

## “CHILDREN ARE A POOR MAN’S RICHES”: AN ANECDOTE OF FELDA PARENTS’ INVESTMENT FOR CHILDREN’S SOCIAL MOBILITY

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of social mobility pertaining to parents’ investment for children’s social mobility. The main objective of this study is to identify the patterns of educational social mobility between the two generations of FELDA settlers in Perak. This study also analyzed parents’ investment in terms of financial support for their children’s educational mobility and the factor that lead such investment to take place. This study used qualitative method using in-depth interviews and participant observation with thirty settlers resided in a FELDA settlement in Perak. The fieldwork was conducted for a period of nine months beginning from December 2014 to August 2015. Thirty first generation settlers and thirty second generation settlers were selected as the main source of reference. The significance of the study is to provide some insights regarding the issues pertaining to social mobility in the context of FELDA community and how such patterns are influenced by parents’ investment. This is significant in order to fill the research gaps and to provide new insights to the sociological body of knowledge and to contribute new inputs for certain government agencies and researchers in the field.

Keywords: Social mobility, parents’ investment, FELDA settlers.

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### 1.0 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Social mobility is a widespread issue observed by many scholars both in the developed and developing countries. It is related to many issues such as its patterns, determinants and socio-cultural factors (Martinez, 2015; Juma & Simatwa, 2014; Sorokin, 1927/1959). Malaysia is not exempted in discussing such issues (Wan Maznah, Azahan & Shamsuddin, 2017; Nor Aini, 2004; Parkinson, 1967). Malaysia had experienced massive changes in terms of social, political and economic aspects since its independence in 1957. This is due to the fact that various factors such as modernization, globalization, industrialization and urbanization have contributed to such changes (Muhammed Fauzi, Mohd. Koharuddin & Mohd Azhar, 2009).

#### *Background of FELDA*

Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) was established on the 1st of July 1956 under the Land Development Ordinance. Its founder, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (Malaysian second Prime Minister) aimed to develop the socio-economic status of Malaysians especially the Malays who were far undeveloped in educational, economic and occupational aspects of their life. The development project was generated with RM10 million budget and it successfully relocated the poor’s settlement and managed the agricultural-based activity such as planting oil palm and rubber. The earliest settlement was opened at Lurah Bilut, Pahang on 1st April 1958 and there were altogether 317 settlements were further established until FELDA stopped opening new settlements in 1990. All of the settlers were given 7 hectares of plantation land, 3 acres of fruit orchard and a 132x66 feet land for house area (Akmar Hisham, 2014). Apart from that, many services, loans, funds and modern infrastructures were also provided by FELDA in order to upgrade the settlers’ socio-economic condition (FELDA, 2014).

#### *Social Mobility Studies*

In Malaysia, the studies of social mobility were vastly done in urban, agricultural and fishing communities (Azlina & Atekah, 2017; Nor Hayati, Ibrahim & Wan Mohd Zaifurin, 2017; Rosniza Aznie, Abdul Rahim, Asmah, Amriah & Rosmiza, 2011; Nor Aini, 2004). Even though there were several studies that were done in FELDA in relation to intergenerational social mobility, they however, were limited (Noraziah, Noorzah & Mohd Azlan, 2010; Nor Aini, 2004). In such studies for instance, they indicated that there was an upward social

mobility due to the government's efforts in funding many educational and training programmes to improve the educational and socio-economic conditions of the FELDA settlers.

## ■2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to examine the patterns of social mobility by education experienced by two generations of Malay FELDA settlers. There is no doubt that Malaysian government has emphasized the importance of quality human capital through education and training. This can be shown by the increase of the budget allocation for education and training every year (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 2018). The government was very committed to create a more developed society that excelled in various aspects especially in terms of educational and socio-economic aspects. The government's emphasis on the educational aspect was fairly justified due to the close connection between individuals' education and their occupations. Education became the most imperative determinant that could lead to one's upward social mobility. As in the case of FELDA, the government had invested RM123 billion to establish a modern secondary school called FELDA Mara Junior Science College in Feldajaya Trolak Utara, Sungkai, Perak. Apart from that, four vocational training colleges called Kolej Yayasan FELDA were also established in Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang to accommodate the youths with vocational skills. In addition, several schemes related to educational and training schemes were further introduced from primary until tertiary education such as Skim Tuisyen FELDA and Skim Pinjaman Pelajaran Tinggi FELDA. On this account, therefore, this study aims to provide some insights regarding the Malay settlers' patterns of educational social mobility.

