

The Impact of Life Story Writing on Insecurity in University Students Living with Foster Parents

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Doi: 10.31316/g-couns.v10i02.7292

Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of life story writing on feelings of insecurity among college students who had been temporarily placed with foster parents. Using a qualitative, hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, data were collected through individual counseling with nine students who reported insecurity. The narratives written by participants served as a reflective space for exploring past wounds, alleviating emotional burdens, and forming new understandings of themselves. The results show that writing a life story facilitates self-awareness, uncovers harmful defense mechanisms, and encourages the creation of new meanings from painful experiences. There is a shift from a trauma-centered narrative to a resilience-centered narrative, recognizing self-worth, fostering hope, and building a positive identity. Spiritual dimensions also emerged as a source of strength in making sense of adversity. Thus, life story writing is an effective intervention for helping students manage insecurity and strengthen their psychosocial resilience.

Keywords: life story, insecurity, counseling, foster parents

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan dampak penulisan life story terhadap perasaan tidak aman mahasiswa yang tinggal bersama orangtua asuh. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode hermeneutika fenomenologis. Data diperoleh melalui proses konseling individu terhadap 9 mahasiswa yang mengalami rasa tidak aman. Narasi yang ditulis oleh partisipan menjadi ruang reflektif untuk menggali luka masa lalu, mengurangi emosi dan membentuk pemahaman baru tentang diri. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penulisan life story mampu memfasilitasi proses kesadaran diri, mengungkap mekanisme pertahanan diri yang merugikan, mendorong pembentukan makna baru atas penderitaan yang dialami. Terdapat pergeseran dari narasi luka menuju narasi ketahanan: mengenali nilai dirinya, menumbuhkan harapan dan membangun identitas positif. Aspek spiritual juga muncul sebagai sumber kekuatan dalam memaknai pengalaman pahit. Dengan demikian, penulisan life story terbukti menjadi intervensi efektif dalam membantu mahasiswa mengelola perasaan tidak aman dan memperkuat resiliensi psikososial mereka.

Kata Kunci: kisah hidup; perasaan tidak aman; konseling; orang tua asuh

Article info

Received December 2024, Revised August 2025, Accepted September 2025, Published February 2026

Published by: Guidance and Counseling Study Program
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta



INTRODUCTION

Equality in education is essential to creating fair opportunities for all individuals. However, disparities persist, particularly in frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged regions (locally referred to as “3T” areas in Indonesia). According to data from the Ministry of Education, educational inequality persists in the population, particularly due to differences in economic conditions and local financial capacity, a lack of facilities and infrastructure, and limited human resources in 3T regions, particularly in East Nusa Tenggara (Jakaria et al., 2019).

Poverty makes it difficult for parents to support their children’s education, notably higher education. Previous studies have shown that economic conditions influence an individual’s ability to pursue education (Vadivel et al., 2023) and that parents’ failure to meet educational needs, along with limited support resources, also impedes access to education (Lopez, 2023).

Research has indicated that economic pressure, limited access to education, and social status affect students’ psychological well-being, including the emergence of anxiety and stress due to unstable environmental conditions, which in turn impact their potential (Hyun, 2018; Golberstein et al., 2019; Setyanto, 2023; Daramola, 2023). Strong adaptability and social support are needed to maintain mental health, particularly a sense of comfort within a new family setting (Kase et al., 2016).

In addition to economic barriers, the geographical challenges posed by an archipelagic region, which students from 3T areas face, further reduce access to higher education (Jakaria et al., 2019). For students with limited or distant access to the university, renting accommodation for study purposes becomes a choice; however, for those who are economically disadvantaged, living with foster parents for sometimes preferred, not only due to financial limitations, but also for reasons such as fostering independence in the child.

Foster parents play an important role in caregiving patterns. Patience and perseverance are essential when dealing with new personalities, especially when living with them, as in the case of students. Their roles include guiding, managing finances, and providing moral encouragement in pursuing education. Shared perspectives and harmony within the foster family are crucial factors in supporting students who live in their homes. Beyond academic demands, these students are also expected to adapt to the lifestyle patterns of their foster parents and to help with household chores (Ögeyik, 2016).

