FACTORS OF ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG STUDENTS IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN KEPONG, KUALA LUMPUR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract:

Academic stress has become the greatest health obstacle as it adversely impacts students' physical and psychological health. This study explored the factors of academic stress among students in a primary school in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A Focus group interview was conducted with 20 students to explore the factors of academic stress. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to interpret data from focus group interviews. The result revealed ten superordinate themes; (1) academic overload; (2) difficulty in-class work; (3) examinations anxiety; (4) poor relationship with friends; (5) bullying; (6) high expectations; (7) social comparison; (8) domestic violence; (9) physical and verbal abuse in school and (10) laissez-faire. The findings of this research to make a valuable contribution by gathering deeper understandings and help curb the impact of stress associated with primary school, especially in the Malaysian context.

Keywords:

Academic Stress, Focus Group, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Primary School

Introduction

Psychological stress refers to a particular kind of relationship between a person and an environment. Stress arises when an individual perceived that it is hard to cope with the demands being made on them or threats to their wellbeing (Lazarus, 1990).

It was reported that overall stress levels had increased since 2014. People reported that they are experiencing extreme stress levels and that the stress levels are higher than what they believe is healthy. Stress was also more prominent among the younger generations compared to older generations (American Psychological Association, 2016).

An appropriate level of stress brings constructive outcome because it helps people to improve, motivate and keep going despite facing adversity. Without stress, people's lives would be aimless and unmotivated. However, excessive amount of stress challenges both physical and mental health of an individual, leading to depression, anxiety and social discomfort. Therefore, moderate level of stress is essential to motivate people to achieve optimum performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

Stress are experienced by all people in all range of ages. Today, students are particularly vulnerable to stress. The main source of stress among students was found to be academic related issues (Nakalema & Ssenyonga; 2013; Negga, Applewhite & Livingston, 2007; Owen-Yeates, 2005). In fact, two-thirds of students reported stress due to academic related issues (Deb, Stridl & Sun, 2015). According to Wilks (2008) academic stress is the product of a combination of academic related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual.

The aim of this study was to explore the academic stress among students in a primary school. Despite the overflowing researchers on academic stress, majority of them concentrates more on high school, college and university students population ((Dema, 2015; Huan, See, Ang & Har, 2008; Hussain, Kumar & Husain, 2008; Lin & Chen, 2009; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011). While there are only a few numbers of researches that studied stress in general among primary school students (Barrett & Heubeck, 2000; Fernandez-Baena, Trianes, Escobar, Balnca & Munoz, 2015), no research was found that specifically study the academic stress.

Middle childhood (ages six to twelve years old) is a period of significant growth and development, yet one that receives less attention in the literature compared to other stages of child development such as preschool and adolescent years (Huston & Ripke, 2006; Waldfogel, 2006). In fact, academic stress is on the rise in primary school children (Vanaelst, De Vriendt, Huybrechts, Rinaldi & De Henauw, 2012).

The stress level among these children are believed to be mounting because the transition to primary school requires them to face new tasks that they never face before, including getting good results in examination, manage their relationship with friends, show improvement and progress in class, understand what teaching is teaching, memorize the formula and meeting parents' expectation. The incompetency in handling these stressful academic requirements can instill a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in children. It further impairs children's skill acquisition and affects their ability to achieve a healthy, positive view of competence and positive attitude toward learning and engagement in life's activities and challenges (Eccles, 1999).

Currently, sources of academic stress among children in this development stage are still not well-explored. Students from primary schools experience different environment and

educational system from that of high schools, colleges and universities. Therefore, different kinds of academic demands are being made on them. Furthermore, students in primary school may have concerns that differ from students from high schools, colleges and universities (Huan et al., 2008; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011; Fernandez-Naena et al., 2015). It has been reported that stress varied across years in school and students in different years respond differently to stressors (Misra, McKean, West & Russo, 2000; Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015). Therefore, this current study focuses on exploring academic stress and determine its issues among primary school students.

Literature Review

Academic Stress

Stress among students is one of the popular topics that is being widely studied especially regarding the major sources of stress. Bataineh (2013) explored the academic stressors experienced among students. The result indicated several stressors faced moderately by students including academic overloads, course awkward, inadequate time to study, examinations, low motivation and high family expectations. The fear of failure and academic punishment were found to be the most stressed by the students. Similarly, workloads or academic overload was found to be one of the major contributors to academic stress among students in another study (Dema, 2015). Additionally, examinations, low grades and staying up late at night were also found to be the factors of academic stress. Apart from that, Dema (2015) also pointed out that students experienced moderate to above moderate level of stress during examinations and peak assessment time. Baksh & Sayed (2015) added students felt pressured due to vastness of curriculum and dissatisfaction with the class lecturer.

