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The Impact of the National Service Programme on Self-resilience Among Youth in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Physical activities, besides having a positive impact on health, are also effective in improving strength, bravery and resilience in individuals. In Malaysia, there are a number of physical programmes designed with this objective in mind such as the National Service Programme. Compared with other physical programmes, the physical module in the National Service Programme is quite different due to its longer duration. The main objective of the physical module in the National Service Programme is to enhance self-resilience among the trainees; this study aims to discover the effectiveness of such a module in enhancing self-resilience among the participants and attempts to provide answers to these main questions: How much self-resilience is gained by the trainees? Is there any difference in their self-resilience before and after they joined the physical training module? This is a quantitative study in which a total of 362 trainees were selected based on multi-stage sampling. The data collection process covered two stages (pre- and post). Based on the analysis done, it was found that most of the trainees had a moderate level of self-resilience in the pre- and post test. The results demonstrated that the physical module was able to enhance the trainees' self-resilience based on the significant difference identified in the mean score of the pre- and post tests. It is therefore recommended that the National Service Programme in Malaysia be implemented for a longer period of time and that the period for physical training be extended to give more room for new and challenging activities.

Keywords: National Service Programme, physical training, self-resilience, youth

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INTRODUCTION

The National Service Programme, also known as *Program Latihan Khidmat Negara* (PLKN) is a mandatory national service in

Malaysia. The programme is developed specifically for Malaysian youth aged 18 years old and above. PLKN covers a period of three months and consists of three series of recruitment per year. This programme was run for the first time on 16 February 2004 throughout Malaysia. At that time, however, it operated without a permanent training camp. A year after its establishment, the authorities constructed a total of five PLKN training camps in selected states. PLKN has four main modules: (1) physical module, (2) nation-building module, (3) character-building module, and (4) community service module. Each module aspires to achieve different objectives. These combined objectives contribute to PLKN's main goal, which is to strengthen the spirit of patriotism, solidarity, volunteerism, being active, applying intelligence and self-confidence among youth in Malaysia (PLKN, 2012).

The physical module of the PLKN programme, which concentrates on physical fitness and self-resilience, is an important element of the programme and should receive due attention. According to Davis (2000), physical fitness in the context of sport is the ability of an individual to meet various physical and physiological needs of the activity without causing a state of extreme exhaustion. Physical training is a process of repetitive exercises performed involving the elements of learning and adjustment. Its main purpose is to enhance the body mechanism for fitness and thus prime the body to avoid injuries (Baungartner & Jackson, 1991). Nonetheless, according

to Hashim (2004), within the scope of the PLKN physical training manual, physical training refers to all outdoor activities such as jungle trekking, canoeing or *kayaking*, abseiling, flying fox and other activities that require high resilience and physical and mental strength, as well as the spirit of cooperation and self-confidence.

Meanwhile, an individual's ability to exert control over a situation in order to solve problems effectively in the short-term is often related to self-resilience (Elizabeth, 2007). Resilience is a process that involves knowledge and experience. Individuals need to be tested and trained to exert control over a situation, while remaining calm, motivated and avoiding anxiety at the same time (Boyd and Hrycaiko, 1997). In this research, self-resilience is a variable used to look at trainees' ability when under pressure and their ability to control emotions in the face of discomfort, tiredness, hot weather and extreme situations. Self-resilience is a crucial element for the individual; according to Sontroem and Morgan (1989) only those with high self-resilience would be able to go through this process.

Physical training carried out in hot weather will cause individuals to feel anger and become depressed. Nonetheless, involvement in physical training and mental challenges will strengthen the individual's level of resilience and confidence (Petruzzello and Landers, 1994). According to Yahya *et al.* (2005), more than 2496 PLKN trainees in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah found that physical training could increase their level of resilience. The results showed

an increase in the mean value from 54.56 at pre-test to 55.41 at post test. In addition, according to McDonalds and Hodgdon (1991), physical training and activities such as aerobics and abseiling had negative associations with anxiety. Additionally, Gruber (1986), who conducted his study involving 150 trainees of Sandhurst Military College, England found that students who follow an active physical exercise regimen have higher self-resilience compared to trainees who are simply active. Apart from this, McDonalds and Hodgdon (1991) found significant differences in the levels of active adolescent mental and physical conditions in training activities based on the factors of age and gender. However, there were no significant differences found for the intermediate and adult age groups. An earlier study in Malaysia showed the difference in self-resilience on gender and location among PLKN trainees (Yahya *et al.*, 2005). Besides that, an adventurous lifestyle is identified as playing an important role in evaluating self-resilience due to the fact that the relationship between lifestyle and mental resilience is significant (Sanstroem and Potts, 1996). Adventurous activities such as swinging bridge crossing, six-foot wall crossing, graduated balance walk, monkey rack, tarzan swing, tunnel, cargo net, barbed wire crawl, fidget ladder, abseiling and flying fox can lead to the strengthening of self-resilience in individuals.

