Striving Towards Independent Living: The Trials and Tribulations of Institutionalised Adolescents in Malaysia

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how five institutionalised Malay adolescents used adaptive strategies towards independent living upon being released from welfare institutions. Five 17-year-old Malay Muslim adolescents, three males and two females, were recruited via purposive sampling for a focus group discussion to gather insights into their plans and strategies to cope with life challenges after being released from their respective welfare institutions. Thematic analysis of the FGD data extracted six themes that portrayed the adolescents' adaptive strategies for facing challenges in life. The themes include making personal preparations, acquiring personal strengths, setting a career direction, exploring the support of friends and outsiders, feeling of being complete, searching for personal necessities and having a sense of responsibility. The findings highlight the need for developing a comprehensive life skills intervention for institutionalised adolescents and psychoeducation counselling modules to alleviate the adolescents' uncertainties in going through the adjustment phase outside welfare institutions.

Keywords: *Institutionalised adolescents, life's challenges, psychosocial support, group counselling, Malaysian welfare institutions*

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysia Child Act (2001) defines a child as an individual below 18 years old. Under this act, children who face abandonment, negligence, abuse, threats, and other unsafe conditions (or adult offences) are protected by the government (i.e., by the Social Welfare Department). Children falling victim to such offences will be removed from their guardians or parents and sent to a safe place in any of the government's welfare institutions. This will be done by the order of the court. The Act further rules that the affected children will be assigned to a welfare institution or placed under the care of qualified individuals for a period of time specified by the court or until they reach 18 years of age. Children without any trace of parental information or whereabouts shall stay at their designated welfare institutions throughout their childhood years until they are eligible to leave at 18.

Records show that from 2013 to June 2018, the number of children abandoned by their parents or family members increased by the thousands, indicating a significant rise in cases of parental neglect and abandonment, and highlighting the pressing need for intervention and support in child welfare efforts. According to the statistics released by the Social Welfare Department, the number of abandonments increases year on year—from 1,836 cases in 2013 to 2,035 in 2014 to 2,236 cases in 2015, and 2,547 in 2016. A slight decrease was identified in 2017 with 2,389 cases and in 2018 with 1,318 cases. In 2021, the reported cases were 6,144, which further increased to 6,770 in 2022. As of August 2023, the official number recorded by the Social Welfare Department was 5,200 (Tan et al., 2023). This growing pattern of child abandonment in Malaysia is visualized in Figure 1 *(Note: No statistics could be obtained for 2019 and 2020)*:

Figure 1

Number of Children Abandoned by Parents or Guardians
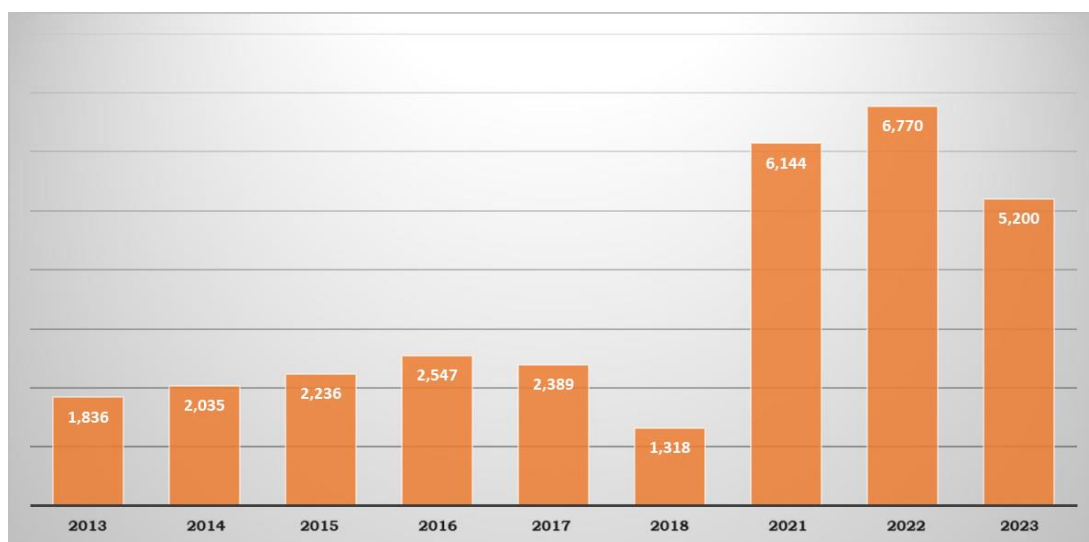
(Source: Social Welfare Department Malaysia)

The experience of staying in a welfare institution throughout their childhood period for some adolescents may not be the same as those staying outside. Spending most of their childhood bound by the system can significantly impact adolescents' growth. Growing up in

circumstances where they must comply with the rules and regulations of the system deprives them of their freedom. Adolescents in welfare institutions will be released from the institution to start living the life they wish for upon exiting the institution. However, transitioning from a sheltered life to independent living, from a sociological perspective, necessitates adolescents to define their personal roles and replace them with more favourable ones (Ebaugh, 1988). The transition-out phase will be experienced by adolescents as they exit from welfare institutions once they reach 18 years old. This is referred to as "emerging adult" phase. "Emerging adults" refer to individuals who are undergoing a challenging transition from late adolescence to early adulthood (Arnett, 2007).