Apart from that, the study also aims to analyze parents' investment in terms of financial support for their children's educational mobility and the social factors that lead such investment to take place. This is important since most modern parents regardless of their educational and socio-economic backgrounds are aware of the importance of education for their children's future (Nor Hayati, Ibrahim & Wan Mohd Zaifurin, 2017; Hilal, 2016; Norwaliza, Ramlee & Jasni, 2016). On this account, this study aims to analyze how such awareness is really manifested in terms of the parents' investment on their children's education.

## ■3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social mobility can be referred to the dynamism of individuals that involves improvement or decline, in order to change their social positions within the social hierarchy. There are two types of social mobility, namely vertical and horizontal. Vertical social mobility indicates individuals' upward or downward changes within the social strata. Meanwhile horizontal social mobility indicates an idle state or no transformation in individuals' social positions (Nor Aini, 2004; Abrahamson, Mizruchi & Hornug, 1976; Sorokin, 1927/1959). Sorokin (1927/1959) had extensively elaborated the abovementioned patterns in his theory of social mobility. His conspicuous multidimensional elements pertaining to the social mobility patterns is reflected in the way he explains both the horizontal and vertical mobility. While horizontal social mobility refers to no changes of social status either to a superior or inferior social stratum, vertical mobility is seen more dynamic since it involves upward or what Sorokin termed as ascending/social climbing and downward or descending/social sinking. The ascending social mobility can occur in two ways, which is through individuals' insertion/infiltration from a lower rank of social stratum to a higher one and through the insertion of a new group into an existing higher social stratum or through a creation of a new social stratum that was recognized as at the same level of the higher stratum.

Apart from the patterns of social mobility, a review on the factors of social mobility is further relevant to be discussed. Education for instance, is considered as the most powerful factor for social mobility. Theory of origin-education-destination (OED) triangle by Goldthorpe (2007) explains how education is imperative in determining individuals' social status or social destination. The theory outlined that social origin, education and social destination were interrelated with one another.

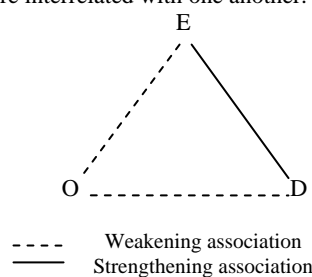


Figure 1: OED Triangle

Firstly, the theory supposed that the association between origin and education (OE) tended to weaken through time due to the rising reformation and change of educational institutions in order to facilitate equality of access to education for all. Secondly, the theory presumed the association between education and social destination (ED) will strengthen through time. This means that ascriptive system which indicates that social origin determines one's social destination would be replaced by meritocratic system which values one's merit. Finally, the theory presumed that the link between social origin and social destination (OD) would diminish. This was due to the combination of what happened between the foregoing OE and ED connection. Education has become the most important factor that controls individuals' destination without the need of social origin as its mediator would encourage the OD association to weaken. This in turn, would result in social fluidity happening, where there is an equality of access to experience upward social mobility through education and without relying on one's social origin.

In a social mobility study done in Malaysia particularly in a FELDA settlement located in Jempol, Negeri Sembilan, the study found out that education played a vital role in determining the settlers' social mobility (Nor Aini, 2004). The second generation surpassed their

parents when 88% of them had achieved education beyond Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level compared to their parents with only 29% of them completed their education until SPM level. The second generation who possessed higher academic qualifications, especially those who have degrees are more likely to enter into professional and managerial types of occupation such as doctors, engineers and executive officers and earned more than RM2,000 per month. On the other hand, those who were diploma holders earned slightly less than their bachelor graduates with more than RM1,500 monthly income. They are reported to be working as technicians, Petroliaam Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS) officers, accountants, system coordinators and supervisors. Finally, secondary school leavers who got involved in the business field earned the least with RM1,000 per month. This further indicates how level of education can affect one's earnings and socio-economic status.