Students without adequate financial assistance are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression (Syaza et al., 2021). Psychological support for students living with foster parents, especially those experiencing feelings of insecurity in such situations, is therefore vital. Insecurity is a significant issue for students because it relates to personality, family, and social problems. Previous research has extensively discussed insecurity in terms of food, nutrition, and low living environments, which negatively affect students in various universities (Shi et al., 2021; Cockerham et al., 2021; Adamovic et al., 2022; Conrad et al., 2022; Ho et al., 2022; Kent et al., 2022; Neal & Zigmont, 2022; Rojas et al., 2023; Shi & Allman-Farinelli, 2023), as well as emotional insecurity (Bergman et al., 2018) but none have addressed insecurity experienced by students living with foster parents.

This research was conducted at Tribuana Kalabahi University, particularly in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, located in Alor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Based on counseling consultation forms from 251 students in the Christian Education Study program, various student problems were identified. There were 27



students experiencing communication anxiety due to feelings of insecurity, and 16 of them lived with foster parents. Of this number, 9 students were willing to share their life stories and become participants in this study. The practice of living with foster parents continues to this day, with some students having lived with foster parents since elementary, junior high, or senior high school, to continue their education.

This study focuses on students living with foster parents because they represent a group with unique experiences, particularly regarding insecurity, its impact, and how they overcome and interpret it. Using a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, it explores students' experiences through life stories.

Feelings of insecurity can affect academic, physical, social, and mental health, including being a source of stress, pressure, and anxiety (Cornett, 2022). This condition is common across various age groups, from children to the elderly (Cao, 2022; Kokkonen et al., 2023; Knuutila et al., 2024). The experience of insecurity impacts multiple aspects of life, including studies and social relationships. In such conditions, students tend to be reluctant to share their stories with others. One way to help individuals express their life experiences is through writing a life story, a technique within the narrative counseling approach.

Research shows that in later life, individuals can recall public events and personal stories from childhood, late adolescence, and early adulthood, and are more likely to remember relocation events (relocation Bump), both positive and negative (Grysmann & Hudson, 2010; Thomsen et al., 2011; Steiner et al., 2014; Thomsen et al., 2016; Enz et al., 2016; Munawar et al., 2018; Nusser et al., 2022; Özdemir et al., 2021; Pillemer et al., 2023; Curci et al., 2024). Thus, early experiences of living with foster parents will remain strongly in their memories, particularly negative experiences that trigger insecurity (Özdemir et al., 2024).

Few studies have specifically examined the experiences of students in 3T areas living with foster parents as a survival strategy to access higher education. Previous research has primarily examined economic factors or mental health in general, but this study specifically examines the impact of alternative caregiving patterns on students' psychological well-being. This research not only explores the problems faced by students but also investigates the effectiveness of writing life stories in helping them overcome feelings of insecurity and improve mental well-being. The results are expected to provide insight for university counselors in supporting students experiencing insecurity, especially those living with foster parents.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing how life story writing can influence the insecurity experienced by students living with foster parents, using a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. This research is motivated by the phenomenon of insecurity among students living with foster parents.

The conceptual framework consists of the following stages: First, Experience exploration, in which students write their life stories that reflect feelings of insecurity, such as caregiving patterns, dynamics with foster parents' families, and the treatment they receive. In addition, students can express emotions and experiences throughout their lives.

Second, narrative interpretation, which involves further analysis of students' life stories. The narratives not only include difficult life circumstances but also how students respond to these experiences. Third, meaning transformation, in which students reconstruct their understanding of the life experiences they have written about. Through reflection and identification of positive aspects of themselves, students are expected to change how they view themselves, thereby reducing insecurity.



This study can provide insights into how life story writing can serve as a tool for processing emotional experiences, reflecting on feelings of insecurity, and constructing new, more positive meanings for students living with foster parents. This conceptual framework is expected to contribute to the development of narrative-based interventions in counseling for students experiencing similar conditions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a hermeneutic-phenomenological method. This method, adapted by van Manen, is designed to explore the meaning of lived experiences reflectively through narrative writing (van Manen, 2017).

The primary focus of this method is to understand the life experiences of participants who live with foster parents and experience feelings of insecurity. This approach was chosen because it provides a framework for a deep understanding of participants' experiences while emphasizing contextual human values (Shindang et al., 2024). In the context of this study, phenomenology allows the researcher to delve into the experiences of students living with foster parents and experiencing insecurity.

