Exploring Positive School Attributes: Evidence From School Leader and Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract
The extent to which school stakeholders perceive positive school attributes remains unclear in the literature. This study seeks to provide an understanding of positive school attributes from the school leaders and teachers’ perspectives in the Malaysian school context. This study employed a qualitative case study research design with 14 informants selected from seven Malaysian secondary schools. The thematic analysis informed six emerging themes: (1) stimulating positive emotion, (2) promoting positive engagement, (3) fostering positive relationships, (4) cultivating positive meaning, (5) nurturing positive accomplishment, and (6) cultivating spirituality in expressing positive school attributes. Fostering positive relationships were specified as (1) teacher-teacher relationship, (2) teacher-student relationship, and (3) student-student relationship. Cultivating spirituality is a newly emerged theme that is added to the unique positive school attributes. These newly added components of the existing PERMA model can trigger further research in positive education studies.

Keywords
Malaysia, positive education, positive psychology, positive school, qualitative case study

Introduction
Literature witnesses a growing interest in school effectiveness research that emphasized schools serving as the nexus between the movement in positive psychology (Gilman et al., 2009; King et al., 2016; Martin, 2016; Seligman et al., 2009). Positive psychologists describe the science of positive psychology as scaffolded by three main pillars which are positive emotion, positive character traits, and positive institution (White & Waters, 2015). By definition, positive psychology in education refers to the development of the students’ strengths and well-being, and thus enabling them to succeed (Elfrink et al., 2017). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 5), institutions which are based on positive psychology could help develop a nation characterized by higher “citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethics.”

A school can be a positive institution if emphasis is being placed in developing better character strength and socio-emotional stability in students (Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011; Wyn, 2007). Thus, positive schools are expected to be able to promote students’ well-being on top of improving academic performance (Kern et al., 2015; Norrish et al., 2013). Evidence shows that across studies on students’ well-being, escalating expectations and overemphasis on academic performance are deteriorating students’ mental health (Ng et al., 2015; Preus, 2007). In fact, the World Health Organization (2011) showed that about 20% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Stankov’s (2013) cross-national study showed that there was a higher level of depression and a lower level of life satisfaction among Asian students. In particular, the Malaysian Ministry of Health announced a shocking finding about Malaysian students’ mental health. Based on the statistics, approximately 30% of Malaysian students aged 16 years and above suffered from mental health problems (Kotera et al., 2021). In connection to this, research shows that students’ well-being is intertwined with the level of autonomy support that they received (Ratelle et al., 2012). To a certain degree, the lack of autonomy might have contributed to depression and anxiety in students because when behavior-control rather than autonomy is being underscored,
students’ interest and intrinsic motivation in learning might be diminished, causing them to feel more depressed and anxious (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

School leaders and teachers are the key change agents to implement, and scale up positive education in school (Zhang, 2016). Positive school attributes are practical when the roles of school leaders and teachers are taken into account in facilitating positive school attributes during the instructional and non-instructional hours. Maintaining a respectful relationship with school stakeholders, practice a goal-oriented tasks, engage with the task assigned by leaders are the essence of positive school. Thus, the role of school leaders and teachers within a positive school are important to cultivate conducive school environment that leads to encounter students’ mental health issues in schools.

It is conjectured that the neo-managerial norms in leadership grows out of great pressure to academically produce compelling results in high-stakes testing. This fuels the tendency to lose focus in developing whole-rounded students in positive schools. In contrast, this study explores into the opposite of this neo-managerialism of leadership whereby theorists of positive psychology in education put their concern on cultivating a learning climate to foster “all-round students’ education through social, emotional, and intellectual development” (Cain & Carnellor, 2008; Palmer, 2003; Thien et al., 2020). This concern is in line with initiatives to empower positive school attributes as emphasized in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 to 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, the extent to which school stakeholders perceive positive school attributes remain unclear both in the limited literature of positive psychology studies, particularly in Asian countries (King et al., 2016; Martin, 2016), especially in how it could promote autonomy support from the school leaders.

As a fundamental attempt, the purpose of the current study is to provide an understanding of positive school attributes from the school leaders and teachers’ perspectives in the Malaysian school context. This study prioritized school leaders and teachers’ perspectives because they are the key change agents to implement, and scale up positive education in school (Zhang, 2016). This study aims to address the research question of “How would the school leaders and teachers perceive the positive school attributes?” The scholarly research on the positive school attributes of leaders and teachers could benefit from understanding how to achieve and maintain positive schools, at the same time to better prevent and moving away from neo-managerial emphasis by understanding the evaluation of “performance, economic efficiency, and conformity” (Sementelli, 2015, p. 133) in Malaysian schools.