The children and adolescents residing in Malaysia's welfare institutions are those who have gone through unfortunate events, including abuse, neglect and abandonment by their biological parents or guardians and this is worrying. Past studies have shown that adolescents who grew up in welfare institutions displayed a number of worrying patterns. For instance, they displayed complex and unpredictable traits (Awang et al., 2004), had poor academic achievement and slow progress in biopsychosocial growth (Jan & How, 2015), acted in ways that indicated a disturbed psychological wellbeing (Mat Min & Tengku Jewa, 2015), and possessed limited information and knowledge (Kuldas et al., 2015). They also frequently encountered negative interpersonal interactions with others (Raj & Raval, 2013). Also, it was found that the level of wellness among female adolescents in the institutions was only average (Jusoh et al., 2020). Furthermore, on the issue of access to academic resources, they were found to lack not only teacher support and guidance, but also access to equal academic opportunities and learning facilities (Awal et al., 2023). In this case, it is seen that although protection and welfare were provided, psychosocial support was found missing in the lives of institutionalised adolescents.

Apart from the personal and biological developmental issues identified, children and adolescents residing in welfare institutions encounter additional challenges, including exposure to negative communication styles. These may involve being subjected to verbal insults, belittlement through sarcasm, and humiliation, all of which are normally practiced by caretakers of the welfare homes to shape and influence their attitudes toward positivity. Research indicates that institutionalised adolescents often experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress during initial counselling sessions (Mat Min & Tengku Jewa, 2015). Other studies have also noted a lack of social support among adolescents residing in institutions (Manaf & Mokhtar, 2016). In summary, these concerns underscore the critical need to provide appropriate guidance for adolescents, ensuring that they do not feel isolated as they navigate their new lives outside institutional settings.

The transitioning-out process presents another challenge for institutionalised adolescents. Those who will undergo this transition may feel overwhelmed and unprepared for the unexpected situations they must navigate independently as they prepare to face the world alone.

In the United States, adolescents who exit state care often experience unstable living arrangements, engage in unlawful activities, lack educational opportunities (Anderson, 2003), face financial constraints (Rodriguez, 2013), and have limited access to learning experiences (Stunkard, 2013). Issues among adolescents facing difficulties with permanent housing were associated with social and behavioural issues, sexual activities, unlawful conduct, and dropout cases while in care (Fowler et al., 2009). Santee (2013) depicted that challenges related to moving out of the state institution occur mostly during the middle of the transition phase and

this requires alternative care and other appropriate interventions for the adolescents to remove the obstacles. In terms of psychosocial aspects, adolescents who are out of the welfare institution system tend to experience unpleasant situations, including anxiety, insecurity, short-term relationships, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate health care support, mental illness diagnosis, imprisonment, substance abuse and unwanted pregnancy (Sandy, 2007; Legere-Branch, 2017; Portwood et al., 2018). Similar to situations in the Western context, children in welfare care systems in China were reported to have comparably negative effects on wellbeing (Xu, 2020). Moreover, adolescents from the institutional care disclosed facing difficulties in career planning and job seeking for independent living. They coped with these distresses by choosing to withdraw themselves from society (Liu et al., 2020).

Reviews from several works of literature showed that adolescents who left welfare institutions often demonstrate flexibility and persistence, albeit in complex ways, when building rapport (Parry & Weatherhead, 2014). Additionally, issues of personal adjustment, identity confusion, deprivation of resources and early return to welfare institutions (Schoenewald, 2016) were reported. Adolescents were also found to have vague ideas about setting plans for living, pursuing education and managing finances after leaving welfare institutions (Lemus et al., 2017). Interestingly, adolescents staying in the cared-for institution were perceived to be fast learners and enter the "instant adulthood" phase quicker than their counterparts (Hyde & Kammerer, 2008). Still, due to the struggles they experienced throughout the years in welfare institutions, the adolescents are prone to being involved in at-risk behaviours, including substance abuse, homelessness, joblessness, mental illness, early out-of-wedlock pregnancies, restricted education, and imprisonment (Collins, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; McMillen & Jayne, 1999; Reilly, 2003). Despite having numerous programmes, the adolescents seem to be struggling to adjust to the new adventure of life outside the cared-for system that they used to live in.

Issues among adolescents in welfare institutions often revolve around identity development, self-concept, and character building. Welfare homes for institutionalised female adolescents were found to be offered with a mentor to assist them in dealing with personal and psychological issues like adjustment, loss, personal development, self-esteem, and anger management (Heindel, 2011). A study involving African adolescents revealed that they wished for quality mentors who were able to offer them resources and support throughout their transition process into independent living. (Munson et al., 2010). These situations showed the need for transitioning interventions that include elements of decision-making opportunities and life skills courses to empower their readiness (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021). Likewise, adult guidance is expected to provide institutionalised adolescents with emotional support and strengths to venture out of negative episodes in welfare institutions (Neal, 2017). Additionally, emotional dysregulation, mental disorders and maladaptive coping were experienced by institutionalised adolescents (Bashliden & Lafmejani, 2023). Limited self-worth and depressive symptoms were shown among institutionalised adolescents as compared to adolescents living outside institutions (Thapa, 2020).

For a positive transitional process to take place, several factors are considered to be helpful. The ecological factors that could make the transition successful need to consider adolescents with maturity in age, strong individual criteria reachable support, tertiary education opportunities, administrative support on documentation, and approachable policymakers (Duta, 2018). These would help adolescents have adequate plans and alternatives when they are struck with unexpected demands on their lives. The factors mentioned above could be included in the group process between a group of adolescents and counsellors. The module and

activities related to the ecological factors mentioned previously could be done in series with role-play sessions at medium to gain insight. Participating in the activity in group counselling contributed to pleasant experiences, the group disclosed platform being heard, supported, and skills building (Pingitore, 2015). Group counselling using existential approach has included elements of helping and meaning-making for the adolescents to share their distressing concerns and overwhelming feelings within therapeutic environment. The therapeutic elements discussed were emphasised in the *usrah* (religious study circle) and *shura* (meeting or discussion) that instilled Islamic values in the content of discussion. The goal of the group work on this study is to support the adolescents in their independent living process after being released from their protection order. This research also aimed to utilise group work with targeted adolescents to explore their plans and strategies to lead life and cope with the potential challenges when they start the independent living phase. The objective of this study is related to the Islamic teaching that is highlighted in *Surah Dhuha* verse 9 which warns the followers not to take advantage of the orphans but to facilitate their true discovery in this world.