In addition, individuals' educational mobility is further influenced by their parents' investment. This is found in studies done in the Western countries where majority of the parents, regardless of their level of income, spent a significant amount of their money for their children's education in terms of children's school and tuition fees, books and meals (Schroeder, Spieß & Storck, 2015; Kornrich & Furstenberg (2013). Similar pattern can be observed from the Asian parents' investment when they were not only willing to prolong their investment by supporting their children's tertiary education, but they also sacrifice a lot by working extra hours, giving up their hobbies, limiting their leisure activities and even taking loans to spend more on their children's education (Chen, 2017; HSBC, 2017; James & Woodhead, 2014).

#### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative method using in-depth interviews and participant observation with thirty settlers resided in a FELDA settlement in Perak. The fieldwork was conducted for a period of nine months beginning from December 2014 to August 2015. Thirty first generation settlers and thirty second generation settlers were selected as the main source of reference since the study attempts to examine educational social mobility patterns, parents' investment and the social factors for educational social mobility experienced by the two generations. Interview schedule related to social mobility questions was used in order to obtain the informants' demographic information as well as the detailed data related to the patterns of social mobility and the first generation's investment on their children's experienced by the said informants.

The issues of consent and confidentiality were obtained and assured through the distribution of information sheet and consent form to all of the informants. MP3 recorder was also used in order to accurately record all the important details uttered by the informants. Frequent visits to all of the informants were made to ensure the reliability and validity of the data gained from the previous interviews. The data was then transcribed in order to make the process of identifying and coding easier. Atlas.ti software was used to systematically code and categorize the themes.

#### 5.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

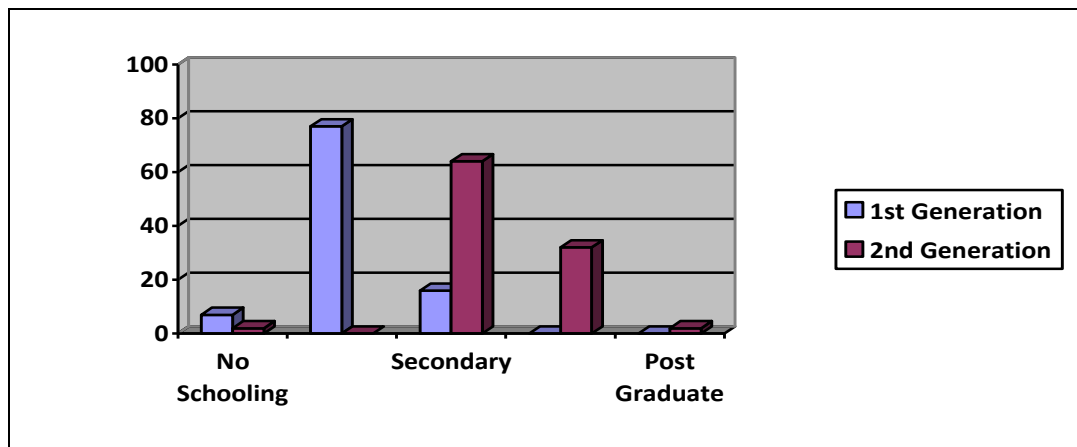


Chart 2: Educational Social Mobility between Two Generations of FELDA

Chart 2 shows that 7% of the first generation did not receive any formal education, 77% had primary education, 5% had achieved upper secondary education and none of them had achieved tertiary and post graduate education. Meanwhile, only 2% of the second generation did not receive any formal education, 64% completed secondary education, 32% had achieved tertiary education and another 2% had achieved post graduate educational level. It is evident that in relation to the level of education, there is an upward intergenerational social mobility experienced by the FELDA settlers particularly the second generation. This further validates as what Sorokin (1927/1959) termed as social climbing which is through individuals' insertion or infiltration from a lower rank of social stratum to a higher one.

