

# LEARNING THROUGH TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

**Khuan Wai Bing, Omar Abdull Kareem, Shahril @ Chahril Marzuki**  
Faculty of Management and Economics  
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris  
khuan.wb@fpe.upsi.edu.my

## **Abstract**

In Malaysia's life long learning effort and policy to help working adults, a leadership development program was designed to help beginning and incumbent headteachers upgrade their knowledge and skills. While accomplishing this program in Sultan Idris Education University, many of the adult learners encountered critical incidents of life and death that could make or break their spirit and learning ability. The main purpose of this study was aimed at exploring the critical incidents of life and death that shape headteachers' learning abilities in completing the first degree of management education. A critical incidents research paradigm was used. The data used in this exploration was collected mainly through self-reflective assignment and in-depth interviews from headteachers who had rose above life situations such as difficult child birth, battling cancer, Parkinson disease, accidents, kidnapping and other critical incidents while being adult learners. The research result yielded several elements that shape the learning abilities of the headteachers in the program. Among them were profound perseverance; motivation; family support; mentors and cultural beliefs. Specific recommendations for further research were also suggested.

**Keywords** Critical incidents, leadership development, adult learners, learning

## **Introduction**

For the last 50 years since independence, the primary school head teachers are appointed from the non-graduate group of educational personnel or those who possess the Teaching Certificate from local teacher training colleges. Preparation of aspiring and incumbent educational leadership has historically been provided by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Having been appointed to the position, the beginning head teachers were selected by their own Education Department to attend the School Leadership and Management Course in Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), Ministry of Education. IAB has often aimed to use new approaches to provide training for aspiring as well as incumbent school leaders.

Changes in the recent decade of leadership preparation have seen partnerships being forged between both local and international universities with IAB to jointly prepare individuals with meaningful, and contextually relevant school leadership programs. In

line with the government's policy to increase the number of graduate head teachers in the primary school, special educational management degree courses were designed to cater to the development needs of the practicing administrators. The aim of the course is to further establish and enhance the professional knowledge and skill competencies of the head teachers in the various disciplines in educational management.

Students consist of two main groups: the beginning head teachers and the incumbent head teachers. Average student age is about 45 years. There is significant diversity among the students in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity and religion. The average class size range is between 40 and 60. Student head teachers are from both urban and rural areas. Two groups of students entered the university program, namely (1) senior teachers and without positions doing fulltime and (2) incumbent head teachers and senior assistants doing an intensive course. The two groups are from schools of various sizes in the communities of different states all over Malaysia. The duration of the degree program is three years, with one year in IAB and two years in UPSI.

While accomplishing this program in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), many of the adult learners encountered critical incidents of life and death that could make or break their spirit and learning ability. Among the life and death situations faced by the head teachers included difficult child birth, battling cancer, Parkinson disease, accidents, kidnapping and other critical incidents while being adult learners.

Grief (Macpherson & Vann, 1996), emotions and traumatic events have received little attention in the literature of educational administration. There is very little study conducted and written about personal bereavement and crisis (Blasé & Blasé, 2008; Wallace, 2010) to help other educational professionals to understand and to develop guidelines to rise above such phenomena. As the head teachers' age rises, they will face with greater frequency, the effects of death (Macpherson & Vann, 1996; Eid, Johnsen, Bartone & Nissestad, 2008) and traumatic events in their lives whether they were studying for a management program or working in their own institutions. The main purpose of this study was aimed at exploring the critical incidents of life and death that shape head teachers' learning abilities in completing the first degree of a management education program.