Hence, this study tries to identify the effectiveness of the physical module in the National Service Programme in

Malaysia. The study will explore the level of self-resilience among the trainees and will compare the differences in their self-resilience before and after undergoing the programme.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In Malaysia, there are 13 states with 83 PLKN training camps. This study employed a multi-stage random sampling involving a total of 362 trainees as respondents. The instrument used for this study was a set of questionnaires that was pre-tested earlier among 30 trainees. The pre-test resulted in a Cronbach Alpha value of .79, thus exceeding the threshold of 0.70 recommended by Nunally (1967) and indicated that the instrument used for this study was reliable. The data collection process covered two stages: (1) pre-test that ended during the first week of the start of the programme and (2) post test that ended in the last week of the programme. The questionnaire included a total of 10 items; for each item, respondents chose answers based on a 5-point Likert scale. Factor analysis divided these items into two categories: (1) self-resilience during a challenging situation, and (2) self-resilience through a variety of emotions. To fulfil the objectives determined earlier, SPSS software was used to perform a descriptive analysis to obtain the percentage, mean and standard deviation. Paired sample t-test was performed to define the different levels of the two categories before and after trainees had undergone the physical training.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. Respondents were divided into four groups and each group consisted of an almost equal number of trainees. Unity is one of the main focusses of the government, and the training in PLKN is the medium used to promote it. The selected trainees came from different ethnic groups and religions. This study involved four main ethnic groups, namely, Malay (61.2%), Chinese (26.2%), Indian (11.6%), and Others (0.8%). Apart from this, most of the respondents were Muslim (61.6%) while a minority were Hindu (11.0%). Moreover, there was an equal distribution of respondents in terms of gender with a total of 50.3% of the respondents being males while 49.3% were females.

TABLE 1
Socio-demographic Profile of Respondents (n= 362)

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Group		
Alpha	82	22.7
Bravo	87	24.0
Charlie	96	26.5
Delta	97	26.8
Ethnicity		
Malay	222	61.3
Chinese	95	26.2
India	42	11.6
Other	3	0.8
Religion		
Muslim	223	61.6
Christian	14	3.9
Buddhism	85	23.5
Hindu	40	11.0

cont'd Table 1

Gender		
Female	180	49.7
Male	182	50.3

The questionnaire provided to respondents consisted of 10 items to measure their level of self-resilience. To meet the objective determined earlier, these 10 items were employed in two stages: in the first stage (pre-test) the trainees received the questionnaires one week after the programme started and, in the second stage, trainees received the questionnaires a week before the programme ended. To each of the items asked, the respondents gave their answers based on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= moderately, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree).

Table 2 shows the items used to measure the trainees' self-resilience. The items were divided into two aspects namely 1) self-resilience during challenging situation, and 2) self-resilience through a variety of emotions. On the aspect of self-resilience during a challenging situation, during the pre-test, the item, "I persevere to face discomfort in training than at home", recorded the highest mean scored ($M=3.36$). Similarly, the highest mean score recorded during the post test was for the item, "I am willing to march in the hot weather" ($M=3.45$). However, the item, "When someone asked me to do push up, I was willing to do it" had the lowest mean score for pre- and post analysis (pre: $M=2.72$; post: $M=3.09$). For the second category, the item, "I persevere to face any challenges during the training" and "I do not like

outdoor activities because it is tiring”, scored the highest mean score with $M=3.74$ (pre-test) and $M= 3.72$ (post test). Apart from this, the lowest mean score recorded was for these items: (1) “I am not the type of person who gets worried and anxious easily” ($M= 3.16$), and (2) “I remain calm when I face frustration or defeat” ($M: 3.37$).

TABLE 2
Self-resilience on Each Item (Pre- and Post)

Item	Mean	
	Pre	Post
Self-resilience during challenging situation		
• I am willing to march in the hot weather	3.21	3.45
• I persevere to face discomfort in training than at home	3.36	3.44
• When someone asked me to do pumping, I was willing to do it	2.72	3.09
Self-resilience through a variety of emotions		
• I persevere to face any challenges during training	3.70	3.74
• I do not like outdoor activities because they are tiring*	3.72	3.71
• I am afraid of wild animals even though they are caged*	3.44	3.53
• Sometimes I am scared without any reason*	3.35	3.48
• I can accept criticism from my friends even though it hurts	3.36	3.47
• I am not the type of person who gets worried and anxious easily	3.16	3.43
• I remain calm when I face frustration or defeat	3.30	3.37

(* is a negative item)

The level of self-resilience was calculated using the mean summated score of the 10 items. The scores were categorised into three levels namely low, moderate and high for scores from 1-2.33, 2.43-3.66 and 3.67-5.00 respectively. Table 3 shows that for the first (1) category and the second (2) category, most respondents possessed a moderate level of resilience at both levels: pre-test: (1) 50.0% and (2) 58.3%; and post-test: (1) 42.8% and (2) 54.7%.