**Education System in Malaysia**

The education system in Malaysia is highly centralized and commonly perceived as highly examination-oriented (Chin et al., 2019). Before 2019, pupils are compulsory to participate for three public national assessment throughout their 11 years of basic education at primary-, lower secondary-, and upper secondary level. These three national assessments are high-stake examination (Lan Ong, 2010) and skewed toward academic excellence instead of developing pupils’ potential holistically (Chin et al., 2019). Overemphasis in academic performance has created the tensions of “teach for test syndrome” (Lim, 2010) and “finishing syllabi syndrome” (Lim & Hwa, 2009).

Besides, Malaysian students’ performance in international large-scale assessment such as TIMSS and PISA were under-performed in reading, mathematics, and science literacies. The mean scores of these three literatures remain below the international average scores throughout a few cycles of the assessment despite marginal improvement was observed (Thien et al., 2021). The decline in these two international large-scale assessments has accelerated a massive education reform in Malaysia. The education reform has led to the formation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013 to 2025. The MEB 2013 to 2025 highlights six attributes of students’ aspiration: thinking skills, leadership skills, bilingual skills, knowledge, ethics and spirituality leadership skills, bilingual skills, knowledge, ethics and spirituality, and national identity (MOE, 2013) to prepare all-rounder students in confronting the challenges in the new era of globalization in the 21st century (Chin et al., 2019).

The national curriculum at primary and secondary school education has been revamped with the focus on reasoning and higher-order thinking skills (MOE, 2016). Following this, a holistic assessment of school-based assessment (SBA) has been rolled out for the first-year pupils in both primary and lower secondary levels to evaluate pupils’ learning domains in terms of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (Ghazali, 2016). The national assessment for year 6 pupils in primary schools (acronym in Malay language, UPSR) has been abolished begins in 2021 (Malaysia to abolish primary school learning examination from 2021, 2021

**Positive School: An Overview**

Schools play an essential role in scaffolding students to develop cognitive, social, and subjective well-being skills. The holistic development of students through social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development is gaining increasing attention (Cain & Carnellor, 2008; McCombs, 2004). More importantly, increasing evidence shows the synergistic relationship between students’ well-being and better learning and classroom attention (Seligman et al., 2009). In this regard, it is pivotal for educationists to understand the positive school attributes. Therefore, the current study aims to identify the positive school attributes as the main research agenda and at the same time refraining from being in the “managerialist project” (Wright, 2003, p.139) which emphasizes on efficiency, uniformity, predictability,
and universality in the attempt to flourish students’ well-being (Myran & Sutherland, 2019). Further investigation into the positive education literature reveals that positive school attributes are well-reflected by Seligman’s (2011) multidimensional PERMA model of flourishing. PERMA is a highly regarded well-being model which has been tested in an extensive number of studies to measure well-being as a multidimensional construct internationally (Kern et al., 2015; Norrish et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). Details of PERMA model are presented in the following section.

Seligman’s (2011) PERMA Model

Deriving from the well-being theory, the PERMA model consists of five dimensions of psychological well-being: (1) positive emotion (P), (2) positive engagement (E), (3) positive relationships (R), (4) positive meaning (M), and (5) positive accomplishment (A) (Seligman, 2011).

Positive Emotion

Positive emotion is generally referred to as happiness, sense of belonging, curiosity, amusement, joy, and gratitude. Positive emotion includes longer-lasting positive moods (Diener, 2000). According to Russell’s (1980) circumplex model, positive emotion can be high activation (e.g., joy, excitement) or low activation (e.g., contentment). In an educational setting, positive emotion refers to students’ capacity to predict, develop, experience, sustain, and generate positive emotional experiences such as happiness, gratitude, hope, and inspiration (Norrish et al., 2013).

Positive Engagement

Positive engagement is related to individuals who are curious (Kashdan et al., 2004), interested (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), and passionate about worthy pursuits (Vallerand et al., 2003). Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that engaged individuals are curious, interested, motivated, and persistent in the face of challenges. According to Norrish et al. (2013), positive engagement is referred to as being highly interested in living the life, curiosity, and absorption, and working toward goals with determination and vitality. Positive engagement is associated with well-being, learning, and the achievement of important goals (Froh et al., 2010; Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Positive Relationships

The dimension of positive relationships is known as students’ sense of belonging among peer groups despite cultural differences and creates equality among relationships to feel contentment in their lives (Hatfield et al., 2010). According to Jiang et al. (2016), positive relationships are known as experiences and expression of positive emotion in the classroom. Positive relationships are conceptualized as strong social and emotional skills that help create as well as promote strong and nourishing relationships with self and others (Norrish et al., 2013) on adaptive and healthy growth (Bronfenbrenner, 2004).

