

Research Article

Purpose in Life among Thai Junior High School Adolescents

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Abstract

Purpose in life is a significant foundation of motivation and achievement that guides adolescents who live life with a positive viewpoint. This paper describes meanings of the purpose in life among Thai junior high school adolescents. Participants were 21 Junior high school adolescents aged between 14 and 15. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, and story writing in 2014. Colaizzi's approach was used to analyze and interpret the data. Four criteria for establishing trustworthiness, based on Lincoln and Guba, were used.

This study found that the participants described the meanings of purpose in life in three themes: a vision for their life, desire to follow their passion, and work toward achievement of life goals. It demonstrated that understanding purpose in life could encourage adolescents to think, plan, and discover their own approach to meet their specific life goals. The knowledge gained from the findings indicates that government, schools teachers and school nurses should encourage and guide adolescents to discover their own meaningful purpose in life.

Keywords: adolescent; junior high school; purpose in life

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of incredible growth, development, and optimism.¹ However, modernization and globalization, a progressive transition from a traditional to modern society and transformations in the world economy, families, and technology have brought both advantages and disadvantages that reshape the contexts of adolescents' lives.² Adolescents face many unique challenges in their developmental trajectories that lead them to be more stressed, have high rates of depression, and attempt suicide.³ A number of adolescents die prematurely from preventable causes such as accidents, suicide, violence, pregnancy-related complications and other

illnesses. An estimated 1.3 million adolescents died in 2015 mostly from preventable or treatable causes. Road traffic injuries were the leading cause of death in 2012 and other main causes of adolescent deaths include HIV, suicide, and interpersonal violence.⁴ Evidence shows that both psychological characteristics and stressful life events are contributory factors in deliberate self-harm among adolescent.⁵ In particular some adolescents are living in challenging conditions including poverty that may be associated with increased antisocial and decreased prosocial behaviors.⁶

Adolescents in Thailand are by no means immune from such challenges. There are an estimated

9,550.00 million Thai adolescents in the age range 10–19, which is about 13.66% of the total population. Approximately 35,000 young people aged 10–24 year olds were reported as being HIV infected in 2014.⁷ A survey of health risk behavior and related risk factors of 2,311 adolescents from Bangkok Thailand, found the prevalence of Bangkok youths' health risk behaviors to be moderate to high. The risk behaviors leading to traffic accidents were due to rarely or never having worn a seat belt (30.6%) or helmet while bicycling (66.9%) and while motorcycling (50.1%), riding with drivers who had consumed alcohol (18.8%), and driving after consuming alcohol (12.1%). For violence issue, the studied group carried weapons (8.5%) and has been involved in a violent event (31.5%). This study also found that although depression amongst Bangkok youths is lower than the depression rates recorded for the United States (28.3%). The prevalence of amphetamine use among Bangkok adolescents (37.8%) was higher than for U.S. adolescents (9.8%).⁸ One study among Thai adolescents found that negative life events had direct and indirect effects on suicide.⁹ It is interesting to note that the magnitude of health problems amongst adolescents, especially in Thailand, increase because of several issues. Adolescents having poor self-esteem or having poor performance in school were at higher risk. It was also found that social and environment problems, gang affiliation and loneliness were significant negative factors too. Adolescents from families of low socioeconomic status or those suffering from deterioration of family connectedness and parental addiction⁸ were also at significant risk. According to the World Health Organization³, every adolescent needs an effective strategy and long-term implications to flourish in both the health and well-being of the individual and for the society as a whole.² A strategy rarely if ever directly considered in contemporary education however is that of developing a positive and strong purpose in

life, and yet recent research suggest that cultivating a purpose in life could be an effective strategy to immunize youth from the threats of high risk behaviors and promote resilience.¹⁰

Purpose in life has been identified as an essential attribute of spirituality for adolescents in many countries¹¹, which in turn is associated with positive behaviors among young spiritual exemplars.¹² Purpose serves as an important source of long term motivation for adolescents.^{13–14} Purpose and goal orientation affect behavior in challenging situations and will influence the meaning attached to situations.¹⁵ They will have a number of positive outcomes such as high prosocial reasoning, active engagement¹⁴, moral commitment, achievement, and high self-esteem.¹⁶ Adolescent with meaning of life present good psychological health¹⁷ great life satisfaction¹⁸ and high self – esteem.¹⁹ In contrast, adolescents who lack a purpose and have a negative outlook on life more frequently engage in socially unacceptable or risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.²⁰ Therefore, purpose in life in an adolescent's life can be an essential concern to enhance their success and well-being.

