of leadership, communication, thinking, informational technology management, and group work except for interpersonal skills compared to the Malaysian students. The Indonesia education system does not utilize the high school certificate and national test for the purpose of university admission but uses other tests specified for students' selection to higher education institutions (OECD/Asian Development Bank, 2015). Thus, this allows more room for the Indonesian teachers to inculcate soft skills at the school level, unlike in Malaysia, where the education system is exam-oriented and uses the high school certificate namely Malaysia Examination Certificate (SPM) for students' selection to higher institutions. An exam-oriented system limits the chances to develop and nurture soft skills among students beginning from the school level (Kim, 2017). However, regarding interpersonal skills, there was no mean score difference between the

Table 1

Levels of students' soft skills in Malaysian and Indonesian samples

No	Soft skills	Malaysia		Indonesia	
		Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation
1	Leadership	3.72	Moderately-high	3.85	Moderately-high
2	Communication	3.69	Moderately-high	3.80	Moderately-high
3	Thinking	3.84	Moderately-high	3.91	Moderately-high
4	Informational technology management skills	4.03	High	4.08	High
5	Interpersonal	3.95	Moderately-high	3.95	Moderately-high
6	Group work	4.05	High	4.13	High
	Overall	3.87	Moderately-high	3.95	Moderately-high

countries. This situation was despite the results of the education system in Indonesia being different from the one in Malaysia as the education system in Indonesia does not solely depend on achievement during high school.

Effect of School Environment on Soft Skills Development of Malaysian and Indonesian Students

Figure 2 shows the contribution of cultural support and classroom activities toward students' soft skills such as leadership, communication, thinking skills, information technology management skills, interpersonal, and cooperation skills. The results of the analysis of SEM showed that the regression model was appropriate, where cultural support ($\beta = .45$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .34$, $p < .05$) were the significant variables toward leadership skills. Cultural support ($\beta = .40$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .43$, $p < .05$) were the significant variables for communication skills. Cultural support ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .57$, $p < .05$) were the significant variables for thinking skills. Classroom activities had a higher impact than cultural support for the development of students' thinking skills. Furthermore, cultural support ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .44$, $p < .05$) were the significant predictor variables of information and technology management skills. The results also showed that classroom activities had a higher impact than cultural support of information technology management skills. Cultural support ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$) variables were the

significant predictors of interpersonal skills and cultural support ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) and classroom activities ($\beta = .58$, $p < .05$) were the significant predictor variables for cooperation skills. The results also showed that classroom activities had a higher impact than cultural support toward collaboration skills.

Figure 3 shows the results of the path analysis equation model SEM measurements (Chi Square/df = 5.73, Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA) = .07, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = .90 and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .91). All types of assessment conducted indicated that the data used in this study proved to have a reasonable adjustment for the proposed model (Z. Awang, 2012). The results of the analysis path model SEM showed that the suggested regression model was appropriate, where cultural support was not a significant predictor of leadership skills, communication, thinking skills, management of information technology, interpersonal, and collaborative skills ($p > .05$), while classroom activities ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor variable of leadership skills. The study also showed that classroom activities ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor variable of communication skills and that classroom activities ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor of the thinking skills variable. Furthermore, classroom activities ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor toward management skills in information technology and also classroom activities ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor of interpersonal skills, while finally, classroom activities ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) were a significant predictor of the work skills variable.
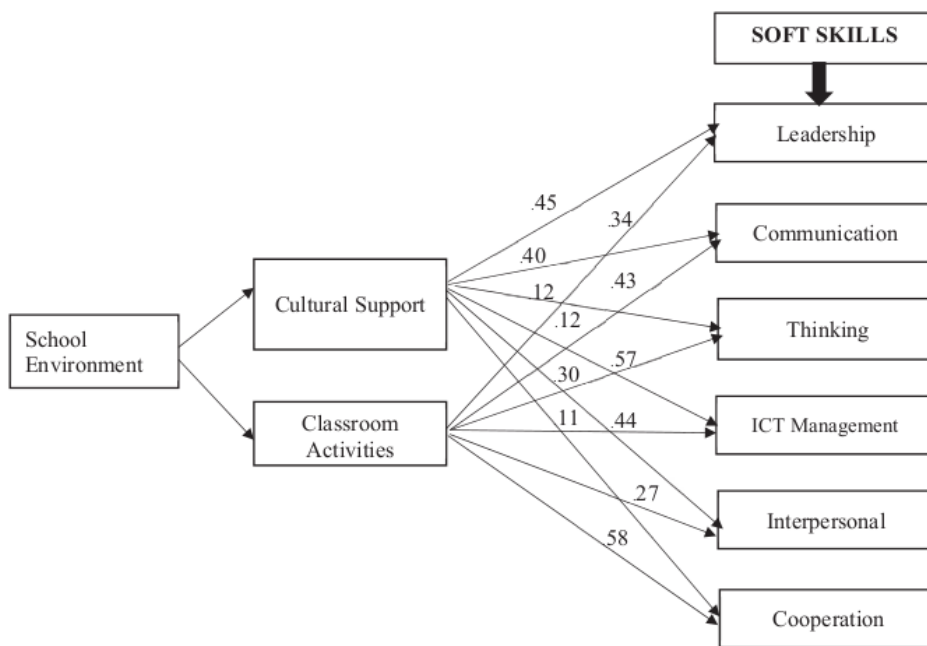