Meanwhile, a study conducted in Malaysia revealed that academic overload, too many tests, difficult courses, exam grades and competition for grades are the top five most frequently reported academic stressors among students (Ong & Cheong, 2009).

Even though stress among students was a popular topic that has been widely studied by various researchers, however these researches largely focused on college, university or high school students. Only a small number of studies were done to examine stress among younger children. In addition, these few studies of stress among children was dated almost twenty years ago. The most recent study on stress among primary school children was done by Fernandez-Baena et al. (2015) in Spain. It was stated that 23.2% of students have mild stress and 8.7% of students experienced severe stress. The study also revealed that there was a significant difference in stress across year of education. In other word, students in lower grade experience more stress compared to students in higher grade. This finding supported the results found by Lipp, Arantes, Buriti and Witzig (2002) that suggested stress declined through grades.

Additionally, Owen-Yeates (2005) examined stressors focused among middle childhood students. The findings of this study showed that the main factors of stress were academic, with the highest issues being examinations, deadlines for assessed work, revision and too much homework. Moreover, school hassles and uplifts experienced by students affected their anxiety and conduct problems. Major life events and hassles were found to be positively correlated to anxiety and conduct problems among third and fourth grade students in Australia. As major life events and hassles increased, students' anxiety level and conduct problems increased. On the contrary, uplifts with school, teachers and home-related issues showed a negative correlation with conduct problems (Barrett & Heubeck, 2000).

Based on past literatures, studies of academic stress among primary school children was still very lacking. Even though it was suggested that stress varied through different stages of school (Fernandez-Baena et al., 2015; Lipp et al., 2002), no other studies found that take a closer look into this matter. Therefore, current study attempted to closely explore the academic stress among children. By this research, it can highlight the issues regarding academic stress from primary school children's point of view that has yet to be discover.

Method

Design
Current study aimed to explore academic stress among primary school students. Since academic stress among them is relatively a new topic being studied in Malaysia, a more thoroughly method is required to explore the related issues. Therefore, qualitative study is utilized as it is typically used to look for meaningful themes and categories in a narrative record (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2015). Qualitative study often focuses on events in their context and is frequently based on personal interviews and comprehensive records obtained from direct observation of behavior (Shaughnessy et al., 2015). Part of the means of collecting data in qualitative study is focus group interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009).

Population and Sample
Samples of this study were selected through a convenience sampling method. Participants of the study was recruited from a primary school in Kepong district, Kuala Lumpur. 20 students (6 females and 15 males) from Standard 4 and 5 participated in the focus group discussions with age range from 10 to 11 years old. Students comprised of three races: Malay, Indian and Chinese, represented the multiculturalism in Malaysia.

Procedure
Ethical approval from Ministry of Education Malaysia was obtained. Thereafter, permission was obtained from Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong to conduct this study. Prior to focus group discussions, a series of open-ended questions regarding students stress and experiences in school were prepared. These questions acted as a guide for the discussion in the focus group and avoid the discussion to be derailed from its main purpose. (Nagle & William, 2013). The focus group discussion was conducted in a face-to-face basis in a room. Students were divided into four groups, each group comprised of 5 students. Each group was assigned a moderator to facilitate the discussion.

The discussions started with ice-breaking phase with the purpose to warm up and establishing trust between moderators and students. In this phase, both moderators and students introduced themselves and some light games was conducted. Afterwards, moderators started the focus group discussion by asking questions prepared beforehand. During the interview sessions, moderators played important role by keeping the discussion flowing and encouraging students to participate fully. Even though the discussion were based mainly on questions the students were expected to answer, the guide was applied flexibly to generate more detailed perspective and topics. Students were encouraged to share spontaneous stories and examples they recount while answering the questions.

The language used during the focus group interviews were mixed with both Malay language and English language according to whichever students were comfortable with. This is because to promote a comfortable environment and boost students' confidence to share their

experiences without being restrain by a language barrier. The focus groups interviews lasted approximately from 55 to 75 minutes in length. Each focus group interview were audiotaped and recorded. The recorded audios were then transcribed into Microsoft Word.

Data Analysis
The audio records were transcribed into texts. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data. The first analytic stage was several detailed readings of transcripts with the aim to obtain a holistic perspective. After the transcripts were analyzed in conjunction with the original recordings, initial interview themes that concisely captured the essential qualities of the interview – predictors of academic stress were identified.