Positive Meaning

Positive meaning refers to the comprehension, believing in, and serving something greater than oneself and deliberately engaging in a task for the benefits of others (Norrish et al., 2013). In positive psychology, a meaningful life is a construct which relates to the identification of value and overarching goals that provide fulfillment, help people to grow and attain their potential (Kosine et al., 2008), and thus provides people with a mission or vision for life and directness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). McKnight and Kashdan (2009) contended that positive meaning is related to resilience, successful coping with stressful life events, and the ability to pursue goals despite hardships.

Positive Accomplishment

Positive accomplishment is used to describe the development of individual capability by striving for and attaining meaningful results. Positive accomplishment involves the ability to work toward valued objectives, the motivation to persist despite challenges, and the attainment of competency and success in essential aspects of life (Norrish et al., 2013). The dimension of positive accomplishment is also known as the focus on developing confidence and competence through striving for and achieving meaningful outcomes (Rijavec, 2015). In the educational setting, positive accomplishment refers to a process of helping students embrace opportunities, learn from disappointments, and maintain effort in the face of adversity (Dweck, 2006).

PERMA model has also been widely used as a scaffolding framework for the development of whole-school and positive education initiatives. For instance, the Geelong Grammar School (GGS) Model (Seligman, 2011) was infused into the entire school by training teachers in incorporating the PERMA model techniques. In Hungary, the PERMA model was applied to examine the perspectives of workers on overall well-being at work (Kun et al., 2017). Kun et al. (2017) underscored the importance of organizational evaluation of work-related well-being at different workplaces and whether the overall organization well-being would align with the PERMA framework. Without the attention in cultivating employees’ wellness, the success of an organization such as a school would be negatively impacted as employees’ dissatisfaction toward the organization and conflicts would increase. Hence, well-being at schools should be assessed from time to time, taking into account the perspectives of not only teachers but also the school leaders.
PERMA model has been extensively applied in different school contexts. For instance, the application of PERMA model in Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia with its six domains of wellbeing, which includes positive emotions, positive engagement, positive relationships, positive purpose, positive accomplishment, and positive health (Norrish et al., 2013). Meanwhile, Noble and McGrath (2015) have extended the PERMA model to PROSPER model with two newly added dimensions, namely strengths and resilience. This is the main reason why the current study explored the positive school attributes from the perspective of PERMA model.

Based on the discussion of the literature related to the PERMA framework, several assertions are being brought to attention. First, there is a need for a more tailored approach to support the practice of positive education in the school context which is scaffolded by the perspectives of school-level stakeholders such as teachers and principals. Second, there is a dearth of information within the literature on whether descriptions of a positive school provided by a sample of school leaders and teachers would align with the PERMA model. Third, the school stakeholders, especially the school leaders and teachers, would be the main contributors to the effectiveness of the PERMA model implementation. Hence, the school leaders and teachers’ perspectives in their understanding of a positive school would be beneficial to extend the knowledge base of positive education literature in a developing country like Malaysia. Specifically, the emphasis of PERMA model on its five dimensions (positive emotion, positive engagement, positive relationship, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment) fits to the substance of the Malaysia National Philosophy of Education in terms of the enhancement of non-academic components, namely, spiritual, emotional, and apart from focusing on students’ intellectual development. These assertions provided the reasons for the current study to adopt the PERMA model in identifying the positive school attributes from the lens of school leaders and teachers in the Malaysian school context.

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Method

Sample

The exploratory case study was employed to explore the causal links between the different perspectives of the school leaders and teachers toward positive school attributes (Yin, 2018). To do this, open-ended interviews and prompts were used to elicit data on the positive school attributes that helped us as the researchers to better understand the nuances of the topic discussed (positive school attributes) and at the same time provides the researchers with more information about the context that the interviewees were in (Hoffmann, 2007). We used purposeful sampling for the identification and selection of school leaders and teachers who are knowledgeable and could provide rich information about positive school attributes. The targeted schools are Malaysian regular secondary schools because this type of school constitutes about 81.70% of the total numbers of secondary schools in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2018).