However, little is known about the perception of meaning of the purposes in life amongst adolescents in general, in particular, adolescents in the Thai context. The perception of purpose in life may differ from person to person and situation to situation.¹⁷ The most significant influencing factors to adolescents' health and purpose are found in their environment including the family and social environment and relationships, schooling, and career orientation.^{2,13,21} The gap in this knowledge has led to the lack of guidance and support for interventions in the promotion and care for junior high school adolescents in Thailand. The aim of the present study is to have better understanding of the meaning of purpose in life among Thai junior high school adolescents.

The Research Objective

This study was aimed at describing the meaning of purpose in life among Thai junior high school adolescents.

Methods

Design: A qualitative research design based on phenomenology was employed to describe the experienced of purpose in life of general Thai junior high school adolescents. Phenomenology is a critical reflection on conscious experience and is designed to reveal the important invariant features of that experience.²²⁻²³

Setting: Data were obtained from 21 junior high school adolescents in Southern Thailand who enrolled in the urban public school; about 2,400 students were in grades 1 to 12 in a large city in Southern Thailand.

Ethical considerations: The Human Ethics Committee of Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand, granted approval for the study (No. 0521.1.05/164). Written consent was obtained from all participants and their parents/guardians. Each received a detailed explanation verbally and in writing outlining research aims and processes, participant involvement, interview methods, confidentiality/anonymity assurance and right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used when presenting their verbatim quotations in this paper. All participants and their parents/guardian signed consent agreements.

Participants: Participants were selected according to the following initial inclusion criteria: Thai nationality, aged 14 to 15 years, studying in junior high school grade 10, be able to communicate in the Thai language, and willing to participate in this study.

Data collection: Approval for the study was granted by the Human Ethics Committee of Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. Prior to the process of data collection, participants

were contacted by a teacher. The teacher described the objectives of the study to the junior high school students. After that the researchers gave further explanation regarding the study. The students who meet the initial inclusion criteria and wanted to participate in this study signed consent forms. Then the data collection process was performed. Every effort was made to ensure students felt comfortable with the researchers.

In conducting each interview, the researchers started with social talk and used two-way communication.²⁴ The initial interview was developed from the literature using broad open-ended questions. At the outset of the study, participants were approached with broad open-ended questions. For example, "Before and after school, what do you do each day?" "Have you ever heard the term "purpose in life"?" "What does purpose in life mean to you as an adolescent?" Probing questions also were posed to obtain more in-depth data and clarify understanding of each participant's explanations. For example, "Could you please tell me more what your purposes in life looks like?" Most interviews were audio-taped and each interview was transcribed verbatim. The time for each interview was scheduled at the convenience of participants. The duration of in-depth interviews generally ranged from 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a private place.

Interviews alone are not enough to understand the experiences of participants²⁵, therefore, in our study, we asked the participants to write a story about themselves including their lived experienced at school and home, and their life's purposes. Then we interviewed them about their way of life and who was involved in it. Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously and data continued until saturation when little new data could be generated.

Data analysis: A modified Colaizzi phenomenological approach was used to analyze the

data.²² The process of data analysis in fieldwork was carried out as follows. Firstly, all transcripts and stories were read thoroughly several times with a microscopic approach to understand them fully. Secondly, significant statements relating to the phenomenon under study were coded and extracted. Thirdly, the meaning of each the significant statements was formulated by the researcher based on interpretation of participants' transcripts and stories. Fourthly, the themes were clustered into three themes. Fifthly, the researchers integrated these three themes into an exhaustive description of meaning of purpose in life among Thai adolescents and illustrated the themes using verbatim quotations from interviews and stories. Lastly, the themes were taken back to the study participants to verify their accuracy based on their experience.