Next, these preliminary themes were organized and reduced into clusters through the process of coding. The coding process is the work with materials for generating concepts and for allocating excerpts of the materials to categories (Flick, 2014). The data analysis was proceeded to provide an overall structure to the analysis by making sense, redefining, condensing and examining the connections between themes emerged. In this stage, some of the identified themes were grouped into clusters while some were emerged as superordinate concepts or hierarchical relationships. Then, lists of tables were tabulated by locating the identified themes and sub-themes in an ordered system to represent the whole data set.

After all preparatory steps for accessing the data were completed, the analysis continued into interpretation. Interpretation is the core activity of qualitative data analysis for understanding and explaining what the coding was revealed about the views in the field, their links among each other, their ties to context conditions and the like (Flick, 2014).

Result
Ten overall themes evolved from the focus group data: (1) academic overload; (2) difficulty in class work; (3) examinations anxiety; (4) poor relationship with friends; (5) bullying; (6) high expectations; (7) social comparison; (8) domestic violence; (9) child abuse in school and (10) laissez-faire.

Theme 1: Academic Overload
Analysis of focus group interview in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong revealed academic overload as the main theme in the issues of academic stress among students. Two sub-themes were identified under the theme of academic overload; too much homework and tight schedule.

Students are suffering because their teachers overloading them with too much of homework. Even though teachers' motives are to reinforce students' learning, those stringent and comprehensive schedules have put too much burden on students. For instance, students who participated in the focus group shared their experiences:

- "*Saya rasa stress kerana guru bagi banyak homework. Setiap hari pun ada homework. Cikgu bagi latihan banyak dari muka surat 43 sampai 47. Malam ni kena buat, esok pagi kena bagi.*" (I feel stress because teachers assign too much homework. There is homework every day. Teacher gives exercises from page 43 to 47. Have to do tonight, the next morning have to submit)
- "*Dia bagi banyak sampai kita cakap, cikgu, janganlah. Cikgu tambah tambah tambah. BM, Buku tatabahasa kan, cikgu bagi 20 soalan, 30 soalan yang tulis punya. Kita tulis sampai tangan dah merah. Sakit ooh.*" (Teacher gives so much homework until we said, teacher, no more please. But teacher keeps on adding. For Malay language, grammar

book, teacher gives 20 to 30 questions that requires writing. We write until our palm becomes red. Its painful)

Other than that, children are required to attend religion school, extra classes, workshops, seminars and competitions in school, which is coupled with homework, projects, test, extra commitment and co-curriculum activities. According to students in focus group interview, most of them were rushing to either religious class, tuition classes or extra classes after school. Some students noted that they even have to attend tuition classes six days in a week. By attending those extra classes, their workload increased because they have to complete all homework given in school and every extra class.

Based on students'' qualitative responses in focus group interview, most of them complaint that they had too much to do in a day, they had not enough time to do revision and had little time off for leisure. One of the students reported that he has to skip his lunch every day because after school ended, he has to attend religion school. Tight schedule in a day present student with a lot of stress, coupled with the pressure of getting excellent results in examination, meeting expectations from parents, teachers and achieving self-imposed expectation.

Theme 2: Difficulty in Class Work
Difficulty in class work was generated as one of the themes that described the predictor of academic stress among students. During focus group interview, almost all students expressed that the difficult syllabus is stressing them up.
- "*Saya risau dengan maths. Dalam maths saya tak boleh nak fokus.*" (I am worried about mathematics. I can't focus during mathematics class)
- "*Matematik, English, TMK, RBT, sains susah.*" (Mathematics, English, TMK, RBT and science are difficult)

Students also expressed the difficulties during class that is caused of language used as a medium of teaching and the fast pace of the teacher's teaching. A student noted "*Teacher saya ajar saya dalam BM, kadang-kadang saya tak faham bila cikgu terangkan. Saya boleh buat kalau English dan BM bercampur.*" (My teacher talks in Malay when teaching, sometimes I do not understand what the teacher is explaining. I could understand if the teacher uses a mixture of English and Malay). While another student said "*Cikgu dia cakap cepat. Memang tak dapat tangka apa yang cikgu ajar.*" (The teacher talks too fast. I really cannot understand what the teacher is teaching).