This study selected regular secondary schools from four zones: (1) Northern Zone (Kedah, Perak, and Penang), (2) East Zone (Kelantan), (3) Middle Zone (Negeri Sembilan and Selangor), and (4) Southern Zone (Melaka) to ensure the representativeness of the data. Each zone has its respective states as stated in the parentheses. There are seven states in total. As an exploratory attempt, this study has limited the school location to urban area only. The selected schools are considered homogenous. This is because the school leaders and teachers who are currently working in the regular secondary daily schools are similar apparently in terms of receiving similar training, curriculum delivery, and working under the common administrative structure. One school was selected from each state and this made up seven selected secondary schools. One school leader and one teacher were selected from each selected school. Thus, this made up seven school leaders and seven teachers as the informants of the study.

The school leaders, including senior assistants and heads of department, and teachers were chosen based on the following inclusive criteria: (1) school leaders who hold the position at least 3 years and (2) teachers who have teaching experience with at least 5 years in the current school. In total, this study had seven principals and seven teachers as the informants. While many scholarly researchers suggested various “rule of thumbs” of the sufficient numbers of informants (e.g., Johnson & Christensen, 2008), the final number should be determined by data saturation (Patton, 2015) instead of relying on an arbitrary number. Similarly, Meriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 246) stressed that “the best rule of thumb is that the data and emerging findings must feel saturated.” Data saturation is achieved at a particular point when the information is redundant among the participants and when the participant repeats the same point again (Meriam & Tisdell, 2016). The final number of informants in this study were 14 to reach data saturation. Thus, a total of 14 informants would be sufficient for the current study.

Table 1 shows that the sample consists of three male and four female school leaders as well as six female teachers and one male teacher. The average age of school leaders and teachers are about 57 and 39 years respectively. The school leader category comprised one principal, four senior assistants, and two heads of department. Meanwhile, for the teacher category, the teaching subjects of the selected teachers include mathematics, science, Islamic studies, English, moral, and accounting principles.
Direct questions related to positive school attributes were intentionally absent from the interview in order not to make the participants respond directly toward the PERMA model. Therefore, questions were asked such as “How do you perceive a good school?” and “What makes you happy in the school?” Probes and sub-questions related to the informants’ responses were used to elicit further information that would shed better and in-depth understanding of the informants’ general answers.

**Data Collection**

The study firstly secured human ethical approval from the authorities at ministry and university levels, followed by gaining consent from the State Education Department (SED). Following this, permission from the administration from each selected school to conduct the interview sessions was sought. Each school leader suggested the appropriate teachers as the informants based on the inclusive criteria. The researchers notified the purpose of the study before the interview session. The informants’ participation was strictly confidential and voluntary. Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the audio recordings of the interviews. Open-ended questions were used to avoid researcher direct biasing (Salazar, 1990). The interview session lasted an average of 1 hour. Throughout the process of the interviews, the interviewer adopted a friendly and non-judgmental attitude by remaining respectful and encouraged the interviewees to share their perspectives with regards to positive school. A verbatim transcription of the collected interview data was then developed. The seven principals and teachers were labeled with pseudonyms names as shown in Table 1.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

The study used thematic analysis in identifying, probing, and recording patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Prior to thematic analysis, the researchers prepared a case report for each selected school, followed by the integration of the seven reports from seven schools. Next, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines, the researchers read and re-read the transcribed data, paying particular attention to variations that exist. The process continued with the development of initial codes and confirmation of the codes. Then, the researchers combined the codes into general themes or sub-themes that represent the data and explain the meaning of the themes. In this study, Microsoft Excel was used to conduct thematic analysis as well as applying filtering and sorting strategy in developing the common themes and sub-themes through coding.

To ensure the and credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study has utilized the multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, and member check strategies to triangulate the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the multiple sources of data, the interview data was collected from school leaders, including principal and senior assistant as well as teachers with different teaching subjects and formal positions in this study. Multiple investigators involved three researchers and two content experts independently analyze the same interview data followed by comparing their findings (Patton, 2015). Finally, we have conducted member check. The purpose is to solicit feedback on the preliminary findings from the informants, and thus ruling out the misinterpretation of the interview data (Maxwell, 2013).

**Results**

The thematic analysis informed six emerging themes: (1) stimulating positive emotion, (2) promoting positive engagement, (3) fostering positive relationships, (4) cultivating positive meaning, (5) nurturing positive accomplishment, and (6) cultivating religious ritual in expressing positive school attributes.