Research supports the common perspective that school administrators involved in continuous learning face a number of problems because of their complex life circumstances as learners as well as responsible adults at the same time. Many of the adults learners in the management program in UPSI too realized that the learning skills that were effective in their jobs might not be as effective in the academic environment. University studies were found to be very tough going and challenging. Many of the student head teachers were not sure even where to start, how to start and how they were going to adapt as many testified that the last time they studied were more than twenty years ago. These new adult learners bring learning styles and life experiences that may either be critical foundations for future success or deeply entrenched beliefs that hinder learning in the academic environment (Bryman, 2007; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

## **Methodology**

For this study, a critical incidents research paradigm is used. The main focus is on describing the "critical incidents" especially pertaining to life and death issues from the perspectives of those who have experienced them while trying to complete their

program. The sample is purposively selected from the intensive group of head teachers. The adult learners in this study are between the ages of 35 and 50, possessed a Teaching Certificate from one of the Teaching Colleges in Malaysia, have full-time employment, are financially independent, and had one year of Diploma in National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) at IAB. They had also attended short courses on management conducted at state and district levels. They had completed at least one semester and they also experienced some form of traumatic experiences during the duration of their studies. All of them had since graduated from the management program in UPSI.

Even though the student head teachers had jobs and financially independent, these older and non-traditional learners had significant challenges that were related to life context. These challenges placed them in the risk group of not completing their degree. By understanding their background, needs and challenges faced by adult learners, educators could develop tools and ways to help students facing the similar predicament, cope with their studies. Educators can then help adult learners to be integrated into the university life and increase their chances of completing their studies.

The data used in this exploration was collected mainly through a self-reflective assignment and in-depth interviews from head teachers who had triumphed from situations such as difficult child birth, battling cancer, Parkinson disease, accidents, kidnapping and other critical incidents while being adult learners. In the interview data, the head teachers were asked to describe a recent incident in their own words. Follow-up questions were also asked to elicit more information and to clarify unclear issues. Although this approach is time consuming, it gave the researcher a better understanding of the students' learning process.

The questions in the assignment were structured open ended questions whereas in the interview, semi-structured open ended questions were used. The students were also given the following questions to help them describe the positive and negative critical incidents:

1. Briefly, what form did the incident take?
2. When and where did the incident happen?
3. Who and what helped you overcome the incident?
4. What learning resulted from the incident?

Such questions provided high quality responses from students as they had sufficient time to reflect on the answers that they gave. However, the researcher also received blank or incomplete responses from several students as they were not willing to spend time to write their responses. Some also mentioned that the incidents were too personal to be shared with other people. The response rate through data collected through critical incident questionnaire tend to be low as participants might not be willing to take sufficient time to describe a critical incident in depth (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). The researcher could not check ambiguous answers as well as probe for further information in the self-reflective assignment. Clarity could only be gained through interviews with the participants.

The semi structured interviews were audio taped (and transcribed verbatim) which lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. In addition, participant observation was also carried out in collecting subjective data. Hence, the multiple sources of data collection methods

of interviews, observations and documents were a means of triangulation (Tisdell, 2003). Data was analyzed throughout the study using narrative analysis and constant comparative method to analyze accounts given by the participants. Early themes were drawn from the initial frameworks derived from literature before finalizing themes that emerged from the narrative accounts. Key themes and illustrations were identified. Member checks were conducted with several participants to increase dependability of findings. Then a description of findings was written.

## Findings and Discussion

A total of ten head teachers participated in the study, whose narratives are featured in some way in the findings. There were six women and four men participants. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard their identities. The profile of the participants is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Profile of the Participants

Num	Name of Participant	Gender	Age	Critical Incident Faced
1	En. Amin	Male	48	Facing blindness due to diabetes
2	Mrs. Tan	Female	47	Son diagnosed with leukemia
3	Mrs. Lim	Female	48	Has third stage cancer
4	Pn. Anita	Female	49	Faced divorce
5	Pn. Fatimah	Female	47	Survived a serious road accident
6	En. Sami	Male	49	Facing heart problem
7	En. Rahim	Male	47	Facing heart problem
8	Mr. Lee	Male	49	Has Parkinson disease
9	Pn. Salmiah	Female	48	Has a mentally challenged child
10	Pn. Aminah	Female	46	Husband passed away

The research result has yielded several elements that influence the learning abilities and attributes of the head teachers in their management program. Among them are profound perseverance; motivation; family support; role models/mentors and cultural beliefs. These invaluable lessons influenced the kind of people that the head teachers have become and the way they manage problems.