Theme 3: Examinations Anxiety
One of the themes that has been identified as the major predictor of academic stress among students is examination anxiety. From focus group interview, examinations and results were found to put undue stress, fear, worry, anxiety and pressure among students.
- "*Sebab ada soalan-soalan yang susah. Takut gagal. Saya pernah ada gagal.*" (Because there are questions that are difficult. I am afraid of failing. I had failed before)
- "Nervous gila-gila nak pergi, nak jawab, nak duduk tu, menggigil, macam menggeletar tau. Nak jawab bila tak tahu, rasa nak menangis." (Very nervous to go to the exam, to answer, to sit, I trembled, like shivering. When I don't know how to answer a question, I feel like crying)
- "*Dulu saya gagal, tapi sekarang saya dah lulus. Tapi masih rasa takut (hadapi peperiksaan). Sebab takut gagal lagi.*" (I failed before, but now I passed. But I am still afraid (of examination). I am afraid to fail again)

- "*Sangat takut. Saya takut ada orang buli saya kalau saya gagal. Atau mengejek.*" (Very scared. I am afraid that other people will bully me if I fail. Or tease me)

Some of the reason of these fear of failing in examinations and getting bad results are because the parents' expectation on the student that their children would get good grades. Getting bad grades would result in punishment which then intimidate the students. In addition, according to the students from focus group interview, failing in examinations, getting bad results and declining in their performance made them restless, anxious and scared.

Theme 4: Poor Relationship with Friend

Poor relationship with friends was also identified as the main theme of the predictors of academic stress among students from focus group interview in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong. According to students during focus group interview, there was a general consensus among all of the students that they were pressured by both direct and indirect interpersonal conflicts with friends.

Most students spoke of their anger and frustration with friends or classmates whom they have conflict with. Some of them even admit that they are fighting with their friends. They complaint that some of their friends were unsupportive, selfish, busybody and arrogant in treating them:

- "*Tapi bila masa tanya kawan ada yang sombong dia tak nak ajar, ada yang dia cakap: "you buat sendirilah". Ada orang yang berlagak sampai tak nak bagi apa, tapi kita orang kena bagi dia, dia tak nak bagi.*" (When we asked our friends (to teach), they're being arrogant and refuse to teach us. Some people don't want to contribute anything at all but when he need something, we have to help them)
- "*Dia tu kedekut gila nak bagi, dia sangat busybody. Dia nak buat ini, buat itu, lepas tu tak nak kasi orang lain jadi ketua, dia je nak jadi ketua. Kita orang tak je.*" (He is selfish and busybody, he wants to do this and that then he refused to let others be leader, only he can be the leader. We can't)
- "*Dia orang kedekut (untuk mengajar). Dia orang cakap, Buatlah sendiri saya sibuk lah...*" (They are selfish (to teach). They said, you do it yourself, I am busy)

Theme 5: Bullying

Another theme that had been identified to be one of the main predictors of academic stress was bullying. Bullying is characterized as the repeated exposure of a students to violence act that happened commonly in school. Bullying is manifested verbally and physically, such as threatening, giving offensive nicknames, teasing, pushing, slapping and beating.

Most students who participated in this study reported that they have been a victim of bullying or have witnessed the case of bullying in school. In most cases, student noted that they are afraid of being the victim of bullying. Students who participated in focus groups interview revealed their insecurity in school as they were afraid of being victim of bullying in school:

- "*Takut orang pukul.*" (I am afraid of getting beaten up)
- "*Masa tu saya baru hari kedua sekolah di sini, dia ejek-ejek depan-depan.*" (It was my second day of school and he tease me in front of everyone)
- "*Saya pun tak tahu kadang-kadang kenapa dia kan, tak suka orang, dia tumbuk. Dia tolak kepala orang. Dia sepak kaki saya, lepas tu dia happy.*" (I also don't know why he, when he doesn't like somebody, he will punch them. He knocks other people's head. He kicked me and he felt happy about it)
- "*Saya takut ada orang buli saya kalau saya gagal. Atau mengejek.*" (I am afraid that others will bully me if I fail. Or tease me)

Theme 6: High expectations

Through analysis of focus group interview in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong, researchers have also identified high expectations as a superordinate theme that described students' predictor of academic stress. Apart from that, three sub-themes are determined including high expectation from parents, high expectation from teachers and high self-expectation.

It was noted that parents often have very high expectations on their children. Some of the parents couldn't forgive even the slightest mistakes and set a high target for their children. These high expectations are forcing the students to work extra hard in order to fulfill the demands of their parents. As a result, students emphasized that they became stressed especially when they couldn't meet their parents' expectations and demands.