### Table 1. Sample Demographic Background.

| Participant | State      | Gender | Age | Position/Teaching subject                      |
|------------|------------|--------|-----|-----------------------------------------------|
| P1         | Kedah      | Female | 58  | Senior Assistant (Co-curricular)              |
| P2         | Perak      | Male   | 57  | Senior Assistant (Academic)                   |
| P3         | Kelantan   | Male   | 59  | Senior Assistant (Student Affair)             |
| P4         | Negeri Sembilan | Female | 59  | Head of Department (Language)                 |
| P5         | Penang     | Male   | 55  | Principal                                     |
| P6         | Selangor   | Female | 58  | Senior Assistant (Academic)                   |
| P7         | Melaka     | Female | 52  | Head of Department (Language)                 |
| T1         | Kedah      | Female | 45  | Mathematics Teacher                           |
| T2         | Perak      | Male   | 40  | Science Teacher                               |
| T3         | Kelantan   | Female | 42  | Islamic Studies Teacher                       |
| T4         | Negeri Sembilan | Female | 38  | English Teacher                              |
| T5         | Penang     | Female | 38  | English Teacher                              |
| T6         | Selangor   | Female | 35  | Moral Teacher                                |
| T7         | Melaka     | Female | 37  | Accounting Principles Teacher                 |
**Stimulating Positive Emotion**

The school leaders and teachers perceived that a positive school should be able to stimulate positive emotion among the school community. The role of the school as a stimulator of positive emotion made the teachers and students perform well. For instance, Mary asserted that teachers can feel joyful if the teachers consider work as something enjoyable:

> “When the teachers and students feel enjoyable, happy... then they will do work.”

> “We need to assume that teaching is fun and not a burden work...”

> “We need to teach and make the students happy so that they are able to learn.”

Similarly, Geo also mentioned that the school should focus on students’ happiness so that the students can learn well. Jussie affirmed that the students should experience cheerfulness and joyfulness in school. Jussie said: “The students are good, and they look cheerful and joyful when they are in school.”

Nick, explained that the interest in teaching makes the teacher happy in school. Jack emphasized that the school should create a feeling of joy, sincerity, and positivity within every individual in the school community: “It is important to create a feeling of joy and sincerity, not creating a feeling of impossible...” [Jack]

The teachers had portrayed positive emotion in terms of positive feeling. Sab expressed that teachers feel enjoyable when being in the school. Teachers were experiencing positive emotion such as the feeling of appreciation when the school was showing concern about teacher welfare. A school could be “positive” when teachers feel satisfied and enjoyable in their teaching as responded by Mesie. Aira also noted that the most joyful emotion would be experienced when teachers are satisfied with the matter they are carrying out.

However, Aira has also expressed the level of depression in school. Besides, Aira also clearly pointed out that a school should stimulate positive emotion as one of the solutions for the teachers’ depression. Aira mentioned:

> ‘...sometimes I feel so depressed with personal problem and also work-related problem, the work-related problem usually due to peers when there are high (level of) conflicts between teachers, it is really difficult to work, and I feel really depressed, we (teachers) cannot work in a very depressing mood, we (teachers) need to be happy. The school won’t be positive when we (teachers) are in depress. The school (is) responsible for help the teachers to feel happy.’

Hence, a positive school encouraged positive emotion by promoting a feeling of happiness, joyfulness, cheerfulness, and appreciation toward concern about school members’ welfare and reduce their dissatisfaction of work life at a minimum level. A positive school demonstrated teachers’ satisfaction with teaching and learning in schools, feeling of being trusted with the responsibility, and feeling of pride being in schools.

**Promoting Positive Engagement**

Promoting positive engagement was part of the dimensions of positive school attributes based on the school leaders and teachers’ responses. School leaders underscored the importance of engagement with schools by always coming early to school compared to other teachers. Mary explained: “Principals often come to school early compared to other teachers... this principal is the first who comes to the school. She is punctual all the time.” The school leaders should optimize when handling the assigned tasks efficiently (Jussie). Jussie added:

> “I will get cooperation from other administrative colleagues, and they are highly committed to complete the task assigned.”

Geo mentioned that teachers should commit to their work and optimize student academic performance either in school examination or national assessment. Similarly, Geo also expressed that teachers who are in a positive school should collaborate in school activities. As pointed out by Geo, “Teachers should make more than 100 % commitment, especially for exam classes.” Jussie elaborated on the point of encouraging teacher commitment through establishing positive schools. Jussie stated that a positive school should have the teachers who are always interested in working beyond the school hours. Ami reiterated that “teachers should not be committed to teaching only but they are also willing to have extra classes after school hours.”