**Profound Perseverance.** All the participants tend to interpret stressful and painful situations as a normal part of life, as seasons of life that are interesting and meaningful. According to En. Amin, “My eye is getting worse. What can I do? Nothing! *Hidup mesti diteruskan* (Life must go on).” This finding echoed what Bartone (2006) found that a critical aspect of people with hardiness is that they have a resilience mechanism that involves the interpretation or the meaning people attach to the events around them and their own place in this world of experiences. Mrs. Lim said,

*My son asked me to further my studies. Go and study mummy. I have been taking care of him since he was diagnosed with leukaemia. I don't know when I will lose him. But he told me to carry on living.*

All the resilient participants also are more open to change and challenges in life. They had to change their thinking and perspectives as a way to approach change. Mrs. Tan recalled, "At first, I was angry, depressed, and talking to the walls. In fact I was asking why? Why me? Why the pain? Why the loneliness?" In the end, to cope with her predicament, she stopped turning anger or blame or pain inward. She started to look forward and move forward in life. Two of them believed that they can control or influence events by influencing their own thinking and attitudes. They are very positive people and learnt to live with uncertainties in life. They learnt not to be distracted by their problems from their goals. They tend to interpret stressful events in positive and constructive ways, and regard such events as a challenge and valuable lessons in life. Lim said, "Through this experience, I become a calmer and patient person. They became my survivor skills and partners in life. These skills could be put to good use in the school (workplace)."

The participants had to learn to persevere in the face of conflict and obstacles, and had to learn it through trial and error. They increasingly discovered value and meaning in what they were doing and whom they were relating to. Anita, who went through a painful divorce, learnt that even though one might be good to others, should not expect them to return the kindness. She tried to understand them in a deeper sense and overcame her own 'hurt' feelings. She accepted them and tried not to take the things that happened too personally. She distanced herself and separated her feelings and tried to approach life objectively and rationally. Anita continued:

*When I was divorced by my husband, I also lost most of my friends. I couldn't concentrate. I had my school work and I had to go to court several times. Many times I had to miss class. Most of the lecturers were understanding but some of my friends were not. They didn't even want me in the same assignment group. They said that I cannot contribute. I am always crying. I felt so hurt.*

Through perseverance and hardiness, they could allow themselves to be authentic and have a deeper sense of experience for themselves. They began to find dramatic changes in their mind-set and their behaviour towards relationships.

**Motivation.** All the participants who went through the traumatic events had a high work (including learning) commitment and strongly dedicated to the learning activities. These adult learners were motivated primarily by the inner desire to excel in their work and knowledge seeking. They had put all their efforts into achieving their study as well as school goals before encountering the traumatic events. Even though they were suffering from traumatic events, they were determined to do well in the examinations and assignments. They can recognize their own distinctive values, goals and priorities in life. White et al. (1997) and Kinman & Kinman (2001) reported that successful people were motivated primarily by the intrinsic desire to excel in their work. The demand for challenging and interesting work (study) is stronger than the obstacles they faced. This finding is also similar to the finding of this study. According to Mrs. Tan, who had stage three cancer,

*"My ambition is to become a graduate. I have always wanted to further my study but I did not have the opportunity earlier. Now, it's so near to my goal. I am determined to finish it even though it's very painful to sit upright in the class. I have to use a pillow for my back and my bottom. The chemotherapy has left me so thin that it hurts to be sitting on my bones."*

All the participants were head teachers, having been in the post for several years. They had a stable and consistent identity and sense of who they are and who they represent. They are constantly conscious that they represent their schools, district and state as head teachers and their good and strong behaviour count. Even though they are down due to traumatic events, their identities as head of a school seemed to uplift and motivate their fighting spirit. Fatimah, whose car turned ‘turtle’ in accident during a heavy downpour while travelling to UPSI for class, said, “Even though I broke one of my legs and had to be in crutches. I have to go to class. I have to go to work. People depend on me. I am the school head.”

Due to their clear identity of who they are, their self-esteem came from a conviction that they are valued by others including bosses, teachers, relatives and lecturers, and what they learn are valuable not only in schools but for their future. According to Tan, “My PPD (District Education Officer) approved my application to further my studies. My school board of Directors and my husband are so proud of me, doing my degree.” This is further echoed by Mr. Sami, “My family is very proud that I am studying. My teachers are very supportive.” Lim said, “After retiring, I have more options with this degree.”