- "*Sebab mak harap kita belajar betul-betul tapi kita dah sia-siakan, lepastu dah risau lah, sekarang usaha nak tingkatkan balik.*" (Because my mother put high expectation on me, she hopes for me to study hard, but I failed to do so. I started to feel worry. So now I am trying hard to improve my results)
- "*Kalau pelajaran turun memang risau sangat sebab tak tahu macam mana nak bagitahu emak. Takut emak marah.*" (If my results drop, I am worried because I do not know how to tell my mother. I am scared she will scold me)
- "*A. Mesti dapat A. Kalau tak dapat mereka (ibubapa) akan marah.*" (A. Must only get A. if I failed, they will scold me)
- "*Tapi saya lama-lama bagitahu, ini baru hari ini saya bagitahu, saya dah dapat tahu (keputusan) sebelum ini tapi saya diam je, keputusan saya baik baru saya bagitahu emak saya.*" (But after some time, I will tell them. I just told my parents today. Even though I got my results previously, I did not tell them. I only tell my mother about my good results)

Apart from that, the teachers also put a lot of expectations for the students and they are expected to success. This has put the students under a lot of stress as well. According to the students, the most thing teachers expected from them are the good and excellent grades.

In addition, students had also revealed that some of the stress they face coming from their self-imposed expectations. Students often set their goals and target very high and striving for that goal is putting a lot of pressure on themselves. Meanwhile, failing to meet their target and goals further stressed them out.

- "*Kalau tak capai (target), kecewa, nangis, taka da energy, pecah semangat dah. Sudah taka da energy.*" (If I failed to achieve my target, I feel disappointed, cry, energy depleted and unmotivated. I feel like I have no more energy)

Theme 7: Social Comparison

Analysis of focus group interview showed social comparison as one of the main themes of the predictors of academic stress among students in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong. Three sub-themes were identified under this category; parents comparing children with others, teachers comparing students and students comparing themselves with others.

It was noted that parents often compared their children with each other or with other kids such as their friends' children. Students who participated in the focus group interview spoke of their experiences and feelings when they were constantly being compared:

- "One more thing I don't like about my parents is that they like to compare me with other kids. Like they are very smart very responsible, you are a fool."

- "*Mereka kata, dia pandai, saya tak pandai. Saya pun diam je. Pastu saya lari.*" (They said, he is clever, I am not, and I remain silent. Then I walked away)
- "*Kalau saya buat exam tak baik, lepastu mak akan cakap, tengok, yang orang tu sangat baik.*" (If I perform poorly in examination, my mother will say look! Those people perform very well)

Other than parents, it was found that teachers also frequently comparing the students with each other. Students in focus group expressed their teacher chided them for not being as good as others. A student has noted, "*Ada budak tu cikgu marah. Dia dapat C, cikgu kata, eh I tak pernah tengok ada budak darjah 4 C semua, ini pertama kali saya tengok.*" (One of the students who got C, the teacher told him, hey I never see any standard 4 students got all C, this is my first time."

On top of it all, it was stated that even students themselves frequently comparing their own results and performance with their friends. It was revealed that their learning environment was very competitive as they would immediately inquire who get the highest marks, curious about how much scores others get and comparing their marks as soon as the teachers returned the examination papers.
- "*Saya share dengan dia orang dan mereka pun akan share dengan saya.*" (I share my results with them, and they share their results with me too)
- "*Selalu. Memang setiap kali dapat je, bandingkan.*" (Always. We will compare our result whenever we get it)
- "Bila dapat je saya mesti akan tunjuk sorang-sorang kertas." (Whenever I get my result, I will show it to everyone)

Besides, students also spoke how stress and worry they were when they underachieved than their friends. Some students expressed of being disappointed in themselves as they feel like they are not being as successful as their friends.
- "I thought I am a total failure, I thought how my friends can do it but I can't."
- "*Orang banyak yang pandai. Saya rasa macam sangat lemah dalam kelas.*" (There are many other classmates who are clever. I feel like I am week in class."
- "*Dulu saya dengan saudara saya lawan, darjah 3 dan darjah 4 saya betul-betul bagus, saya dapat anugerah, saya lawan. Tahun ini saya langsung tak cakap apa-apa. Rasa malukan.*" (Previously I compete with my relatives, standard 3 and 4, I am really good, I received awards, and I compete with them. This year I remain silent, I feel embarrassed)

Theme 8: Domestic Violence
Analysis of focus group in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong revealed domestic violence as one of the main themes of academic stress among primary school students. There are two sub-themes; domestic violence between parents and domestic violence against children.