Establishing Trustworthiness: Four criteria for establishing trustworthiness, based on Lincoln and Guba, were used.²⁶ Credibility was pursued by prolonged engagement and member checking. Dependability was presented by investigator triangulation. Confirmability was accomplished through the inquiry audit of the process and the finding of the research. Transferability was established by providing rich descriptions.

Results

Participants

Participants included 14 females and seven males aged between 14–15 years. Eighteen participants were Buddhist and three were Muslim. Sixteen participants lived with their parents, three participants lived with their relatives (aunts and grandparents), and two participants lived with a single mother. At the time of data collection, participants reported a variety of employment status of their parents or guardians. The main occupations among the families participating in this study are general laborer for nine participants, three farmers, two government

employees, two grocers, and two goods sellers, one each had a parent who was a teacher, mechanic, and noodle restaurant owner. All participants received between 40–100 Baht/day (1–2.5 dollars/day) from their parents, mother, or relatives (aunts and grandparents). Two participants earned extra money from a part-time job (seller and worker at a golf club). All participants had been able to save money, including those who received only 1 dollar/day. This was partially due to the school providing free milk and lunch on a daily basis. Only nine participants had 3 meals per day, reasons for the lack of regular meals was not necessarily related to financial issues but rather having no time for breakfast or needing to lose weight. All participants were able to ride a motorcycle however, more than half of participants reported to rarely or never wearing a helmet. No participants reported any serious problems socially and were able to get along with peers and make friends relatively easily.

Meanings of purpose in life

This study reveals meaning of purpose in life and the significance of purpose in life from the experiences of the participants who were Thai junior high school adolescents. Purpose in life is an experience in perceiving their significance. Each participant's purpose in life occurs at different time and age. They described the meanings and significance of purpose in life in three themes.

Theme 1: A vision for their life

Many participants described the significance of having purpose in life and that having purpose in life was like having a vision in life. It was like a compass directing the way to move on. When they had a purpose in life, they knew what to do and what not to do. Having purpose in life provided a chance to plan their future and instill a quest to achieve it. They committed their assets to achieve their purpose. In addition, what was more important

was that life directions could be specified by each individual and hence, depended totally on oneself. It was discovered that life's future depended upon our self. Nid, a female participant who wanted be a member of the Navy Band, remarked:

Purposes in life are something everyone must have since they signify good future and show that we have plans for our good future... If we try and aim to achieve our goals, we will have good future as planned. For me, I want to be a member of the Navy Band so I have hope and intend to be what I want to be, to do what I want to do. This is good because it makes me concentrate on doing it for my good future.

Theme 2: Desire to follow their passion

Once the participants had purpose in life, it inspired them to think about their future and set a plan in motion to achieve it. Therefore, they described purpose in life in terms of the desire to follow their passion. Tum, a male participant, noted:

When we put our heart and soul into the process, the drive is to achieve good results and if we succeed, we feel proud of ourselves after facing the challenges and achieving our goals. If I really get to be an engineer, I will build a house for my family. I will concentrate on my study so as to achieve my goals because I love this profession and I will certainly succeed in doing it.

Although purpose in life could be changed and adapted as time passes, many participants described people with purpose in life as having a bright future. They felt that having purpose in life would make them have motivation to achieve their

individual goals despite the challenges they may face. Kung, a female participant, said:

Having purpose in life has an impact on my life. I am motivated and can plan for what to do or lay guidelines for my life appropriately... Having purpose in life affects my life. I can see.