Based on Table 4, both self-resilience categories recorded a significant difference before and after the programme ended; the analysis done proved this significant difference as follows: for self-resilience during a challenging situation ($M= 3.10$, $SD= 1.01$) for pre-test and for posttest ($M= 3.33$, $SD= 1.02$; $t(362)= 4.140$, $p= .0001$), while for self-resilience tested based on a variety of emotions, the analysis performed resulted as ($M= 3.43$, $SD= 0.64$) for pre-test and for post test ($M= 3.53$, $SD= 0.61$; $t(362)= 3.060$, $p= .001$) (Table 4). From the activities, trainees had the chance to involve themselves in adventurous activities such as wall climbing and flying fox to test their courage, marching in the sun to test their patience level as well as climbing and jumping from high walls to reduce their fear; hence all these activities tested the trainees and thus, trained them to exert control over the situation, while remaining calm, being motivated and being courageous (Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997). Eventually, such physical activities can improve their resilience level even further; the study done by McDonald and Hodgson (1991), supports the findings

TABLE 3
Level of Self-resilience

Level	Percentage		Mean		S.D	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Self-resilience during a challenging situation						
Low (1-2.33)	26.8	22.4	3.10	3.33	1.01	1.02
Moderate (2.34-3.66)	50.0	42.8				
High (3.67-5.00)	23.2	34.8				
Self-resilience through a variety of emotions						
Low (1-2.33)	4.1	1.9	3.43	3.53	0.64	0.61
Moderate (2.34-3.66)	58.3	54.7				
High (3.67-5.00)	37.6	43.4				

recorded in this paper, that physical training such as marching in the sun, abseiling and crashing into barriers can improve resilience in individuals.

TABLE 4
Comparison of Self-resilience

	Mean	S.D	t	p
Self-resilience in a challenging situation				
Pre-Test	3.10	1.01	4.14	.000
Post Test	3.33	1.02		
Self-resilience based on a variety of emotions				
Pre-Test	3.43	.64	3.06	.001
Post Test	3.53	.61		

DISCUSSION

The results given in Table 3 show that the percentage of trainees in the three levels (lower, moderate and highest) was different at both stages (pre-test and post test). For instance, in the first category, it can be seen that the lower and moderate levels had decreased (low: 26.8 to 22.4 and moderate: 50.0 to 42.8) while the highest level improved (high: 23.2 to 34.8). The mean score for each item in the first category

had also increased. For example: "I am willing to march in the hot weather" (3.21 to 3.45), "When someone asked me to do push up, I was willing to do it" (3.36 to 3.44) and "I persevere to face discomfort in training here than at home" (2.72 to 3.09). This situation can be accounted for by a number of reasons. Firstly, activities such as jungle trekking, flying fox and abseiling are able to build leadership skills, mental resilience and confidence (McDonald & Hodgdon, 1991). In addition, PLKN provides the trainees with a new environment which is highly challenging and demanding and, consequently, offers the trainees the right environment for the improvement of self-resilience. As the module stretched over a long period, the trainees also had the opportunity to get to know each other, practise mutual assistance among themselves and share food and equipment to achieve their common goals or mission and in the process they were able to achieve success as a team (Smith, 2000). It may seem that youngsters today tend to be pampered with

luxury and have most things available and ready for them; this conditioning may have led to occasions of complaining among the trainees when the numerous difficulties presented in this module confronted them. However, the physical training offered in this module offered them the chance to learn how to adapt to unpleasant and difficult situations. Physical training that includes adventurous activities requires the group to display strength in facing these challenges; hence they need more than one teammate in order to achieve the goals of each activity (Kozub & Button, 2000). Trainees who have undergone this programme stand to become more disciplined and can improve their levels of resilience in facing challenges; initially, the trainees might not want to get involved in physical training because of the challenges perceived i.e. hot weather, discomfort, pain etc., but a few months into the training programme, most of them would see a reduction in fear and reluctance and a rise in self-confidence. It is clear that the physical training in PLKN brings much benefit to youth; in addition, it enhances courage in youth so that they become bold enough to withstand future challenges besides possessing near perfect health and mind (Saxena *et al.*, 2005). This result is consistent with the philosophical tenets of the country, introduced in 1970 and, further enhanced in the Vision 2020 that are important in developing the country (Abdul Rahman, 1997).

Based on the findings of this study, it is highly recommended that the National Service programme in Malaysia be extended

for a longer period. It will be beneficial to allocate a longer time period for physical training which will give more time for new and challenging activities such as those provided in survival camp. Doubtlessly this will provide the trainees a chance to feel challenged and pressured, and subsequently, significantly improve and enhance their level of self-resilience. In addition, selecting more youth to participate in the national service programme will allow the benefits of this programme to be enjoyed by a greater number of the country's youth.

CONCLUSION

The results obtained from this study showed that the physical training in the National Service programme has a good input in that it improves the trainees' level of self-resilience. Overall, most of the trainees have a moderate level of self-resilience. To ensure significant improvement in the future, all stakeholders should improve the aspects pertaining to the inputs in the module and facilities as well as provide experienced trainers so that trainees will be able to gain better from a holistic physical training module.

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