The negative interaction between parents not only influence the husband and wife but also the children in the family. In fact, in focus group interviews, students revealed that they had been exposed to domestic violence between parents in their homes. They directly witnessed the assaults between their parents, and they were very much aware of the incidents:
- "*Masalah pergaduhan ibu bapa. Bapa dengan ibu gaduh. Emak saya cakap dengan saya, kenapalah bapa awak macam ini, kenapalah tak jaga kita.*" (The fights between my parents. When my mom and my dad fights, my mom told me, why is your dad behaves like this, why can't he take care of us)

- "*Saya buat kerja rumah, sekolah, lepastu dekat bilik saya, lepastu dekat bapa saya mari pukul 12, bapa marah mak saya. Bila mak mengadu dekat kita, lepastu kesiannya mak.*" (While I was doing my homework in my room, my dad came in around 12 am. And then my dad got angry at my mom. When my mom confided me, I feel pity for her)

In addition, these students who has been living with domestic violence had described the feeling of sadness, annoyed and disturbed:
- "If my mother and father fight, I will feel so sad."
- "Yes, my mom and dad will fight. When I heard what noise that was, and then suddenly they are fighting. I feel so sad."
- "*Saya rasa macam ini hari-hari bergaduh saya dengar pun aduh. Kadang-kadang pergaduhan ibu bapa boleh mengganggu.*" (I am annoyed when my parents fight every day. Fights between parents are disturbing sometimes)

Apart from that, some students in focus group had also talked about domestic violence acts against them. Students reported that they are being verbally abused, beaten and canned by their parents at home:
- "*Saya punya, lepastu mari bilik saya pukul saya. Lepastu mak dating saya tidur tipu-tipu.*" (In my case, my dad came to my room and beat me. Then, when my mother came, I pretended that I am sleeping)
- "*Kadang-kadang kalau ayah suruh buat kerja, ayah cakap sekali je, kalau tak buat kena rotan.*" (Sometimes if my father instructed me to do any task, he just said it once, f I didn't do it, I will get canned)

Theme 9: Child Abuse in School
Another theme that has been identified as the predictor of academic stress among students in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong is child abuse in school. Based on students' responses and experiences, researcher found that most students experienced verbal abuse and corporal punishment in school and thus, determined two sub-themes of abuse from the teachers; verbal abuse and physical abuse.

From the analysis of students' responses in focus group interview, teacher's characteristics were frequently reported to be a stressor by the students. Teachers who stressed them were those who were strict, demanding, mean and abusive. During focus group interview, students spoke their experience of being verbal abuse by their teacher:
- "*Bila kita orang tak dapat jawabkan, dia cakap, jangan sampai saya cakap kamu bodoh. Dia cakap macam tu. Rasa sedih.*" (When we could not answer the questions, the teacher said, do not force me to say you are stupid. He said like that, I feel sad)
- "*Kalau tak rotan, kita dapat gred C gred D cikgu cakap, padan muka.*" (If teacher did not cane us, teacher will say, serves you right. If we got grade C and grade D)

Other than being abuse verbally by teacher, students revealed that they often got punished physically by their teacher:
- "*Cikgu rotan ataupun cikgu suruh ketuk ketampi.*" (Teacher cane or asks us to squat)
- "*Dia pernah tampar saya dan Tarik rambut saya. Rasa nak balas dendam. Rasa geramnya, rasa macam nak marah je.*" (He slapped me and pulled my hair. I feel like taking revenge. I feel so furious, feel like getting mad at her)
- "*Cikgu Tarik tangan lepastu pukul sini (tunjuk belakang badan) sangat kuat.*" (The teacher beat here hardly (student demonstrates the teacher beat his back)

Theme 10: Laissez-Faire

Laissez-faire was generated as one of the superordinate themes. Laissez-faire came from a French word that means a policy or attitude of letting things take their own course, without interfering. In other words, laissez-faire can be understood as neglectful parenting or child neglect, it is the omission of care such as healthcare, education, supervision, protection from environmental hazards, and meeting physical needs and emotional support, resulting in actual or potential harm.

Some students participated in the focus group interviews pointed out that they experienced laissez-faire parenting style at home. Parents of these students often take no care, uninvolved in the students' life. It was noted that these acts sometimes caused the students to feel disturbed:

- "*Bapa saya pun asyik-asyik main game, TV, game, TV. Mak saya pun macam tu. Saya sudah geram saya pergi bilik saya tutup pintu.*" (My father keeps playing games and watching TV only. My mother is also like that. I feel so angry. I went back to my room and close the door)
- "Sometimes they won't see me. I feel stressed and I feel that something is wrong with them."