Lack of focus in this area may underscore the necessity of interventions and psychological support in addressing stress-related concerns among these adolescents (Eljo et al., 2021). They are susceptible to mental illness too if personal needs and life satisfaction are overlooked (Sahad et al., 2022). Comprehensive support is needed to prevent them from experiencing long-term psychological effects (Ali & Shaffie, 2021). Henceforth, for the adolescents to enter another chapter in life, it is essential to discover the adolescents' preparation and strategies to cope with upcoming life difficulties.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This phenomenological inquiry explores the insights and experiences of five institutionalised adolescents in a Malaysian welfare institution regarding their journey towards independent living. Specifically, the study intends to understand the supports and strategies of the institutionalised adolescents to equip themselves with coping skills when facing life challenges when they live on their own after court order as they reach 18 years old.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A phenomenological approach was used as the design for this research. It aims to gather phenomena experienced by participants which allows the study to better understand the issues (Creswell, 2007). Researchers intended to explore plans and strategies of adolescents on how they arrange their lives when they live on their own, what approaches to take if they are confronted with problems and whom to refer to get support and advice.
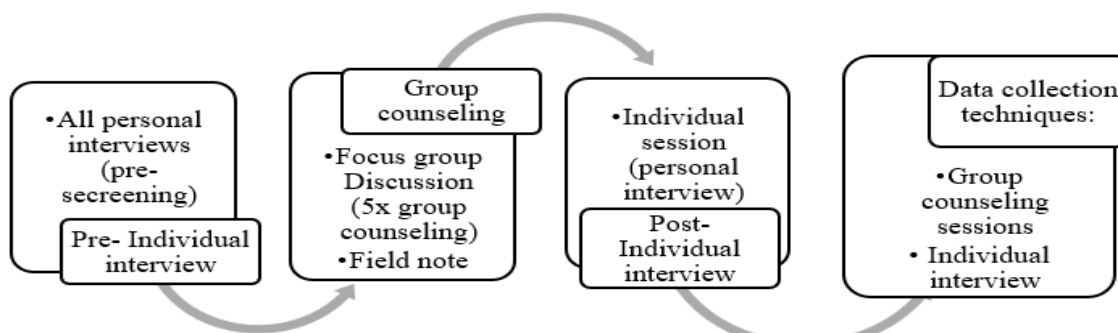
Participants and Participant Selection

Five Malay Muslim adolescents, aged 17, provided data for the study. Their specific demographic characteristics are given in Table 1. The purposive sampling criteria used for this study include participants who were in court order under Malaysia Child Act 2001 (31) (1)(a) Act 31 due to being neglected and abandoned when they were found. The following displayed the profile of participants set as criteria for selection for the recruitment process.

Table 1

Participants' Profile

Participants	Gender	Sibling	Citizenship	Duration of stay at Welfare institution	Personal Information (Parents and schooling)
M1	Female	Two brothers	Malaysian	13 years	Completed both her primary and secondary schooling. Mother has died and father was untraceable
A1	Male	None	Malaysian	17 years	Completed both his primary and secondary schooling. Parental whereabouts and information were untraceable
FK1	Male	None	No record of citizenship (no document found)	17 years	He has not completed his primary and secondary schooling. Both of his parents' information was untraceable
F1	Female	None	Malaysian	17 years	Completed both his primary and secondary schooling. Parents' whereabouts and information were untraceable
D1	Male	None	Malaysian	17 years	Completed both his primary and secondary schooling. Parents' whereabouts and information were untraceable

Data Collection: Focus Group Discussion

Five group counselling sessions that acted as focus discussions were held with the participants. They were recruited as they are approaching the age of 18 years old. The participants are no longer considered children according to Malaysia Child Act 2017, and court protection order had been lifted by then. The focus group discussion was conducted in the specified room with group discussion setting a few months before they were released. Group counselling facilitated researchers to gain in-depth information from the participants regarding their experiences living in the institution and allowed participants to share experiences they felt comfortable with. The researchers, who were registered counsellors, briefed the participants regarding the goals of the group counselling and research process which were held concurrently with the group activities. The researchers introduced the activities and invited the participants to participate with it. Figure 1 illustrates the procedures for data collection from the pre-individual interview phase until the post-individual interview phase.

Figure 1

Data Collection Procedures

The FGDs concentrated on the discovery of their overall concerns and planning and strategies to cope with challenges of upcoming independent living. Researchers processed the product activities together with the participants as they completed the activities. Participants' product activities were collected as researchers' personal records and discussions with participants were recorded using audio recording devices. As sharing of experiences may trigger psychological vulnerability among participants, researchers paid attention to any signs or symptoms displayed by participants throughout the interview process.

FGD Protocol

The FGDs were guided by semi-structured interview protocols shown in Table 2.

Table 2

FGD Protocol

Main Questions	Probes
1. What efforts have you made to prepare yourself for independent living?	Can you elaborate further on preparation that you mentioned before?
2. How do you plan to start your new life afterwards?	What types of necessities should you have in your new life?
3. What are your plans to make the transition process successful?	What kind of plans do you have for home, finances, medicine, and education?
4. What are your career goals and aspirations upon venturing into career life?	What job would you venture into later? How do you sustain that job and select better one later?