Theme 3: Work toward achievement of life goals

Some participants perceived that purposes in life were related to achieving in life. They described the purposes in life in terms of the outcome. They described about their dream occupations such as mechanic, diplomat, soldier, police, nurse, dentist, and doctor and gave reasons why they were interested in those occupations. These included the desire to do what they love to do, the intention to help out their parents, society and their country as well as to cultivate pride and happiness for themselves and their beloved ones. Three participants wanted to be nurses because they perceived that nursing was a good and secure occupation and they could use their profession in caring for their parents and people around them. Pim, a female participant, wrote:

Having a goal to become a nurse is very meaningful to me. I can care for or treat myself, my parents, persons close to me and even mankind. Helping people is a way to make merit and build friendship. It can be done by anyone with mercy and intention... My goal came into existence since I was young... around Grade 4 when I visited my sister at the hospital... I saw the nurse smile and her smile made the patient happy, so I want to care for other people too.

Discussion

Purpose in life is the principal enthusiasm of life that is described as one's capacity to discover a sense of personal worthiness and purpose in life.²⁷ This study showed that the participants experienced purpose in life and had their own life's plan. This is supported by a previous study which concluded that meaning and purpose in life could make a difference to an individual's life. They could motivate a person to do something or shape his/her basic choices about how to live.^{13,16} A sense of purpose creates a sense of hope for better life, produces increased effort toward positive expectation for the future, and engage in prosocial behavior.⁶ Purpose in life diminished the relationship between poverty and antisocial behaviors for the youth because purpose acts as a buffer for the negative impact of poverty on youth and help them resist anti-social behavior.⁶

Participants in this study, who were aged 14-15 years, do have experience of purposes in life. Thus, this study supported the developmental characteristics of adolescence and young adulthood, which state that late adolescence is a period during the age of ~15-19 years of continued growth in capacity for abstract thought. At this phase in their life, adolescents develop a capacity for setting goals and an interest in moral reasoning, and think about the meaning of life.¹ This confirms existing literature in the areas of adolescent goal content which shows that adolescents report personal goals in a variety of life domains.²⁸ Therefore, it is significant to note that the stakeholders should pay attention to this group of people and motivate them to experience purpose in life. It is a great time to nurture holistic health promotion, in particular purpose in life.

The participants in this study described purposes in life in the three meanings: purpose in life was a vision for their life, desire to follow their passion, and work toward achievement of life goals. They had positive experiences with purpose

in life and see the beneficial consequences of realizing purpose in life. The findings are consistent with the definition of purpose in life depicted by Damon et al.¹⁶ as a goal of sorts, a part of one's personal search for meaning, and always directed at an accomplishment toward which one can make progress. Their purpose in life serves as a significant motivation for achievement. Purpose in life represents a guiding direction toward a personally meaningful ultimate purpose, an intentional action and active engagement to achieve a long term goal, and a desire to make a contribution to oneself, others, and society.¹³ Furthermore, the purpose was positively associated with self-esteem, hopefulness, education aspirations, altruism, academic achievement, and mental and physical health.^{16,29}

Once the participants experienced purpose in life that reflected in their sense of self-worth, they could visualize positive consequences in their life. Having inner strength and realizing self-value and self-worth is one of the significant conditions that enhance purpose in life.³⁰⁻³¹ Having low self-esteem is directly correlated with depression.³² A previous study showed that adolescents with existential well-being and who were focused on their future believe that life contains some purpose and perceived life to be a positive experience and present lower trait anxiety.¹¹ Importantly, our results show that gratitude towards the benefit of others and responsibilities to society are linked to purpose in life, nurture positive feelings, encourage and generate feelings of hope and good study behavior that is unique in the Thai culture. Participants in this study were poised to enact lives of purpose for matter beyond themselves. These customs are induced by Thai culture including the sense of gratitude.^{13,33-34} Therefore, it is worthy for the adolescents and the society if the stakeholders pay attention to maintain this culture and custom found in Thai adolescents. Based on these results, the participants will have

an existential well-being, positive outlook on life and not engage in antisocial behaviors because of their experienced of purpose in life. They will have an opportunity to project their positive life that is not only beneficial for the adolescent, but also for others and society in general.

Implications

Purpose in life encouraged the adolescents to plan the direction of their goals and search for ways to achieve them. Therefore, the stakeholders in particular the Thai Government, school teacher, and school nurse should launch a program to enhance purpose and develop life prospects for adolescent.

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