Participants in this study consisted of nine students from the Cristian Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Tribuana Kalabahi University, who met the following criteria: having lived with foster parents, experiencing feelings of insecurity, and being willing to participate in life story writing and counseling. Data were collected through life-story narrative writing, observation, and open-ended interviews conducted during three sessions of individual counseling.

Data analysis was conducted using an interpretive approach applied to the life story data. This involved reading and deeply understanding the text, identifying key recurring themes in the narrative, conducting contextual analysis by linking experiences with life backgrounds, exploring the relationships and interactions between students and foster parents, interpreting the data, and formulating the final finding

To ensure data validity and credibility, the study employed member checking and data source triangulation (comparing life stories with brief counseling observation results to ensure that the meanings derived by the researcher aligned with participants' actual experiences, as well as discussions with research colleagues).

This research adhered to ethical principles by obtaining informed consent after explaining the study's purpose, benefits, and risks, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' data, and allowing participants to withdraw from the study should any risk arise.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The life stories used in this study took the form of written narratives. This format was chosen because the clients were university students who also experienced feelings of insecurity. The narrative began with the completion of personal identity information, followed by descriptions of both positive and negative life experiences, including those during their time living with foster parents, experiences in romantic relationships, and reflections on life experiences. The counseling process was conducted over three sessions: one session using the life story approach to explore participants' life experiences in depth, and two face-to-face counseling sessions, accompanied by direct observation,



to understand participants' emotional responses, thought patterns, and behavioral dynamics.

The narrative of EM indicated a dynamic of insecurity rooted in an unstable family relationship since childhood. Em was abandoned by her father, left behind by her mother, who migrated for work, and raised by her grandparents, who passed away when she was still young. Observations during counseling showed that EM often paused when recounting the loss of beloved figures and experiences of rejection, and cried when speaking about her mother, who had migrated for work. Her expressions included hesitation, a soft voice, and tears, indicating deep anxiety and insecurity. EM stated, "I was treated unfairly and differently from biological children, often scolded, and I felt uncomfortable; I was even slandered and expelled from the house."

Participant AM said,

"Although we are family and my parents also contribute to food, I still feel I am not part of the family, because I receive bad treatment every day, even in public. I was beaten, colded, thrown at with objects, and humiliated. I was never given room to speak."

This illustrates emotional conditions shaped by both verbal and physical violence, reinforcing AM's sense of insecurity. Counseling observations showed Am's facial expression was confused, with tear-filled eyes. She said,

"I was often blamed for everything... even suspected of having a special relationship with the male foster parents."

Participant SK experienced inequality in the distribution of household scores and had no opportunity to study; she was often scolded if she failed to complete tasks. She said,

"I was maltreated unfairly compared to other children; all the household work was assigned to me."

Nonverbal expressions, such as tear-filled eyes, slumped posture, and a soft voice, indicated deep emotional wounds. Participant DTM said,

"We had to work in the foster parents' home, yet we were still accused of not working. I also often did not receive a smile from them."

Emotional tension arising from unjust caregiving led DTM to feel alienated and to lose trust in her environment. Counseling observations indicated a flat facial expression, confusion, and head-shaking, signs of uncertainty and discomfort.

Participant RK had difficulty telling her story due to power dynamics with the foster parents. Participant MPN appeared to have experienced childhood trauma, including physical violence and discriminatory treatment from her father, and had to adjust to living in a crowded foster family. Although the environment was safer, MPN said,

"I felt uncomfortable simply because there were many family members in that house, even though I did all the household chores."



Counseling observations showed a hesitant voice and a pained facial expression when recounting her life story.

Participant IL said,

“I was scolded for small things and felt closely monitored; this disrupted my concentration in studying.”

She appeared confused but smiled while speaking, indicating emotional conflict between obedience and a sense of pressure. Participant BW experienced inner tension that disrupted her sense of safety in familial relationships that should have been supportive. She said.

“I do not like my father’s family.” During counseling, she displayed only a faint smile that appeared briefly and quickly disappeared.

Negative self-attributions often accompany feelings of insecurity. Students usually blame themselves for situations beyond their control. Writing a life story served as a mirror for EM, enabling her to recognize the accumulation of her inner wounds. Experiences of abandonment by significant figures and rejection within the family created an internal narrative that she was not good enough.

During the counseling session, EM, with a sad expression, asked,
“Why doesn’t my family like me?”