Table 2

(continued)

Main Questions	Probes
4. What skills do you have to help yourself achieve your career goals?	Do you have other skills or potential that can be bonus for you to get your dream job?
5. What are your strategies to handle and deal with challenges during transition phase?	If you face problems in life, how do you want to deal with them and with whom will you be seeking advice from?
6. How would you find the courage to fulfil your basic needs for stable living once you are outside the place?	How do you make sure that you eat every day and stay protected later?

Data Analysis

The study generated the emerging themes and sub-themes for data analysis using thematic analysis. Significant responses extracted from the participants sharing were recorded, grouped, categorised, and coded. The thematic analysis approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) involved six key steps; familiarising oneself with the material, coding the data, generating themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and summarising the findings. Researchers made effort to familiarise with the data by reading it thoroughly after data collection was conducted. Data was read thoroughly for better understanding, codes were generated using meaningful keywords, phrases, and/or sentences that reflected the perspectives, ideas, views and concepts. Themes were searched via compilation of codes. These were placed together to form primary themes by recognising the resemblances of codes. The secondary tool for this research employed field notes in which analysis of the data would also appear in the analysis using themes extracted from pictures of the participants' descriptions during the focus group discussion and researchers' personal notes. The themes and sub themes from the participants' responses were reviewed by experts before it was finalised.

Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

The rigour and accuracy of the FGD data were ascertained through member checking (Lincoln & Guba,1985). The researcher assisted participants on how to process their input and products from the group counselling with the creations that they made in the group activities. A brief personal interview was conducted to ask related questions not shared with the others and to double-check the input discussed by participants during the focus group discussion (Leung, 2015). The findings of this research are discussed based on the overview of the adolescents throughout the group counselling.

Ethical Consideration and the Researcher's Role.

The participants were thoroughly briefed about the research, and their agreement to participate in the research was sought by getting their signatures on consent forms for permission to be interviewed. The participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any time during the research. The researcher acted as the group counselling leader and interviewer for the focus group discussion and for the brief interview (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researchers, who hold a position as registered counsellors also provided emotional support to ease the participants' distress should there be signs of distress during the focus group discussion.

FINDINGS

The institutionalised adolescents who will venture into independent living need to have strategies and plans to maintain a balanced lifestyle. The researchers found that the adolescents had proposed strategies of their own which they set in facing life challenges. Among the plans and strategies were equipping oneself with preparation, acquiring personal strengths, setting career direction, exploring friends' and outsiders' supports, developing the feeling of being complete, searching for personal necessities and having a sense of responsibility. These were the themes generated.

Theme one: Self-preparation for leaving

Thinking of themselves, the participants disclose ways to be taken afterward for themselves and for those they care about. Sacrificing for siblings was shared by M1 since she was the one who had siblings to look after. Besides caring for others, the participants also shared their awareness of health and intrinsic motivation as part of the preparation they had for independent living.

a) Self-care awareness

Getting healthy was discussed by participants in group activities as part of their plans to live independently. A1 and M1 shared their strategy to remain healthy when they face any health issues in life. This approach is also regarded as the "healing and treatment strategy" an example of which is when they catch a fever or face a stressful situation.

> *"…I will make myself relax, drink, sit and pray, wash my face…" (A1, 460)*

> *"to make sure I'm healthy, I have to work out. If I'm down with fever, I will go to the clinic alone…" (M1, 49)*

Self-care and health awareness were essential for them to have a healthy mind and body. M1 and A1 believed that self-awareness was valuable in understanding their readiness of taking care of themselves whenever they feel unfit or experience health issues.

b) Intrinsic motivation

The internal motivation of the participants came from their inner drive to pursue something for themselves and their loved ones. M1 and A1 mentioned having determination in themselves to achieve justice and success. As such this internal drive it helps them arrange for their independent living. Additionally, finding a long-lost parent has become a source of motivation for M1 when she leaves the institution.
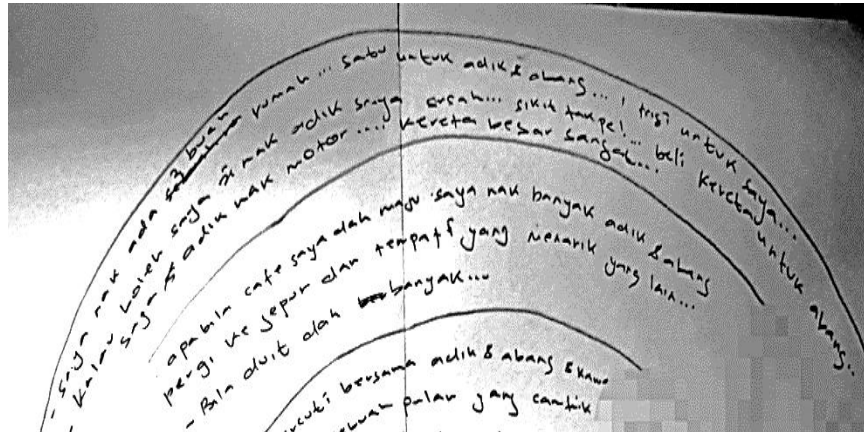
*"My source of encouragement is myself. Because I believe in myself only" (M1, 318)*

"I want to stand up for justice..." (A1, 491)

"When I succeed later, I want to go and find my father to complete the love..." (M1, 515)

The unique criteria of these participants was their intrinsic motivation to achieve or do something. M1 showed that her motivation was associated with herself and family members while A1's internal motivation was to participate in society by engaging in the community.