Discussion

Analysis of focus group in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kepong revealed ten contributing factors or academic stress among primary school students. Students mentioned academic overload being one of the reasons for them having academic stress. Lee and Kang (2006), pointed out that "too many demands and meeting deadlines" was one of the academic stressors. Other than that, studies conducted by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), Bataineh (2013), Agolla and Ongori (2009), Ong and Cheong (2009) and Bob-Manuel, Joseph and Ihenko (2012) showed that academic overload contributed to stress among students. In fact, Owen-Yeates (2005) found that "too much homework" ranked the fourth in predicting students' stress.

Apart from that, almost all students expressed that the difficulties in class work was stressing them up. Ong and Cheong (2009) highlighted that difficult courses were one of the top five most frequently reported stressors among students. Besides, Nandamuri and Gowthami (2011) concluded that curricular aspect of academics was prominent in resulting academic stress among management students. On top of that, Harikiran, Srinagesh, Nagesh and Sajudeen (2012) showed that difficulty of course work was one of the sources of stress among final year undergraduate students.

Examination anxiety was found to be a contributing factor of academic stress among primary school students. This finding is parallel to the study done by Owen-Yeates (2005) found that examination was the top-ranked sources of stress for students. Other than that, Lee and Kang (2006) and Harikiran et al. (2012) suggested that "tests and finals" and "examination" were the major academic stressors experienced by students. Even though these previous researches were done outside of Malaysia and done with different population, the findings of examinations anxiety as predictor of academic stress were consistent with current study.

Poor relationship with friends was also found to be one of the contributing factors of academic stress among students. This finding was consistent with that of previous research by Owen-Yeates (2005), which highlights "getting along with other students" as one of the items of stress. According to students' responses in focus group interviews, there was a general consensus among all of the students that they were pressured by both direct and indirect

interpersonal conflicts with friends. Most students spoke of their anger and frustration with friends or classmates whom they had the conflict with.

Bullying was also found to be one of the issues that was affecting academic stress among primary school students. Although bullying has become an important research area over the past, but its association with academic stress has been relatively underexplored. This is because the cases of bullying can be hidden from teachers and parents most of the time. Often perpetrators bully victims in a setting where no one is around. This makes it difficult for teachers and parents to believe that the allegations of bullying are true. Even though the incidence is witnessed by other students, they tend to ignore, walk away and avoid being involved in such issue, in consistent with bystander effect. However, bullying was found to have an impact on students' anxiety and depression levels (Salmon, James & Smith, 1998).

Another major factor of academic stress emerged from the focus group analysis was the high expectations. This included the expectation from parents, teachers and also from self-expectations. This finding was supported by past research done by Nakalema and Ssenyonga (2013), who suggested that students who received high social expectations experienced greater academic stress. Deb et al. (2015) also suggested that nearly two-third of students reported feeling pressure from their parents for better academic performance.

In addition to that, students' high self-expectation and desire for academic achievement and performance were found to induce their academic stress. Previous study conducted by Kadapatti and Vijayalaxmi (2012) showed aspiration was positively and significantly related to academic stress indicating that as the aspiration increased the level of academic stress also increased.

From students' feedback in focus group discussions, being constantly compared by parents, teachers and within own self elevated their academic stress. This was a relatively unique discovery as there were no prior studies mentioned on the relationship between social comparison and stress among students. Social comparison is one of the natural forms of ability when a person is set against another to identify their similarities and differences in addition to determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others they perceive as faring better or worse. The primary goal of social comparison was to acquire information about one's self. There were three underlying motives identified for social comparison which are self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement (Taylor, Wood & Carillo, 1995).

Social comparison in this study came in three forms; Parents who compare their children with other children, teachers who compare their students with other students and students who compare themselves with their peers. It is not uncommon that parents and teachers to compare their children and students with counterparts to look for frame of reference; determine whether their children and students achieve better, average or poorer than others. The action of comparing is like incite a competition between children and their peers, which also can be portrayed as competition. This acts also portrayed parents' and teachers' high expectations on students as the evaluations goes, they hoped that the students would further improve themselves to achieve even better results than their peers. Unfortunately, such acts were perceived to be a burden on students as parents and teachers tend to be exaggerated rather than motivating.

Domestic violence was identified as one of the factors of academic stress experienced by upper primary school students. A small number of researches have examined the prediction of

domestic violence on children's academic stress because domestic violence is a hidden problem across countries, including Malaysia. The incidence of under-reporting in Malaysia is significant, of the estimated 1.8 million women, only 909 reported the violence to the police in 1989 (Awang & Hariharan, 2011). According to Awang and Hariharan (2011), the under-report of domestic violence can be due to the reluctance to make problem public and seek help due to shame, fear of retaliation, lack of family support, unawareness that physical abuse is a crime and a belief that legal system cannot help. The under-reporting of domestic violence crime might cause this issue to be largely unconsidered in previous research on academic stress.