Counseling observation: EM experienced difficulty narrating her childhood; she often fell silent at certain points before continuing her story. She appeared to avoid eye contact when recalling experiences of injustice and the loss of loved ones. When speaking of her father, who had left, she frequently bowed her head, looking sad and crying. EM also cried and spoke haltingly when narrating the deaths of her grandparents. Even when talking about her mother, who migrated to support her education, she paused and cried.

This reflects the internalization of wounds into a negative self-narrative. Participant AM said,

“I’m confused, what’s wrong with me that I always get scolded?”

In her written narrative, she stated,

“I started to get used to being myself without needing anyone to like me.”

During the observation, AM exhibited shyness, avoided eye contact while telling her story, and reported difficulty socializing. She often displayed affective incongruence, expressing emotions that did not match the topic being discussed, such as laughing while narrating experiences of violence during frequent relocations and instances of being slandered. AM’s emotional wounds not only affected her relationships with others but also shaped how she viewed herself. She stored the pain internally and did not express it openly.

Participant SK’s narrative reflects the pressures of social adaptation, as evidenced by frequent moves due to limited economic means. The absence of a father also created a profound sense of loss, with possible hidden wounds masked by her early ability to take responsibility for herself, coupled with emotional fatigue from struggling to survive without parental support. Participant DTM’s emotional wounds extended beyond work experiences to personal relationships. An incident of sexual activity outside marriage became the climax of her wound narrative. She faced a dilemma between loyalty, love,



and emotional pressure. She expressed guilt, fear, and hopelessness for not safeguarding her parents' trust, even though she intended to preserve her romantic relationship. This illustrates how relational trauma and social pressure can lead to forms of psychological self-abuse.

Participant RK's emotional wounds were visible in her social experiences during elementary school, particularly during interethnic/religious conflict when she was scapegoated and punished by teachers, eventually developing thoughts of revenge. She also suffered heartbreak in personal relationships during adolescence. She said,

"I learned a lot about love, affection, and also about pain."

This suggests an internalization of anger, perceived injustice, and a need to prove oneself. In MP's narrative, wounds appeared mainly in the form of regret and guilt unexpressed to her foster parents, who had helped her. She said,

"I feel sad and guilty toward my foster parents."

She bore a moral burden alone, without any mechanism for reconciliation. MPN's narrative began with the words

"once upon a time, there was a child,"

and ended with

"the heart's testament of a child."

This can be read as a confession of the heart, suggesting that she had long suppressed her pain and lacked a safe space to express it. Although she was an adult in age, she still carried wounds and an inner identity as a child. MPN's account reflects childhood wounds transforming into dysfunctional behavioral patterns during adolescence. Her damaged relationship with her parents revealed an unsafe form of support that could inflict deep emotional injury. She lost trust in her stepfather and stepmother, faced rejection and violence, and experienced feelings of injustice, anger, hopelessness, and sadness.

Participant IL demonstrated emotional maturity by processing her experiences through sharing with her mother during the school holiday. She said,

"I will treat all children fairly."

She felt pressured, disappointed, and constrained in self-expression, preferring to keep her grievances to herself while reflectively learning the importance of treating all children fairly.

BW's emotional wounds began with her father's death just before her 10th-grade exam, followed by rejection and belittlement from her father's family.

She wrote,

"I dislike my father's family the most,"

As they spoke ill of her mother and shamed her family's financial condition. There was no indication of deviant behavior. Neither IL nor BW displayed deviant behavior or resistance; instead, they chose compliance and endurance, making their emotional burdens latent.



While writing her life story, participant EM began to recognize patterns of repeated loss and rejection. Through counseling, EM was able to openly express feelings of sadness, anger, and disappointment. She said,

“I am grateful for the counseling.”

Similarly to AM, who smiled during the final counseling session and said,
”I feel relieved to be able to share my story.”

Participant SK said,
“I want to achieve my dreams...”

A statement repeated several times, indicating a strong hope for herself. In addition, her narrative, which portrayed important people in her life, helped shape her resilience. Through life narrative writing, participant DTM holistically reconstructed her experiences, not merely retelling past events but reinterpreting them from her current standpoint. Her self-awareness that she is not a victim of her own decisions was accompanied by a profound reflection that she could commit to and reorganize her life without disappointing her loved ones, such as her parents.