C) Caring for others

M1 highlighted her plan to focus on and pay attention to her life and her siblings as part of her strategy for living independently. She planned to go on a vacation with her siblings to capture some happy moments and prepare a comfortable life for them when she is released later.
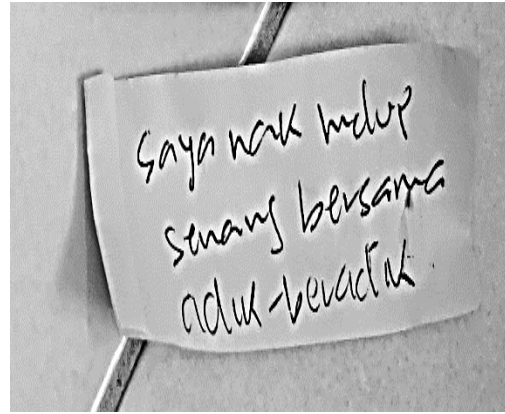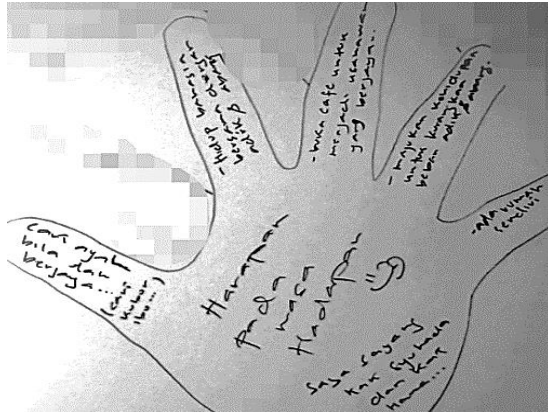
"...I feel worried thinking of my siblings until I cannot focus on my work. They will not be with me for 24 hours but I need to know their activities at least. If I have started thinking of them, I cannot do my work, I feel distracted…" (M1, 302)

"...my ambition is to go out with siblings only. To be happy with them…" (M1, 513)

"I want to provide them with convenient life. If they intend to continue studying I could help" (M1, 286)

M1 discussed mainly her efforts for her siblings as she has no other family members left. Caring for her siblings and preparing comfortable accommodations for them is her ultimate goal.

Theme two: Personal strengths

Living in a welfare institution has earned the adolescents a bonus point in that they have acquired a special unique character which is to persevere and be able to bounce back from any challenges. Living on their own without close guidance from biological parents has made them strong inside and out. The following are the further elaborations of personal strengths acquired by the participants.

a) Positive attitude

Remaining positive about life according to the participants was essential in helping them face any challenges. It is the key to healthy living and also provides a greater chance for positive feelings to thrive. Having positive value and being grateful have been mentioned by A1, FK1, and D1 on their aims for independent living when they leave the welfare institution.
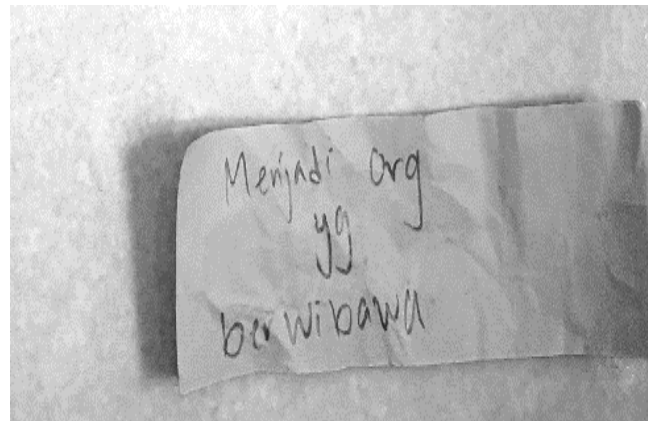
"...I like internal beauty. For me, a nice house represents us..." (A1, 169)

"If I have my hand phone, later I will call the officers and say thanks for taking care of all of us..." (FK1, 191)

"Others acceptance of me could be a little bit hard if they know my experience. I hope they can accept me positively..." (D1, 521)

Sustaining the internal beauty will reflect one's own personality and surroundings according to A1 and being grateful to others was mentioned by FK1 and D1, which is how they would behave when they are living outside on their own. The sense of being appreciative towards people or things and having positive attitudes seemed to be the ideal value that they would like to instil in themselves when leading life in community later.

b) Mature thinking

In terms of age, the participants were considered older adolescents and ideally, they required more guidance and support. However, throughout the discussion they highlighted that they aimed to improve their interpersonal relationships with others through positive communication skills and thoughtful decision-making.

"...I have to seek skills, and then my relationship with others is through communication. If I have problem with others, I need to solve it properly..." (M1, 24)

Being thoughtful was discussed by the participants in terms of how they should mingle and connect with society.

Theme three: Career direction

Career path is another point of concern in the focus group discussion by the participants in setting for their independent living. The participants focused mainly on their planning for a career wherein role models and personal values became the sources of motivation for them to realise their career interests.

a) Role model to inspire

    Having role models may differ from having a coach. Role models gave a deeper sense of inspiration for the participants to achieve their dreams and to pursue their interests. Becoming a great footballer like the legendary Malaysian footballer was shared by FK1 whose dream was to be a football player.

> *"...I want to be like Mokhtar Dahari who had brought Malaysia team to Asia World Cub and Olympic. My idol is Mokhtar Dahari..." (FK, 262-264)*

To be like a legendary figure required hard work for FK1, thus proper career planning and requirements should be prepared accordingly for him to realise this interest.

b) Personal values

    Another point to consider when planning for a career is having strong values in oneself. FK1 and A1 mentioned that among their values for careers were to make Malaysia proud and be able to provide help for others.