Some of the participants going through traumatic events only encountered them in the middle of the program. They had already completed at least one semester where they achieved good results. For people who previously didn’t do well in early school days now achieved good results when they return to school as an adult, would find their school related self-esteem increased drastically. In turn, their self esteem will increase their motivation level. Pn. Fatimah said, “After this degree, I want to continue with Masters program. I don’t want to lose steam.” En. Rahim also agreed, “This degree course is an eye opener. I wouldn’t have had such an eye-opener if I hadn’t done my degree.”

Most of the participants agreed that their friends’ sense of humour during class lessons also motivated them. Anita added that being strong comes with experience but also with humour. She reminded:

*Being strong comes with experience. I am not sure whether I will be able to do this when I first started. One shouldn’t take things too seriously and don’t allow sadness to overwhelm one’s life especially when you face obstacles. Laughter is the best medicine. That’s why I like to go to class. Some of the lecturers and course-mates are very funny people. It takes away my troubles for a while. In class I need to concentrate on the course. I don’t allow too much sadness to seep into my life; I don’t suffer alone.*

In addition, the curriculum and courses provided were able to meet the achievement needs of adult learners. More emphasis was given to assignments that were practical and immediately applicable to the participants’ school context. They also fulfilled different needs and interest of the participants. “For instance, Mr. Lee who had Parkinson disease found difficulty in writing notes but he found pleasure taking part in a role play for the *Negotiation* course and acted excellently.” recalled the researcher. “I was working in the Educational Technology department in the Ministry with the latest equipment and software tools. I could showcase my skills in the ICT assignments and presentations. Most of my friends in the class often asked me for help. I felt really motivated.”



**Family Support.** Most cited that it was their family members who had encouraged them to complete their studies. All the participants are married and except for two adult learners, described their partners as supportive of their study pursuits. Marriage does not seem to be the obstacle to their success as adult learners in this study. They all indicated that a supportive partner gave them security to advance in their studies. As described by Salmiah, “My husband is not a very demanding person. He does his own washing, ironing. He takes care of his car. My daughter also comes in to help.” Family especially the support of their husbands acts as the main source of support in the Malaysian society. Men have begun to play a greater role in domestic chores resulting in a redefinition of societal structural roles which Salmiah suggests is the coping mechanism most positively associated with the completion of her studies.

Three of them especially the women adult learners also had the help of their mothers to take care of the children and home. Another head teacher, Fatimah also mentioned her mother as the big help during her studies, “I was pampered by my mother. For the past twenty two years, my mother was staying with me. I had everything taken care of from housework to taking the children to buy their uniforms or shoes or books.” Lim also echoed the same kind of support she gets from her mother, “My mother takes care of everything at home so I get to study most of the time.” In general the family members helped with the household chores or child care. When they are not attending classes, the women adult learners still shoulder the major bulk of domestic responsibilities.

Most of the head teachers felt that they had not done enough for their families or even their schools but they had to accept that fact and learned to see life as a whole. Anita admitted that the feeling will always be there but adult learners should not live with regrets of not doing enough. Anita mentioned:

*This is one thing that all adult learners, at any point in their study life that they feel they had not done enough for the family. We may not be able to have pushed our children as others have or always be there for them. But we can still have hope that they become wholesome individuals. They will have good values. They'll cope. I think that is comforting enough. Of course we could have done more. We could have polished their studies. We could have sent them for religious class. There will always be the feeling that we could have done more....that we were not there for them. When they cried, where were we, when they were looking and needed a mother's touch. It was the servant who was there, not us. We were away in Tanjung Malim studying for our degree.*

However, Salmiah believed that she had the best of both worlds of family and studies but she had to be very disciplined in what she does with her time. “You can have it all but you have to be very disciplined so that's what I learned. From that book ‘*Wait a minute, You can have it all*’, I followed the tips, tried it out and I managed. God willing so far”. Anita recognized her limitations and needs and tried to create a balance between work-home life.