From the teachers’ perspective, the role of committed teachers in a positive school was emphasized. Halya highlighted that: “If there is any activity...teachers should give full commitment and cooperation.” Mesie supported Halya’s responses and added that “teachers should be willing to do work beyond the job specification and we should view workload positively.” Besides, Teo had risen his or her concern that positive schools should have a systematic document filing and be a caring educator who would be aware of the students’ well-being at school. Teo described in detail:

> “I am the secretary of special education student affairs... so I have a job scope to do such as collecting student data... Everything related to the student. I need to take care of students. If the student is absent. I will call the parents and ask them why they didn’t come to school. I will also handle students’ disciplinary problem...teachers are committed to teaching... monitoring student progress is important as well...” [Teo]

**Fostering Positive Relationships**

The theme of fostering positive relationships consists of three sub-themes: (1) teacher-teacher relationship, (2) teacher-student relationship, and (3) student-student relationship.
Teacher-Teacher relationship. School leaders in this sample claimed that a good relationship between teachers is an essential attribute for a positive school. Mary stated that:

“Teachers need to have an understanding among themselves so that they can help each other.”

From the teachers’ perspective, Putri elucidated that teachers should maintain a good relationship among the teaching staff by sharing new teaching methodology and having a social media application such as a WhatsApp group to share school-related information. Aira mentioned that mutual respect was essential within the collegial relationship. Aira added:

“A positive school should initiate programmes for teacher welfare in addition to sustaining a good relationship among teachers.”

Teacher-Student relationship. School leaders highlighted that a positive school should foster a healthy and close relationship between teachers and students. Rina mentioned that to establish a positive school, the school needs to organize activities that could create a close relationship between students and teachers. Rina further gave examples of these activities such as in-school training programs that involve teachers and students. Nick stated that students should feel unintimidated to approach their teachers when consulting on academic problems. Geo agreed that if the relationship is good between teachers and students, then there will be less disciplinary problems in school.

For teachers, Mesie pointed out that the relationship between students and teacher should be like a “family” in a positive school. Sab added that a close relationship between teachers and students could be nurtured via social media application such as a WhatsApp group. Besides, Teo mentioned that a healthy relationship between teachers and students would also benefit the underperforming students as teachers would readily provide their guidance. As explained by Teo, “students will not feel shy to ask teachers about their problem in learning because they are close to the teachers.”

Student-Student relationship. School leaders iterated that a positive school should have less disciplinary problems such as gangsterism. Jack believed that disciplinary problems could be reduced by having a close tie with their students. Similar to the school leaders’ view, the teacher respondents, Sab and Teo pointed out that a positive school should reflect the harmonious relations among the students where all the students were close with one another and would practise a caring culture.

Cultivating Positive Meaning

School leaders emphasized that a positive school should be able to provide positive meaning to the students. Positive meaning offered students with a central mission or vision for life as indicated by Nick. Rina stated that:

“A school should fulfil students with meaning life. . .and teachers are responsible for carrying out meaningful academic tasks for the students.”

From the lens of the teachers, Sab addressed that the teachers realized the purpose of schooling. Mesie affirmed that teachers should use their time meaningfully and emphasized the importance of the quality of knowledge delivered over the quantity of knowledge being delivered. In addition, Putri described that schools should provide meaningful school activities such as motivation-related, developing soft skills, and spiritual-related programs so that the students could learn living skills other than formal academic knowledge through meaningful activities.

Nurturing Positive Accomplishment

The school leaders and teachers’ responses revealed that positive accomplishment was one of the emerging themes of positive school attributes. Jussie stated that:

“I feel happy in this school. . .This school has helped me to achieve my goals, being a successful educator and teaching my students and nurture them to become a successful person too.”

Jussie added that:

“In a positive school, everyone is happy, and they can handle their tasks either assigned by the school or teachers.”

According to teachers’ point of view, they emphasized that a positive school could be established when the school community included the administrators, teachers, and students to work together to achieve a common goal. Putri described that all individuals in the school community should strive to attain the schools’ vision and mission.

Cultivating Spirituality

The school leaders accentuated that cultivating spirituality was another essential component of positive school attributes. Jack mentioned that the emphasis on nurturing spirituality through religious ritual could nurture courage, determination, and perseverance for the betterment of the students’ lives. Mary stressed that having a religion could help the students to self-realize.