The study found that poverty was regarded as a major factor for the first generation's inability to achieve a high level of academic achievement in the past. The factor was mostly related to the financial situation of the first generation's families. Most of them had to quit schooling and participated in economic activities to contribute to their families' income. Most of their families were involved in the agricultural sectors such paddy farming and rubber tapping. The income from such economic activity was very low and unstable. It was only sufficient to cover household expenses such as food, shelter and clothing for their big-sized families. Sometimes, they also bought

goods from the grocery shops on a loan basis due to their poor financial situation. Thus, their parents were unable to invest in their education and there was a crucial need for them to sacrifice their intention to be formally educated in schools for the sake of their families' subsistence. This situation was reflected in the narration by one of the informants named Nuh, aged 68 years old:

*"I could not achieve high level of education due to poverty. Instead of going to school, I was needed to help my family by working at the paddy field and doing any odd jobs that i could find to earn a living. Even though I did go to a madrasah (religious school) for a little while, but I was unable to finish my study there."*

Due to such unfortunate fate that the first generation had to face, most of them were very determined to ensure that their children would not follow their footsteps. This is shown in the study that all of the first generation informants admitted that their children's educational expenditure was considered as the second most important after kitchen expenses. They tried not to be spendthrift while spending in order to invest more for their children's educational expenses. This is reflected in the narration of Nuh, aged 68 years old:

*"I once postponed buying my wife some jewellery for our wedding anniversary because at that time some of my children said that they needed money for hostel and examination fees. I said to my wife that our children's education is far more important than our own needs and wants."*

Similarly, Baizura, aged 65 years old narrated:

*"I still remember that I was very prudent in spending my earnings when my children were still studying in schools and universities. I did not buy myself any electrical kitchen appliance such as rice cookers and kettles while most of my neighbours already had them. I preferred to save my money for my children's education."*

### **Doing Additional Jobs**

All the first generation settlers stated that during the early establishment of their settlement, the earnings they got from their main job working in the oil palm plantation barely covered their basic necessity such as food. This is due to the reason that most of the settlers had a large number of offspring and they needed extra money to spend for the children's education. In order for them to invest for their children's education, they did some additional jobs in various fields such as agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, livestock farming, small and medium sized industries and in services.

Some of them worked in the same agricultural industry by being rubber tappers and farmers. This is reflected in the narratives of Daud, aged 63 years old who once worked as a rubber tapper:

*"I once did a part time job as a rubber tapper together with my wife at the nearby FELDA settlements. I used to wake up at 4.30 in the morning and started to go to work at 5 in the morning. This was done in order to add to my family income especially for the expenses of my children's education."*

Zulkifli, aged 72 years old, on the other hand shared his experience working at a vegetable farm as follows:

*"Apart from working at the oil palm plantation in the morning, I used to work at a vegetable farm in the evening. I was hired to work at a Chinese fruit and vegetable farm at the nearby settlement. I did all the manual jobs there such as weeding, harvesting and picking the vegetables and fruits. The farm owner was very kind to me and he let me take some of the vegetables and fruits home after I finished working everyday. I often brought back sweet potato, eggplant, cabbage and watermelon. Thus, I was able to save some of my income from buying any fresh produce at the market and I could spend more on my children's education."*

Apart from doing additional jobs in agriculture, first generation informants also did some works in aquaculture and fish husbandry. An informant named Farida, aged 70 years old narrated:

*"I still remember how diligent my late husband was when he and his two friends were involved in fish husbandry. They at first opened a freshwater fish pond just for their own consumption. But later on after the fish bred and the number started to multiply, they decided to sell some of the fish. I did not know very much about the business because I did not help my late husband at all at the pond. The activity was done as a means of livelihood and it was considered as an ample protein source for us. We did not have to spend to buy fish at the market. When my late husband passed away, the pond was managed by his two friends. They regularly visited my family and brought some fish and sometimes gave me the*

*shared profits they got from the small business. Thus, I was able to invest more on my orphan children's educational expenses."*

Some of the informants further admitted that they worked as fishermen too. This is reflected in the narratives of Suri, aged 63 years old who told an experience pertaining to his late husband's additional job:

*"My husband used to fish at nearby rivers and mines in the evening after he finished all of his works in the oil palm plantation. The job was primarily done for our family's own consumption but if he caught a large amount of fish, he would dry them and sold those dried fish to the villagers. The profit from such small business was used for my children's school fees."*

Further, livestock farming was found to be another additional job done by the informants. Ayyub, aged 69 years old narrated:

*"I used to rear four dairy cows for their milk for eight years from 1982 to 1990. The milk was sold within the vicinity of the settlement only. The profit from selling the fresh milk was sufficient to support my family especially for my children's education. However, I then decided to sell all of the cows because I did not have enough time to juggle between rearing them and my teaching profession. I chose to focus on being a full time religious teacher at the nearby private religious school and at the mosque. The income alone was enough to provide for my family."*