*I tried to finish my assignments during the week when classes are going on. Classes are on from Mondays to Wednesdays, sometimes Thursdays. Once the classes end, I am off, back to my hometown so that I can spend at least three days with my family. Even though the weather is sometimes not good, I will still make it a point to go home. I wanted to work hard for my studies but it isn't wise. There wasn't much time for myself. But I have to give time for my children.*

Family is the most important socio-cultural institution and support in the lives of adult learners more so in the lives of those who were also facing traumatic events. For the adult learners in this study, family is the dominant source of strength, ‘listening ear’, encouragement and advice. This study indicated that family support has a big effect on academic accomplishment. This is consistent with White’s (1995) and Young & McLeod’s (2001) findings. When spouses provide or indicate that they will provide support particularly in terms of sharing home responsibilities, the head teachers may feel encouraged or at least freer to pursue their studies in higher education (Young & McLeod, 2001).

Most of the head teachers said that they tried to achieve the balance with the help of their family members although in the event of any family crisis, they would put their family first. Similar to White’s (1995) study, most of the head teachers found that studies and family mutually enriched their lives and they felt that a stable base was important when pursuing studies in higher education. They did find that they did not have enough time to spend with their families but they mentioned that they tried to spend quality time with them. These statements suggested that work (study) and family need not be in conflict but that the multiple roles may offer unique psychological benefits. These benefits will fulfil different needs (e.g. growth needs, security needs, the need to belong) (White, 1995).

**Role Models/Mentors.** Almost all of the participants in the study indicated that they had professional or personal mentor. Lim reported having mentors from her career, head teachers who had completed similar management programs. Lim attracted the attention of her mentor through her high level of commitment in a wide range of school activities and her willingness to tackle all kinds of challenging tasks. “My head teacher is the role-model. I’ve seen the way he runs the school. He is very good. He was more competent after he had gone for the management course at UPSI. He can change people’s attitude.” Her mentor was pleased with her performance and kept encouraging her to further her studies. Lim said that the attitude and the support from her head teacher gave her a lot of confidence. It was the confidence the mentor had in her and the support shown that helped her make the decision to apply for the management course. She recalled, “My headmaster was very sick but he never showed it. He was still as cheerful as ever. He died suddenly just one semester before completing his studies.” The encouragement boosted her confidence in her learning ability. This type of encouragement is what Young & McLeod (2001) referred to as professional endorsement.

Besides learning from mentors, adult learners also in turn became mentors to others. In class, they often played the supportive role of a coach. They took time to coach and share knowledge and competencies with their course mates. For example, Anita was going through a messy divorce and she could not concentrate on her classes, assignments and examinations. According to Anita, “Some of the assignments like dealing with ICT, I am willing to work, only thing I don’t know how to do it. Luckily, I have my course-mates. They showed me how by giving software classes to the whole class. Some of them are facilitators in their respective department giving training in ICT programs.” Tan also agreed, “...our class stayed back and Ahmad, our coursemate personally conducted one workshop for us. By the end of the day, we can prepare our assignment paper with the new skills.”



They were further encouraged when others who had information would share it with the whole class to facilitate their learning effectiveness. According to Lim, "...Ainon who works in the state department communicated and shared the latest information with us. Whatever information from the Department or the Ministry, she'll photostat and give it out to all the teachers." This practice is also echoed by Anita. "Whatever information or knowledge my classmates received, they would pass to us so that we're always in the know." The head teachers also encouraged each other to share information and knowledge with one another, and to coach each other." A number of scholars have noted this importance of personal role models (Young & McLeod, 2001).

All the head teachers are proud that they have become independent persons who don't depend on authorities, lecturers and others for assistance. Anita said that she was working for herself not the authorities or lecturers. She prides herself for being proactive, independent and don't have to depend on lecturers or others for resources. Anita said, "We have to be proactive and we have to do things for ourselves. If we are looking at other people for help, we may not get it. Sometimes, they do not come. They also have their own work and problems, they might not see that it's necessary."