“The disciplinary problem in this school is getting lesser (when we introduced religious education programmes). We have a spiritual programme whereby Muslim students would go to the mosque (while the) Indian students and Chinese students perform their religious activities too.” [Mary]
Identically, the teacher sample claimed that religious ritual was important to shape students’ well-being. Teo emphasized that religious ritual was a crucial aspect for a positive school. Aira expressed that incorporating religious education programs could enhance the development of a positive school. According to Mesie, the Muslim students who were having examination would have their Rassin prayers every week. On the other hand, Sab responded that the school leaders always reminded the non-Muslim students to pray according to their religions and practices. Putri pointed out that teachers need to educate the students on moral values and encourage them to pray or engage with their religious practices as it would be a good exposure to the students’ religious beliefs.

**Discussion**

The scarcity of empirical positive education studies in the Asian countries has motivated the current study to explore positive school attributes from the perspectives of Malaysian school leaders and teachers. While the concept of positive education is currently well-known and widely solicited, further understanding of positive school attributes would be crucial. The present study adds current empirical support to Seligman’s (2011) well-being theory, which proposes five indicators of well-being of PERMA model (positive emotion, positive engagement, positive relationships, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment). This study informed important findings as follows.

The qualitative findings suggested that one of the domains of PERMA, stimulating positive emotion, emerged as a positive school attribute from the perspectives of school leaders and teachers. As described by school leaders and teachers based on their school experience, having positive emotion is characterized by the enjoyment of positive feelings such as happiness and joy at work; being cheerful and enthusiastic, and the existence of trust and sincerity between school members. The findings revealed that if school strives to promote positive emotion, happiness and a sense of purpose would be created within the school members which would then motivate them to carry out the assigned task more productively. The findings are in accordance with what Seligman (2011) has described as the hedonic feelings of happiness (e.g., feeling joyful, content, and cheerful). A positive school should be able to promote optimistic emotions to its members as it is a crucial indicator of well-being (Coffey et al., 2015; Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009).

Promoting positive engagement served as an essential theme contributing to positive school attributes. The findings of this study illuminate three indicators of positive engagement: (1) being highly committed to work or task assigned, (2) being immersed and getting involved in daily school life, and (3) having the willingness to participate in school activities. The main essence of the findings indicates a need for establishing a psychological engagement that creates a sense of “connectedness” (Resnick et al., 1997) and “belongingness” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) within the school members and parents to cultivate commitment and engagement. This would be in line with Seligman’s (2011) study which put forth that a level of psychological engagement that involves intense concentration, absorption, and focus in the organizations would be important that enable maximum participation of the school community (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Positive relationships are created and maintained in the form of interpersonal interactions with friends, family, colleagues, and the community. As past studies have suggested, building relationships is significantly linked to work and life satisfaction as people feel loved, supported, and valued by others in meaningful and gratifying relationships with others (Allen & Bowles, 2012). As emphasized by Seligman (2011), positive relationships have a significant impact on health and well-being. Fostering positive relationships either between teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and student-student would contribute to developing a positive school. Findings of the current study revealed that the relationships among the school members were not forced upon and were not based on individual gains. Instead, within the described relationships of the school leaders and teachers, their relationships were strongly supported by their sense of responsibility and willingness to help each other and to share new ideas of teaching in the classroom. Data further showed that respecting others and preserving good communication were essential in maintaining a positive relationship which would align with findings of Caprara et al. (2000), Martin and Huebner (2007), and Noble and McGrath (2011). Pursuant to Klem and Connell (2004) research, teachers in this study believed that positive relationships could contribute to desirable students’ behavior. In view of the benefits of positive relationships, schools should take strategic steps to find ways to enhance positive relationships (i.e., peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, staff relationships, and parent-school relationships).

Participants in this study mentioned that cultivating and promoting positive meaning are essential attributes for positive schools. Relating to this, Steger’s (2012) study provided explanations about the importance of having a sense of meaning including at work: (1) to promote a direction in life, (2) to connect to something beyond the potential of the individual, and (3) feeling that one’s life is valuable and worthwhile. In the same vein, in the school context, Seligman (2011) proposed that positive schools valued the contribution of every member in the organization and each potential should flourish. This study confirmed that the participating schools were proactively growing the students’ potentials by realizing their own goals to prepare them for the challenging world. Across the literature, positive schools help students to have core life mission and to have a sense of direction (Norris, et al., 2013; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Specific examples of how educators can develop students’ purpose in learning are available, one of them would be to provide
students the opportunities to choose the learning activities (Norrish et al., 2013).