> *"Now I'm trying to prove that I could make Malaysia proud" (FK1, 266)*

> *"...I want to be successful, worship Allah, become actively involved in police team...to assist others to achieve their ambition ..." (A1, 460)*

> *"...to play football is my ambition. Who knows one day I'll make Malaysia proud" (FK1, 260)*

> *"I don't know how I can manage this country, the citizen. I want to be successful only" (A1, 496)*

Having strong values for a career will usually drive the individual in their job, especially in terms of planning, direction, and decision-making.

Theme four: Friends and professional support

The participants shared their intention to seek help from those they knew, if they were faced with any difficulties when they start to live independently later. They believed that they will need other's help for better ideas and solutions in resolving their issues.

   a) *Friends*

      D1 and M1 mentioned asking for help from their group of friends staying outside the institution whenever they faced difficulty in life.
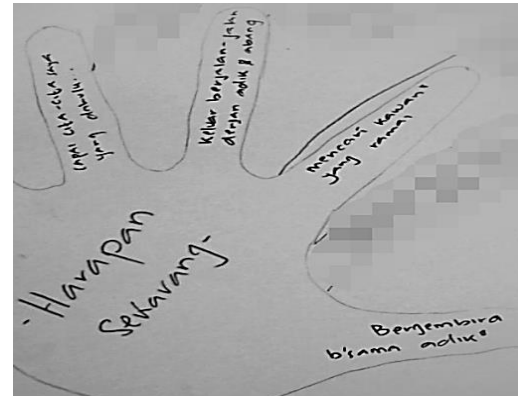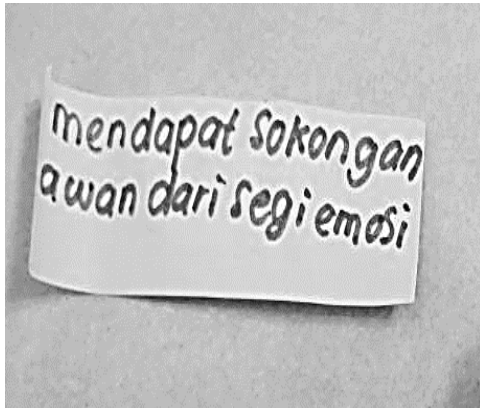

> *"if we live in the same house, I'll call out to my friends if I have problems…" (D1, 190)*

> *"…I feel stressed when I compete with others…but I will be happy if I could disturb others. But when I started to disturb my friends, they will eventually ask me to teach them instead, so I'm okay with that…" (M1, 372)*

b) Professionals

      Aside from friends who rendered help to the participants, they mentioned having to reach out to outsiders or professionals with whom they are close. Among those are the board of visitors (ALP) from the welfare institution namely the mosque community, dentists, and lecturers. These are the professionals who have come to the welfare institution to provide support in terms of giving ideas, providing discussion, funds and academic support whenever needed. On the same notes, teachers at school were also categorised as professionals according to participants.
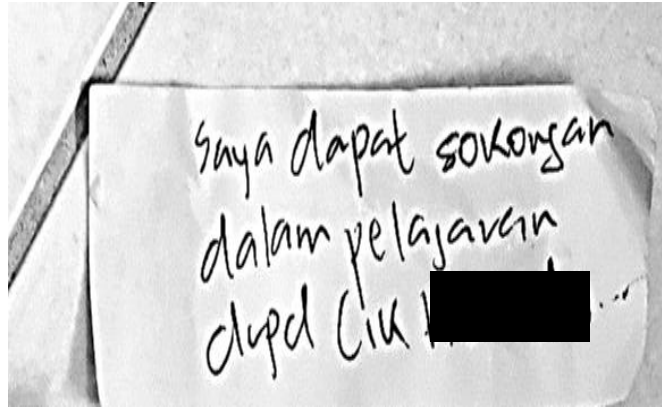
"Teachers give good support" (D1, 495)

"Haji will always be with us…haji often takes us out together…" (F1, 469)

"Haji will teach me but if haji is not available, I can meet cikgu. Cikgu S, our school teacher. Cikgu S said if I get into trouble, to go and find her" (M1, 340)

"…teacher S asked me to find house worth below one thousand or below 800. She will help look for a house to rent for me if I can't find one…" (M1, 344)

However, little was mentioned about seeking help from the caseworker or institution's caregivers by the participants should they be in a challenging situation when they live outside on their own.

Theme five: Feeling complete

The participants intended to feel complete by having a significant one in their lives. The significant ones are seen as the main source of support for them once they are out of the welfare institution. The participants mentioned that their initial intention was to gather with their family members and then find someone new to complete their life as a family.

a) Reunite with family

In the discussion, FK1 and M1 shared their hopes to find their parents. The intention to search for their long-lost parents would make them feel complete and by knowing their parents' whereabouts and well-being would make them feel that they have a family to which they belong to.
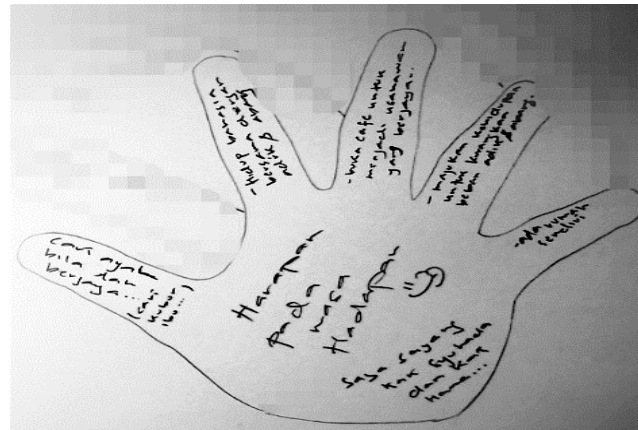
> *"...I want to have a father, mother and so pray for me that I could meet my mother. Or the parents of my partner. To have a family..." (FK1, 91)*
>
> *"...my future hope is to find my father and my mother's grave. To live happily with my siblings..." (M1, 513-515))*

To have a family and to be happy with them were part of the participants' plans throughout the independent living journey. They placed high hopes on being reunited with their parents and they planned to search for them and meet their immediate family members once again.

b) Getting married

Additionally, the participants discussed planning to get married so that they could complete their lives with someone as their spouse. FK1, F1, and D1 mentioned that getting married could give them the feeling of happiness and being surrounded by those who could love and care for them is essential.