**Cultural Beliefs.** All the participants agreed that the culture of the educational institution where they were studying had obvious influences on their learning and rising from their traumatic experiences to complete their studies. A supportive institutional culture was practiced where UPSI had a flexible scheduling although formal timetables for lectures and examinations were issued to the learners. Mr. Lee recalled,

*I have Parkinson disease, at stage two of the disease. My hands shake a lot especially when I am nervous. I was given extra time to write my answers during examinations. I would be sweating and drenched my shirt even though the air condition was at a cool level. I was allowed to change my seat to right at the back away from the other students so that I could be calmer. At times my hands were shaking so much that I could not write. The lecturers were very kind. They would come to tell me that it's OK. Take my time to answer.*

As for En. Amin, he lost the sight of one eye and continued to lose his eyesight as the course progressed on. Examination questions had to be prepared in font size 20 so that he could see. He was using a magnifying glass to read the examination questions. But he had perseverance. He also completed his studies. It was observed that the environment accommodated the work and family responsibilities of adult learners. This finding is similar to the study of Hayes (2000). In the surroundings of UPSI, facilities included a kindergarten (in UPSI itself), primary and secondary schools, mosque, Chinese and Indian temple and a church, just across the road in front of UPSI. Salmiah said,

*I had to move house and workplace to Tanjung Malim from Penang so that I could take care of my children. One of my children is mentally challenge and there was nobody to take care of them while the other two are still small at the time I was studying the degree course. I managed to transfer school and still maintained my position as headmistress in one of the schools in Tanjung Malim, enrolled my daughter in UPSI's kindergarten and the other two in the primary and secondary school. I can fetch my children from school and bring them to my class. They will do their homework there. Luckily for me, my course-mates are very understanding.*

Other adult learners showed their care by lending a listening ear to their friends' troubles. Aminah indicated that her course-mates were good listeners and also listening with the heart in understanding her situation. Some of them were also good in interpersonal and counselling skills since in their own schools, they had to counsel their own teachers. Aminah said, "I just needed someone to listen to me.. I feel that three quarter of my burdens and problems are already solved if I am listened to. My friends don't have to say much ... speak little but listen a lot." The head teachers tried to create the loving and safe learning environment where other student head teachers felt protected, have a sense of belonging and supported sufficiently to open up and share their troubles. As Salmiah mentioned, "If we have any problems we personally go to our friends. Their doors are always open. I will also do the same thing for them. We try to solve each others' problems related to our studies and in our schools."

In addition, the family values passed down by their family members was also critical in developing their approach towards persisting in accomplishing their studies. Anita recalled, "My father taught me good values. He was a very honest and hardworking man." Anita later inherited his values of hard work and honesty and applied those values in her work and studies. Others relied on cultural and religious values to guide them to complete their studies. Salmiah would dedicate herself to the studies and her children at the same time without giving up to the every end. "*Insyah Allah!* (God willing!) I will do what I can to the very end and after that it's up to God. But as long as I am still here, I'll do it."

All the head teachers found being an adult student very challenging and stressful, so they planned ways to retreat to regain strength. Aminah made time each day for stress-relieving activities like reading, exercise and meditating on God. She realized the importance of retreating into the cracks of her busy lives and had her own private or quiet time. She guarded this time carefully as she believed that life was more than just focusing on work and studies. For her this private time and space was necessary for a person's well-being for further and continued performance in her position as a head teacher and student. Aminah remarked:

*What is 'lapang sebelum sempit' (free time before it's too late)? I believe there's always time for everything if I plan it properly so there's time for family, time for work, time for studies, there'll be time for you yourself. And there's also time for your internal soul. I share with you, I am not bragging. I set time one hour before dawn. I wake up and I pray and read the Quran, there must be time. You must make the time. That's life so I try to implement it. But of course it takes time. Sometimes you slack but again from my reading, it says that slacken doesn't mean I throw it away. I'll pick it up again and can go on to improve. That's the way to de-stress. It's something that you do just for you yourself and I treasure the moment.*

All of them had a foundation in spiritual matters from a young age which left a deep impact in the values they hold. As mentioned by Anita, "Through experience I have a strong spiritual background and strong spiritual support so when I have this kind of problems, the values is able to put things in the right perspectives. They have very significant and important impact upon my life and my sustainability." Anita used religious beliefs to guide her judgments concerning the correctness of a decision. She tests her ideas and decisions by using her religious reflections as a yardstick to measure if she had made appropriate decisions and actions.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The main purpose of this study was aimed at exploring the critical incidents of life and death that shape head teachers' learning abilities in completing the first degree of a management education program. The main events and reflections were recorded for over three years from 2007 to 2010 during the students' study period from head teachers in the intensive program. Multiple data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, a self-reflective assignment, and participant observation were utilized. Data was analyzed throughout the study using narrative analysis and constant comparative method. Among the findings are profound perseverance; motivation; family support; role models/mentors and cultural beliefs.