Informants were also found to be involved in service-related occupations in both public and private sectors. For instance, they were reported to work as religious teacher, cleaner, security officer and cook. An informant named Maria, aged 60 years narrated about her late husband working as a religious teacher as follows:

*"My late husband was hired as a religious teacher teaching Kafa<sup>1</sup> at the nearby Sekolah Agama Rakyat (private religious school). He received RM200 monthly for the job. Since he was a religious teacher, he was also invited to many mosques and suraus<sup>2</sup> to deliver kuliah (religious lessons). In addition, he also worked as a zakat collector during hari raya. It was the earnings from such sources which helped us to add to the family's income especially for the children's educational expenses."*

In another case, an informant called Zarith, aged 75 years shared her experience working as a cleaner:

*"I used to be a cleaner for almost 15 years to help my family. I was hired at several private companies and institutions such as the FELDA Residence, MARA and MRSM. The income that I got was mostly used for kitchen and my children's educational expenses. I then stopped working in 2012 due to my health condition. I was feeling thankful because at that time all of my children had already finished their studies."*

Another informant's narratives such as Dahlia, aged 64 years old, further mentioned her late husband's job as a security officer:

*"My late husband once did a job as a security officer at the nearby factory. The job was quite challenging because he needed to do many patrols around the large factory premise. In addition, the job was dangerous too since he needed to handle many unexpected crime situations such as robbery, break-ins etc. Even though the income was not very high but it was one of his efforts to support our family especially to invest for our children's education."*

An informant also told that she worked as a cook as her additional job to support her family. In relation to this, Najla, aged 70 years old, narrated as follows:

*"I was asked to prepare three meals a day for a group of Indonesian contract workers who rented a house within the settlement. I would cook and pack the food to be taken by the workers who usually worked at the nearby construction sites. Apart from that, I also used to be hired as a cook at some stalls that sold Malay ala carte food in the evening. Even though I did not earn much from the*

1. Kafa is an abbreviation for Kelas Al-Qur'an dan Fardhu Ain (Al-Qur'an and Fardhu Ain Class). It is a class that is normally held in the afternoon for primary school children to learn the basic Islamic curriculum.

2. A place of worship which is smaller than a mosque.

*job but it was enough to cover for my family's monthly expenses such as the children's educational fees."*

In addition to jobs that were done in the fields of agriculture and aquaculture, fishing and service sectors, many of the informants reported doing small businesses in order to invest for their children's education. Among the most popular business was the one that was related to food-selling. This is evident in the case of Muna, aged 66 years old:

*"I used to sell nasi lemak and snacks such as murukku and karipap kering as an additional job in the past. I had to wake up at 4.30 a.m. in order to prepare the food. I would take half of the nasi lemak and the snacks I made to be sold at the FELDA Resort and the Training Centre. The rest of the food was then sold by my children at their schools. The nasi lemak was sold only 20 cents at that time. It was meant to support my children's education."*

Another informant, Musa, aged 64 years old, shared his experience as a grocer as he narrated:

*"I used to open a grocery shop as an additional job in the past. The shop mostly sold snacks, home-made popsicles, kuih and fresh produce such as vegetables and fruits. I felt thankful that my wife and the children often helped me managing the business and looked after the shop. I on the other hand, was often away handling my fruit orchards that were located outside the settlement. The fruits obtained from such orchards such as coconuts and bananas were then sold at the grocery shop. Somehow, I felt proud knowing that my children's educational success is due to my sacrifice in doing such additional job to support them."*

Another informant named Izzah, aged 65 years old, illustrated her experience as a baker as follows:

*"I used to be a baker. I received lots of orders to bake cakes from my fellow neighbours. I saved sufficient money to open a bakery. I also bought some electrical machines and equipment in order to maximize business productivity. The involvement in this business was due to support my children's educational expenses. However, I could no longer manage the business after I was involved in a serious hit-and-run accident that broke my arm and leg. I underwent a metal plate implant surgery to fix my bone fractures and I was advised by the doctors to rest and not to operate any machinery for full recovery. The bakery was then handed over my daughter and my son-in-law to continue the business."*

Idris, aged 71 years old on the other hand, was a rice seller as he shared his experience as follows:

*"I was once a BERNAS rice seller for almost 5 years. I got involved in the business in 1995 when all of the oil palm trees needed to be replanted since they were not productive anymore. Therefore, since I had no job to do in the plantation and I need to support for my children's education, I decided to get involved in this business as an additional job to earn some income for my family. I then quit the business after five years because I was elected as head of his block and I was busy taking care of the residents' welfare."*

Further, another informant named Baizura, aged 65 years old mentioned in her narratives regarding her experience selling chilli sauce and jamu.