> *"…I plan to get married because I have a mature and quick thinking. I want to have a family, to have my kid, a family. I could not experience the feeling having a family here…"*
> *(FK, 91)*

> *"My dream is to have a family… a partner" (F1, 426)*

> *"I want to get married, to have a happy marriage" (D1, 504)*

Feeling happy as a family member was the ultimate goal the participants aimed for. This is due to the lack of warmth and affection from their own biological parents and family members during their growing up years in the institution. Thus, they have set the expected criteria during group discussion to form a family of their own as part of their strategies. D1, F1, and FK1 shared their expectations to form a happy family with their preferred partner.

> *"I hope one day I could have a husband that can clique with my siblings just like how close I'm with them…" (M1, 348)*

> *"among the criteria of my wife are that she must be capable to earn money, doesn't matter how much she earns, most importantly the money is from the right source. The second criteria are she needs to be disciplined with her prayer, 5-time prayers, and wearing face cover. And then she must be brave and bold…" (A1, 240-241)*

> *"I want a kind wife and be skilful in football. I want an active wife who doesn't sit at home just to eat and sleep only, eat some…" (FK1, 237)*

Forming a family with a partner who could fulfil the expected criteria was shared by the participants in the group session. For instance, the highest criteria set by participant A1 about married life is that his partner should comply with religious guidelines. The participants on the whole, mainly focused on criteria such as having positive attitudes, spiritual values and understanding to be present in an individual, suitable to be part of their life later.

Theme five: Personal expenditure

Preparation for personal necessities was discussed as part of the planning and strategies of the participants. According to them, this involves attitude on spending and travel expenditure. They have to make strategies on how to fulfil their needs for future independently living based on their own affordability and spending attitude.

a) Wise spending

Preparing budgets every month was emphasised by A1 and FK1. They believed that they should have adequate money for themselves and their future partner. They emphasised giving priority to the most basic needs before buying other necessary things for themselves.

> *"When I'm outside, I have to have enough money to support myself and my partner. To use the money whenever necessary…" (A1, 245)*

> *"I'll manage my money wisely and before buying anything, I'll decide which things that I want. I would put it in the list but I seldom use the list, I would think of what I need to buy first ..." (A1, 247)*

> *"We need to put more effort and continue with work to earn money for living. And to fulfil the needs in life. Because I have started thinking about it now…" (FK1, 166)*

The participants believed that spending excessively would lead to a shortage of financial resources and may cause distress. They further shared that they spent wisely on their existing savings to fulfil their needs while living on their own later outside the welfare institution.

b) Leisure activities

The participants planned to go travelling to broaden their minds and knowledge about other places as well as to fulfil their wishes. Their movements are restricted while staying in welfare institutions and most of the time they stayed inside except when receiving invitations or getting funds from external parties to organise events outside the institution. They considered going abroad as a self-reward for them to find peace and leisure for themselves.

> *"...I hope I could travel across countries. I want to visit nice places and look at entertaining places that have many lights, songs, and leisure…" (D1, 521)*

> *"I wish to go for traveling" (F1, 436)*

> *"...one day when I become a boss, during a long vacation I will bring my friends for a holiday at a nice beach. I like the beach, it has a nice view that can calm my mind…" (M1, 515)*

> *"...I want to study hard so that I can go for a vacation to Korea or US. In Korea, I can visit Jeju Island and take pictures of the rivers, and sightseeing. I can also buy their products and shop over there…" (FK1, 517)*

Most of the time, there was a limited chance for them to go for travel or vacation on their own since they were bound by the system and rules. Thus, once they were released from the welfare

institution, the participants hoped to go out and have their own vacation fulfilling their wishes and at the same time fulfilling their curiosity about knowing other people's countries.

Theme six: Feeling responsible

The participants did mention that as part of their preparation for independent living, religious teachings do matter. Practicing religious acts and taking care of family play a bigger role in life. M1, A1 and F1 shared some expectations for independent living, that is meeting family members upon release from the welfare institution. This is driven by spiritual belief that they are holding to take up the responsibility to meet family members as soon as they ventured into outside life.

> *"...try to avoid problems in good ways... avoid someone who talks negatively about any matters. I'll investigate it first and my Ustaz always advised and tell me to investigate first before taking in (gossip) anything..." (A1, 460)*

> *"have a strong faith, complete the prayer... And then I would like him to be responsible and kind-hearted" (F1, 233)*

> *"...I will discuss with my brother that if our father is happy with his new family, we shall go back. If the father is alone then perhaps we could meet and greet him. If he no longer recognizes us, we should just accept fate. At least we would be able to see his face and know his condition. It is enough for us to live with just the three of us" (M1, 64)*

Gathering her family becomes the main M1's target. She considered her brothers to be her main responsibility after she had lost her parents. She voluntarily took up the parental role and set plans with her sibling to search for their long-lost father to reunite their family.