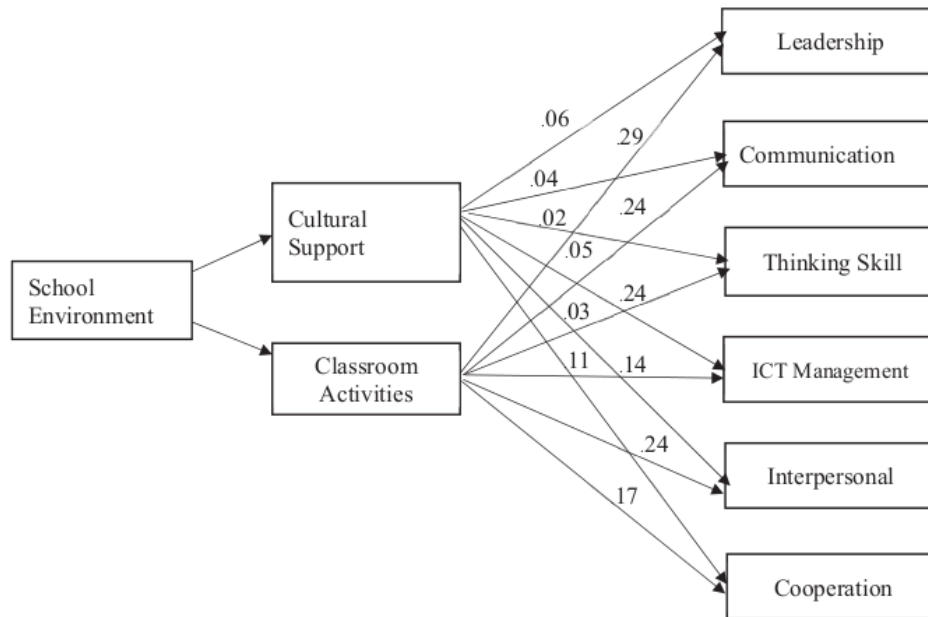**Figure 2** Effect of school environment toward Malaysian students' soft skills

Figure 3 Influence of school environment towards Indonesian students' soft skills

Discussion

This study showed that there was not much differences in soft skills among the students from both countries because both countries practice similar cultures and education systems. The Malaysian students in many schools get support in terms of encouragement from cultural interaction and courtesy between students and teachers, encouragement and a caring attitude toward work, counseling facilities, and activities to create positive competition among students. In Indonesia, the education system also encourages students to interact and promotes positive manners between students and teachers as well as conducting a variety of activities for students to create positive competition (Maulana, Opdenakke, Perry den Brokb, & Boskera, 2011). In terms of classroom activities, students in Malaysia are encouraged to cooperate within their group to improve their performance together; assignments are given to students to find additional resources through the Internet, to encourage students to be respectful of others' opinions as well as to encourage the student to interact regardless of others' background and culture. In Indonesia, the students are more engaged with the task of finding additional resources through the Internet, and are encouraged to be respectful of others' opinion and to interact with others regardless of their cultural background (Alin, Fikri, & Kenny, 2017). However, the education and examinations system in Indonesia provide more space for the teachers and students to expand their potential in soft skills compared to Malaysia. Therefore, in order to improve the soft skills development among students, a specified curriculum needs to be implemented continuously at the school level.

SEM examination showed that there was influence from the school environment to support soft skills. Among Malaysian students, the school culture and classroom activities had a positive impact on their soft skill development. On the other hand, only classroom activities affected students' soft skills in Indonesia. The results of this study showed that in both countries, aspects of classroom activities had a great effect on the students' soft skills. This was in line with Mancha and Ahmad (2016) who stated that the school environment will aid incremental student involvement in extra-curricular activities. Such involvement in extra-curricular activities will indirectly increase the soft skills among students as they will be exposed to skills to communicate with teachers and colleagues, leadership skills, work skills, and others.

As soft skills are vital in order to develop the character of students, learning strategies are required that can be developed to optimize the interaction between teachers and students, students with students, teachers and students and generate a healthy rich environment, as well as enhancing various interactions. In addition, the strategy should also provoke creativity in students to be actively involved, physically, mentally, socially and emotionally (Adnan, Daud, Alias, & Razali, 2012). Thus, when these skills are successfully acquired by students, they will be well equipped when entering society as well these being useful for their job prospects. The commitment of teachers to develop soft skills in learning is very important. Without the teachers' will, the development of soft skills in learning cannot be implemented. Good skills are required of teachers so that they can provide optimal learning as well as using their creativity in managing the class. Teachers need to have understanding and the ability to implement a

variety of models, techniques, methods, approaches, and learning strategies in order to conduct a better class.

The school must create a culture that can implement and develop the students' soft skills. School culture should create a more innovative and competitive environment by organizing various events and activities as well as encouraging the students' participation in activities to enhance their soft skills. Public speaking, quiz competitions, lectures, and other activities need to be continuously conducted in order to improve soft skills among students. In addition, the school should also strive to create a culture and environment so students' develop interests so that their soft skills can be improved either directly and indirectly. The Ministries of Education in Malaysia and Indonesia need to make changes to their school curricula by incorporating aspects of soft skills in the subjects taught in school. In addition, the Ministries also need more training and courses for teachers so that the application of soft skills among students can be successfully implemented. Therefore, teachers need to be given constant exposure through in-service training in order to create a situation that is more effective in applying the soft skills to students.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Understanding the soft skills demands in the current situation where students are expected to be competent in various aspects involving both hard skills and soft skills is of importance in helping them to secure better job opportunities. Such skills need to be developed and nurtured throughout the schooling process and integrated into classroom activities. The school administration should create a better school culture and environment to promote and develop soft skills among the students. This study proved that classroom activities have the most influence on both Malaysian and Indonesian students toward the development of their soft skills. Therefore, the realization of producing high quality students with good soft skills should be achieved through both teachers and the school administration helping with a better school environment which includes cultural support and classroom activities.

Conflict of Interest

Acknowledgments

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