In any leadership preparation or enhancement programs, adult learners often face many life changing challenges that can affect their learning either in a positive or negative way. There is a need for leadership programs to train and assist school leaders emotionally as well as cognitively (Schmidt, 2010). There is a need for a formalized mentoring program designed to help student head teachers develop new knowledge, skills and attitude. The mentoring program will enable beginning student head teachers learn how to survive in a confusing and ambiguous school and study context.

Because integration and adapting into the academic environment is a challenge for adult learners, developmental educators must understand the background of adult students and develop a curriculum that addresses their particular needs (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). The educators can do so by having an awareness of the different learning styles of adult learners, framing learning strategies in immediately useful ways, and using competition and repetition to enhance the integration of the adult learner into the university environment.

This study is probably the first study on traumatic events on head teachers attending university in Malaysia. As such, it contributes basic knowledge to the rapidly emerging area of learning programs in university-district partnerships as well as the field of educational leadership. However, much more research is required to understand traumatic events that has positive or negative effects on head teachers personally and professionally, and one that significantly affects classroom teaching and learning. More research is needed to understand the variables perseverance and hardiness. Perseverance and hardiness seems to be a particularly relevant personality dimension that could be related to leader development in challenging and intensive leader development programs (Eid et al., 2008).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors wish to thank UPSI for their financial support and for providing facilities for conducting this research project.

## **Reference**

- Anderson, L. & Wilson, S. (1997). Critical incident technique. In Whetzel, D. L. & Wheaton, G. R. (Eds). *Applied Measurement Methods in Industrial Psychology*, CA: Davies-Black, Palo Alto, 89-112.
- Bartone, P. T. (2006). Resilience under military operational stress: can leaders influence hardiness, *Military Psychology*, 18, 131 – 148.

- Blasé, J. & Blasé, J. (2008). The mistreated teacher: a national study, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(3), 263-301.
- Bryman, D. (2007). Veterans and colleges have a lot to offer each other, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54 (16), 5 – 9.
- Edvardsson, B. & Roos, I. (2001). “Critical incident techniques – towards a framework for analyzing the criticality of critical incidents”, *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 12(3), 251-68.
- Eid, J., Johnsen, B. H., Bartone, P. T. & Nissestad, O. A. (2008). Growing transformational leaders: exploring the role of personality hardiness, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 29(1), 4 – 23.
- Hayes, E. (2000). Social contexts. In Hayes, E. & Flannery, D. D. (2000). *Women as learners: the significance of gender in adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 23 – 52.
- Kenner, C. & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: applications to non-traditional college students, *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, Spring 2011, 41(2), 87 – 96.
- Kinman, G. & Kinman, R. (2001). The role of motivation to learn in management education, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 13 (4), 132 – 143.
- Macpherson, R. J. S. & Vann, B. (1996). Grief and educative leadership, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 34(2), 24-40.
- Schmidt, M. J. (2010). Is there a place for emotions within leadership preparation programmes? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(5), 626-641.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Voss, R. (2009). Studying critical classroom encounters: The experiences of students in German college education, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 17(2), 156-173.
- Wallace, J. (2010). Facing “reality”: including the emotional in school leadership programmes, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(5), 595 - 610.
- White, B. (1995). The career development of successful women, *Women in Management Review*, 10(3), 4-15.
- White, B., Cox, C. & Cooper, C.L. (1997). A portrait of successful women, *Women in Management Review*, 12 (1), 27-34.
- Young, M. D. & McLeod, S. (2001). Flukes, opportunities and planned interventions: factors affecting women’s decisions to become school administrators, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37(4), 462-502.