In this study, nurturing positive accomplishments was noted as one of the positive school attributes in driving the school members’ motivation to achieve their needs and ambitions. In tandem with the findings, Lambert D’raven and Pasha-Zaaidi (2016) found that students had happier school life when the positive accomplishment aspect of the school was fulfilled. Lambert D’raven and Pasha-Zaaidi (2016, p. 16) further identified the intrinsic (i.e., “to accomplish tasks above my level”) and extrinsic (i.e., “to be the first in my class”) motivators for students to achieve and accomplish their targets. Apart from these five attributes as stipulated in PERMA, another theme emerged from the present study which added to the unique positive school attributes, that is, cultivating religious ritual. This study further added that religious ritual in education is an essential aspect for the sample schools in which spiritual education programs are usually planned and conducted to strengthen the religious practices of school community members. These competencies include the values of determination, perseverance, and the ability to focus on goals and pursuing the meaning of life. This claim is in line with previous studies in which religious ritual has been found to positively influence the well-being of a person and academic engagement (Fisher et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2007).

Besides, Frey et al. (2005) found that religious education programs could contribute to students’ well-being in their search for a meaningful life and instilling self-efficacy values that facilitate students’ personal development. Along the same line, Tirri (2009) advocated promoting students’ spiritual intelligence which encompasses a deeper level of consciousness in respecting the differences in religion and culture while facilitating everyday problem-solving and goal attainment. In other words, the attention to religious education allows schools to develop students into better human beings in our current world of multicultural society, which is particularly of importance in the context of Malaysia which consists of a myriad of communities with different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Malaysian school leaders initiated religious activities such as daily Zohor prayers in school for the Muslim students with the belief that religious activities can cultivate a meaningful and good life style. Clearly, religious ritual is likely to enhance student well-being. Thus, the aspect of religious education programs in the school setting should be practised for the individual’s benefit.

**Conclusion**

This study identified the attributes of positive school according to the Malaysian context. This study was carried out to address the globally understudied research area in positive education literature. Findings of this study illustrated the ways the different perspectives of school leaders and teachers would align with the PERMA model. This study demonstrated how the PERMA model can be helpful in grounding framework with value-added components of religious education in developing an integral vision for the positive schools. Most of the school leaders expressed that “happiness” is important among the school stakeholders and specified that a school could be positive by stimulating positive emotions. Consequently, in the sense of emotion, this would be a new way to reduce the social and mental health problems among the teachers and students in school. Furthermore, fostering of positive relationship between the school stakeholders should be promoted by maintaining a good friendship, able to understand and share workload, helping each other, and meet friends to share the knowledge. Hence, schools would collectively develop and use their capacity toward developing well-balanced individuals through positive school initiatives.

**Implications**

This research has several implications. For the practical implication, schools are suggested to practise positive school attributes that could fit into the context of the schools through organizing programs and activities to encourage the holistic development of students as highlighted in the Malaysian national philosophy of education. For instance, in view of the benefits of positive relationships, schools should take strategic steps to find ways to enhance positive relationships from the perspectives of peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, staff relationships, and parent-school relationships. As suggested by the PERMA model, the implementation of positive school attributes would stimulate positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, on top of religious ritual to understand the ways in leading happier schools.

For policy implication, it should be cautioned that for PERMA model to be an effective model for institutional leadership and cultural change, “wellness” programs for students and staff should not be implemented in isolation without connection to other initiatives and cultural context (Slavin et al., 2012). Therefore, creating a positive school can be a thrust of promoting happiness to school members with the condition that the positive school initiatives are interwoven into the cultural context of the schools that everyone could commit to their fullest potentials (O’Brien, 2012). From the theoretical implication, this study provides a further enhancement to the well-being theory with its respective components, namely positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) by introducing one emerging component, that is, religious ritual. These newly added components of existing PERMA framework can trigger further research and experiment in positive education studies.
Limitations and Future Studies

Several limitations are worth noting. First, the study relied upon a small sample and was restricted by the researchers’ capacity and time. Second, this study sample is not representative of the entire population and limited to urban schools. The sample were only covered 7 states out of 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia. Future studies could include more representative sample size according to school location, involving schools in urban and rural areas to address these limitations. The current study could be extended by developing the descriptors of each emerging theme in future studies. The descriptors could be validated using statistical analysis to ensure its convergent and discriminant validity.

Besides, we are aware of potential barriers to the positive school attributes which were not well-expressed by the informants in this study. We should admit that the discussion of the current study has framed the issue of climate in a very positive way. Thus, we suggest the investigation of potential barriers to the positive school attributes as a new direction of future studies.

Overall, this study has extended the knowledge base of positive education literature in the non-Western societies. Hence, it is hoped that educational authority and practitioners, in particular, should consider integrating the elements of positive school attributes to align with school effectiveness and improvement initiatives toward more effective schools.

Author Note

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