In sum, the findings of the group discussion elaborated on the aims of this study which focuses on the research questions that include the needs and concerns, plans and strategies of the participants. All these were closely related to how they perceived their living in the welfare institution as well as on strategies for their upcoming life outside the welfare institution.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand the transition process of the participants by identifying their general perspective about welfare institution, the knowledge, and skills they required, and the support or strategies involved in their planning for leaving the welfare institution later. The strategies that the adolescents had in mind to get ready for their independent living, involved feelings complete, attaining a career, increasing personal growth, and exploring help from others. These were shared as part of the preparation and strategies for their future lives. The expectations shared by the participants were deliberated with findings by Samuels and Pryce (2008) which stated that adolescents tend to become resilient in their lives to sustain safety and security while being outside in the town alone. Correspondingly, this aspect was discussed by

Kuldas et al. (2015) who indicated that adolescents without personal strengths and solid preparation will face physical, mental, and behavioural difficulties when they are out on their own. Arnett (2007) who coined the phrase "emerging adult", greatly emphasised that adolescents between the ages of 18 and 21 enter a phase that would require great responsibilities in life. Unlike normal adolescents, adolescents from welfare institutions are forced to enter the adulthood phase instantly. Thus, there is a high need for them to learn about living independently faster than others which is reflected in the transition process of the participants in this study.

Failure to plan indicates that we plan to fail. Adequate support and guidance are important for adolescents to keep up with challenges and set up strategies in life despite still being young. Mohammadzadeh et al. (2017) in their study recommended that the development of a module on life skills would yield fruitful results for adolescents in orphanage homes. This is to enable them to learn how to cope with challenges, hinder inappropriate substance abuse, avoid misconduct activities, and avoid involvement in unhealthy relationships.

Past studies mentioned that tertiary education and learning opportunities were indicated as the main aspects for the adolescents to be prepared for (Rodriguez, 2013; Stunkard, 2013). Having a quality mentor as a guide was correlated with previous research and having a supportive mentoring relationship will benefit the adolescents most (Munson et. al., 2010; Tracy, 2010). Various types of support were mentioned in previous studies including emotional support (Abd Manaf & Mokhtar, 2016), regulating skills for coping (Saim et al., 2013) and developing a positive meaning about life as a whole (Zakaria & Zulkifli, 2017). This study found that positive esteem developed within the participants. On the contrary, other studies have also found that adolescents faced difficult situations involving self-efficacy and efficacy were affected by the environment (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2017; Lehmann et al., 2013). Furthermore, siblings and friends in shelter homes acted as a source of motivation for them to cope with intense situations and emotional distress (Saim et al., 2013). Hence, the role of motivation and close supervision seemed to be positive factors for adolescents in enhancing their self-esteem while staying under protected and controlled care like that characterising welfare institutions.

Apart from that, research on role models and values for adolescents living in Malaysia's welfare institutions was found to be limited. Studies in the West highlighted the appropriateness of having alternative interventions to help adolescents experience a smooth transitional process and face challenges when they were outside (Santee, 2013). This could be advantageous if the welfare institution appoints a quality mentor and establishes a supportive mentoring relationship for the adolescents as part of buddy support system (Munson et al., 2010). To date, Malaysia has yet to devise a standard intervention for the adolescents before they leave welfare institutions.

CONCLUSION

Independent living preparation programmes in welfare institutions are in high demand to ease the dilemma of adolescents before the emancipation process. Such programmes can offer appropriate plans to enhance adolescents' readiness to face many aspects of life upon entering new adventures (Baranovich & Lau, 2016). Nurturing with good values and strong faith would be the recommended elements that would best be integrated in the programme apart from readiness alone (Haridi et al., 2020). In addition, the knowledge that they gather from the welfare institution can instil in them the personal motivation to excel in their studies and

achieve good results in academics during secondary school. Subsequently, the excellent result will assist them in meeting requirements for college or university admissions, hence becoming a stepping stone for their career path.

These findings have great implications on counselling practices and counsellors in charge of welfare institutions. For the counselling profession, the findings help to highlight the identified issues of the adolescents and subsequently initiate a group counselling or individual counselling intervention to support adolescents' transitional process upon reaching 18 years old. Secondly, policymakers from governmental departments would also benefit from this finding in that they can gather further understanding of the concerns, needs, support, and resources of the adolescents in fulfilling their lives inside and outside the welfare institution. Policymakers from the related religious department may establish further engagement with other governmental offices to facilitate programmes for adolescents on religious aspects of life. These include building a religious identity, inculcating morality, increasing spirituality as well as assisting in their psychological and social development. This would expand the self-awareness in preparing for a holistic life and facing challenges on their own.

This study focuses on phenomenological findings of this issue among adolescents upon leaving welfare institutions. It sought richness of data on individual experiences as well as shared concerns about the issue. However, the findings are not meant to be generalised to other populations. The modules set to mediate the group process for this research are used for data collection only, not for measurement or testing purposes. For future research, other research designs namely case study, action research, experimental study, longitudinal study and grounded study may be applied as they can be useful to highlight more issues and on the needful intervention for the adolescents in the welfare institution. The development of modules for social skills programmes and group activities programmes, or group counselling interventions could be tested and improvised and later turned into a manual for each welfare institution. This manual is to be followed and used for adolescents who are facing the transition process a year before leaving the welfare institution. To sum up, it takes a village to raise a child. Similarly, to assist adolescents to arrive to a positive developmental growth without the presence of their biological parents, is the community's and *ummah's* (society) job or responsibility. The community and *ummah* must lend a hand to support them in facing life challenges, acquiring adaptive coping skills, and in facilitating them with comprehensive preparation for independent living.

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