Domestic violence against children as predictor of academic stress among students was not in-line with the results of previous research because the incidence of this issue is related to cultural practices and values. In Malaysia, most people are raised up in traditional family culture: parents are the key figures and they exert fully control over their child. Regardless of race, most families in Malaysia endorse authoritarian parenting style (Kumaraswamy & Othman, 2011). Authoritarian parents believed that they are obligated to punish their child for wrongdoings in order to shape their child into a better person. Therefore, in Malaysia, traditional parenting practices usually involve the use of harsh corporal punishment such as caning, beating and whipping with strap as forms of corrective behavior. Students who participated in this study reported that being verbally abused, beaten and canned by their parents in home.

Although it has long been understood that domestic violence against children put children on risks, its prediction on children's academic stress are not known in literature review. This can be attributed to public's low awareness towards the prevalence and consequences of domestic violence against children. Public has high tolerance toward corporal punishment, abusive treatment of children has not been seen as a problem everywhere and at all times, by any means (Iarskaia-Smirnova, Romanov & Antonova, 2008). In Malaysia, corporal punishment and abusive treatment towards children were regarded as a socially acceptable behavior or just a family issue. Even though public witnesses the child was abused by parents, they perceived it as a way of family education rather than domestic violence. They tend to not take it seriously or reluctant to become involved in other's family issue. As domestic violence against children was not regarded as an issue, its prediction on academic stress might be omitted in previous research.

Child abuse in school was also identified as one of the sources of academic stress among students. Child abuse in school were mainly done by the teachers through various forms such as verbal abuse, emotional abuse, restriction, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, bias and discrimination. According to students involved in focus group, most students experienced verbal and corporal punishment in school. In fact, McEvoy (2005) mentioned that in most schools, there will be at least one or more teachers who were abusive toward students. He further added that these abusive teachers are usually old teachers who have taught five or more years and had established and secure their positions.

In many schools, at least one or more teachers can be identified as abusive toward students. Abusive teachers were even more daring as there were no negative sanctions applied to teachers who abuse students. Such were the case as there were no school policies and responses to reports of abusive behaviors by teachers generally ineffective or not exist (McEvoy, 2005).

Moreover, teachers also tend to not perceive their behaviors of demeaning, discrimination, dominating, destabilizing, distancing as a form of abuse. On the contrary, students reported to

have a high perception of such behaviors as abusive (Longobardi, Settanni, Prino & Gastaldi, 2018). Teachers abusive behaviors were proved to be one of the stressors among students especially in classroom settings and assessments (Piekarska, 2000).

Laissez-faire is another factor that was determined to be a contributing factor to academic stress among students in upper primary school. Laissez-faire is a French term that means "let it be". Laissez-faire can be understood as neglectful parenting or child neglect, it is the omission of care, such as healthcare, education, supervision, protection from environmental hazards, and meeting physical needs and emotional support, resulting in actual or potential harm (Li, Zhong, Chen, Zhong & Pan, 2015). Laissez-faire parents raise their children with "anything goes" approach, they rarely fluctuate when response to children's behavior and they freely accept all emotions no matter how children behave. Among the four major recognized parenting styles: authoritative, permissive, laissez-faire and authoritarian, laissez-faire is one of the most harmful styles of parenting because there is no trust foundation between parents and children (Mgbemere & Telles, 2013).

Laissez-faire could be one of the predictors that predicted academic stress because children's academic stress peaked when their basic needs were not met adequately. However, laissez-faire as predictor of academic stress was not in-line with previous research literature. An extensive research literature has documented the devastating lifelong consequences of laissez-faire on children but only a small number of researches have focused on whether laissez-faire predicts academic stress in middle childhood.

One potential reason why laissez-faire was not considered as predictor of academic stress in previous research can be due to public perception and action toward laissez-faire. Laissez-faire cases often received less attention compared to other type of children maltreatment such as physical and sexual abuse because it is more difficult to be substantiated and proved (Yusoff & Thambapillay, 2007). Its identification is inherently not easy as it rarely seen directly by people outside the family. For instance, physical abuse leaves visible wounds and bruises but the signs of laissez-faire tend to be less visible. If public does not acknowledge laissez-faire as a serious issue, unfortunately it goes unreported. Although laissez-faire may be perceived as less serious but previous researchers show that its prevalence is relatively high across countries and its consequences are as serious as other type of abuse (Yusoff & Thambapillay, 2007). Thus, the detrimental effect of laissez-faire, particularly its prediction on academic stress among students can no longer be overlook.

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