*"I began selling jamu since I migrated to the settlement. I learned the skill to make the jamu from my Javanese parents who were also jamu sellers. I mostly made jamu for the females, especially for their dietary supplements during the confinement period. Apart from selling jamu, I also handled a business selling chilli sauce, which I learned from my older sister. These businesses were considered as additional jobs she did in order to earn extra income for my children's education."*

It is evident in the foregoing examples that parents' investment in terms of doing additional jobs is a vital force for the upward educational mobility to occur among the FELDA generations. Parents were very committed to sacrifice most of their time and energy doing additional jobs that can result to more investment for their children's education. Such situations were also observed in other studies by Chen (2017), HSBC (2017) and James & Woodhead (2014).

### **Awareness of the Importance of Education**

From the preceding discussion, it can be said that majority of the first generation informants were willing to sacrifice in order to invest more on their children's education. This is primarily due to the heightened parents' awareness on the importance of education for their children's future. They firmly believed that education is the most important factor for attaining upward social mobility. Such belief was further fortified because they highly believed that education is associated with a brighter future, liberated mind, high paid jobs and affluent life. Most of the second generation informants also corroborated such belief when they mentioned that their parents always implanted the importance of education since they were little. Their parents were willing to sacrifice their time, money and energy for the sake of education. This is reflected in narratives of Yaaqub, aged 69 years old, who repetitively advised his children about the importance of education in their life:

*"I always advised my children about the need to be educated for their future. I believe that education could spare my children from various types of misfortunes that I experienced before such as poverty, fraud and injustice. Because of having such awareness of the importance of education, I would sacrifice anything to ensure that my children got educated. I hope all of my children would gain high qualifications or at least pass the SPM. I was grateful that all of my children were university graduates except only two who were SPM and STPM leavers."*

Similarly, a second generation informant named Mawar, aged 43 years further reported about his parents' awareness on the importance of education as follows:

*"My parents were very supportive when it came to the issue of education. They would encourage us to be educated as high as they could. For that, they would do many additional jobs besides being settlers in order to support our educational expenses. They used to work as rubber tappers to invest more for our education. I also shared the same belief like my parents that indicates education led to a brighter future."*

It is clear that the foregoing examples indicate how the heightened awareness of the importance of education resulted in a large percentage of the children achieving upward educational social mobility. These findings are in parallel with findings observed by Nor Hayati et al. (2017), Hilal (2016) and Norwaliza et al. (2016). Norwaliza et al. (2016) for instance, had stated that parents truly believed that education was the most vital means for their children to achieve great future especially in terms of their socio-economic status. Therefore, this heightened awareness led the parents to express their utmost encouragement for their children high academic achievement so that they would not follow their parents' ill-fated footsteps. This further validates propositions made by Goldthorpe (2007) in his OED triangle theory that states social origin and social destination (OD) association will be weakened and the connection between education and social destination (ED) will be strengthened. This is clearly reflected by the findings observed in this study that despite of the poor socio-economic background, the second generation of FELDA still managed to achieved upward social mobility since education becomes the most vital determinant for improving one's social condition in this modern world.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The study evidently shows that the FELDA settlers, especially the second generation had experienced an upward educational mobility. This situation was possible due to parents' investment for the children's education. The study has clearly showed that despite of the first generation's unfortunate socio-economic background, they willingly to sacrifice their energy, time and money to for the sake of their children's future. Majority of them sacrificed to earn more in order to invest for their children's education by working additional jobs and being mostly prudent in their spending. There is no doubt that such investment was not resulted from pointless or thoughtless effort but it was actually fortified by a strong awareness on the importance of education. They were very aspired and determined not to let their children follow their ill-fated footsteps and suffered the same difficulties in life as they experienced before. They would do anything to ensure their children succeed and achieved upward social mobility because children are a poor man's riches.

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