

THE LIFE STORY OF A RESILIENT UNDERPRIVILEGED YOUTH: THE MOTIVATION TO LEARN SOFT SKILLS TO THRIVE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - The study aims to explore and analyse how Firdaus, an underprivileged blind individual from an extremely poor family, developed soft skills and resilience to thrive in life, despite the life challenges faced which could have easily hindered the development of his abilities and skills. This is important to be analysed because the Ministry of Higher Education 2015 Graduate Tracer Research Report had stated that most of the unemployed graduates are underprivileged, and the related literature mostly highlighted that the unemployment in Malaysia is mainly due to lack of soft skills (Abdul Hamid, Islam, & Hazilah Abd Manaf, 2014; Abdul Karim et al., 2012; Pillai, Stefanie; Khan, Mahmud H.; Ibrahim, Ida Syahirah; Raphael, 2011 and Zaharim, Ahmad, Yusoff, Omar, & Basri, 2012). Empirical evidence shows that soft skills are the least developed in the underprivileged from a very young age due to their upbringing and exposure (Duncan, Magnuson & Votruba-drzal, 2014; Garcia, 2015). Therefore, Firdaus was chosen as he is distinct to the phenomenon being studied, coming from an extremely underprivileged background but being able to secure a degree in a prestigious public university under a scholarship while winning various awards, and managed to secure a job immediately upon study completion. The findings may be used as a starting point for more research to be done on the underprivileged in the Malaysian context, to guide initiatives to build resilience and motivation to learn more soft skills to thrive in life. The results could also facilitate in exploring a fresh new outlook to address the lack of soft skills that lead to issues in graduate employability as well as behavioural and risk factors, especially among the underprivileged in Malaysia.

Methodology - As this qualitative study seeks to explore experiences through the life story of an underprivileged individual during his childhood and youth, the narrative inquiry method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was used to understand the circumstances, protective factors and turning points in his life. A “retrospective” longitudinal study was carried out where experiences over a period of time was retrospectively documented and analysed via the collection of Firdaus’ life story through responsive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth

unstructured interviews were carried out to understand experiences to seek rich information, using open-ended questions which changed throughout the interviews. Data was collected from one participant who is very distinctive to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013) via two interviews which were recorded and transcribed. To facilitate triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), his mother and teacher were also interviewed as other data sources. Member checking (Creswell, 2013) was another method to ensure trustworthiness, as Firdaus reviewed and commented on the draft findings before they were finalised. Manual coding was carried out while field notes and analytical memos were progressively written, and while interviews were being transcribed, as recommended by Saldana (2013). Open coding was used at the commencement of coding to detect main ideas and patterns in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Themeing the data (Saldana, 2013) was then carried out, when the codes and themes emerge from data analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016) by thematic coding. This was followed by longitudinal coding where the data was reviewed thematically and comparatively through time to review changes that may have occurred (Saldana, 2013). The interpretation of the codes and themes was then carried out to provide meaning, coherence and linkage of the results to answer the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Findings - Positive youth development in relation to the growth of resilience in Firdaus' life resulting in him developing motivation to learn more soft skills to thrive in life may be the result from the ecological system he grew up in which was supported by the three synergistic protective factors below; as well as the traumatic life turning points he experienced.

Religiosity and Spirituality

Faith works as a stronger protective factor that successfully help children adapt and cope with life adversities in some cultures than in others (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). In Firdaus' case, religiosity and spirituality teachings from very young appears to have developed his resilience. In the integrated secondary school he went to after he lost his sight, he felt so sad about how the other blind students were treating him. However, he did not confide in his mother or his teacher like when he did when he was in primary school. Instead, he cried and confided in God and faith pulled him through his difficulties.

Parental Discipline

It may be surprising that a high discipline environment which Firdaus experienced in his childhood, with power assertion and physical punishments being meted out, is considered a protective factor in his life. Grusec, Danyliuk, Kil, and Neill (2017) had explained that parents with a low socioeconomic status tend to exert more controlling discipline methods to ensure the child's safety as they come from risky environments, and strict obedience is crucial. However, there appears to be no trauma detected in Firdaus' stories about the physical punishments meted out on him. Instead, he expresses that he is what he is today because of his mother's discipline methods which mainly used power assertiveness.

Care and Support

Firdaus exhibits unconditional love for parents, especially his mother, due to the sacrifices she made for her children. With his upbringing of strong religious teachings, he believes that he will receive from God what he gives to his parents, be it happiness or sadness. He mentioned that his university degree and his achievements at his job are all because of their prayers for his success.

Life Turning Points

The turning points in his life which were (1) the extreme adversity of becoming blind when he was a teenager; and (2) when his reserved father had an outburst; may have been the catalysts of his current achievements.

Keywords: Underprivileged, resilience, soft skills, life story, narrative inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS

Firdaus' achievements in life due to his resilience and other soft skills may be attributable to a strong ecological system comprising of religious and spiritual teachings, parental discipline, and care and support. These findings are in line with the Bronfenbrenner ecological theory on human development which focuses on how a child's environment influences his development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), as well as the Resilience Theory that centres on positive youth development by enhancing protective factors through the understanding of individuals' interactions with their social ecologies, rather than reducing exposure to risk (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Substantially difficult life trials which present themselves in the already challenging life of the underprivileged filled with adversity appeared to have produced highly positive results, on condition that the protective factors within the ecological system are strongly experienced. This study also challenges the understanding of negative impact of power assertion in parental discipline highlighted in various other studies which results in short term compliance, with no long term value internalisation. However, research found that cultural differences are important to be taken into consideration, because if the discipline and punishment mete out is seen by the child to be normative, fair, and a sign of effort and care by the parent to teach the child values; the effect of the parental discipline is generally positive (Grusec et al., 2017). The findings from this study give rise to new questions which may be answered with more qualitative studies done on the underprivileged in Malaysia, to guide the government and other interested parties on potential methods and initiatives to build resilience and motivation to learn more soft skills in the underprivileged for them to thrive in life.

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