The story of RK’s family life dynamics made her realize that every wound and conflict she experienced was part of shaping who she is today, a person who learns to be grateful. MP’s story more prominently displayed feelings of guilt toward her foster parents, but she also demonstrated strong reflective capacity, as seen in her campus and off-campus activities, which helped shape her identity. MPN’s narrative of emotional message about a child was reflected in her adult activities as signs of personal change, working in church and school, which enabled her to display her identity. He wrote at the end of her narrative,

“through God’s unconditional blessings... Replaced with great joy.”

IL’s narrative was delivered in a reflective tone, in which she balanced the positive and negative aspects of her experiences with foster parents. She said,

“In every event I experienced, I learned to accept it gladly, even though I was sometimes disappointed because I had already lived with them, but they helped pay for my schooling.”

IL viewed her past as a maturing period that made her independent. Participant BW described events but also expressed feelings, choices, and values she upheld. BW acknowledged the role of close people who supported her life. She openly admitted the treatment from her father’s family and chose to pursue life not with anger but with a spirit to move forward.

The impact observed from students’ life story writing shows a transformation beginning to emerge as they reflect on their stories during counseling sessions. They begin to see that the bitter experiences they went through also shape their endurance and capacity for growth. Through her narrative, EM reconstructed the meaning of her life experiences. She no longer viewed herself merely as a victim of circumstances but as a person who persevered through difficult situations. She said,

“I am grateful that I can go back to school, my mother is always there, and I must not give up.”



This affirmation demonstrates a shift from a wound-centered narrative to one of resilience and perseverance. Observations during counseling showed changes in tone of voice and body posture: from looking down to sitting more upright, and stating,

“I must finish my degree.”

AM’s narrative revealed that she worked for two years in a café to save money before starting college. This reflects an expression of resilience and autonomy, a decision that demonstrated the courage to take responsibility for her future, even without a scholarship and without fully relying on her parents at the beginning of her studies. In counseling, AM stated,

“Although what I went through was very bitter, I could survive.”

She chose not to live in her past wounds but turned them into strength. She persevered under pressure, completed her education, and returned home with a sense of relief. This shift in meaning shows that trauma does not always remain as a wound. Through healthy internalization processes and emotional support from her closest person, her mother, she was able to construct a new, more empowering meaning.

SK’s narrative illustrated a significant shift in meaning, from loss to resilience. Despite financial constraints and difficult relocations, she maintained her motivation to complete her education through the sixth semester. The independence developed through the responsibility and the guidance of her foster parents became a key factor in her resilience. The household activities she engaged in were not merely routines but opportunities to practice life and time management skills, which contributed to her psychological resilience.

The shift in meaning became apparent when SK described how she continued her studies despite family pressures, relational issues, and financial hardship. She demonstrated resilience through her persistence in completing her degree, her involvement in organizations, and her ability to cope while her mother was ill and her family faced financial hardship. This resilience was not the product of ideal conditions but of a long struggle against challenges.

Participant RK demonstrated the capacity to adapt to various limitations. She accepted her parents’ decision to delay her college enrollment for her older sibling and interpreted it not as a failure but as a form of sacrifice. This resilience was also evident in how she handled her family’s financial difficulties, including relying on scholarships and the support of people around her. This change in meaning reflects a shift from a suffering-centered narrative to a resilience-centered narrative.

Although MP felt guilt and sadness, she did not dwell on the wound. She was able to channel her energy into positive activities such as studying, participating in organizations, and joining the “*kampus mengajar*” program. Her decision to remain active academically and non-academically demonstrates high resilience capacity.

MPN’s narrative shows a strong process of transformation and resilience, because she did not remain a wounded, troubled, and hurt teenager. Her resilience process was marked by her persistence as an unpaid honorary teacher for 15 years, choosing to serve in the church despite feeling unworthy of becoming a deacon, and remaining an active university student. MPN demonstrated that wounds do not always signify the end but can be fertile ground for steadfastness and personal maturity. Resilience was formed through internal drive (determination) and external support (wife, church, and community).



Students related their experiences to aspects of faith or belief. Some mention that through suffering, they have drawn closer to God and learned to rely not on people but on him. One important aspect of EM's story is the role of faith in the healing process. She said,

"I always pray to God,"

When speaking about recovery from illness and graduating from school.

In the counseling session, participant AM stated,

"I just surrender to God, I believe God knows my heart."

Am's success in overcoming difficulties since living with foster parents while attending college has been remarkable. The pressures she experienced were interpreted as a process of character formation. Her reliance on God reflects a spiritual means that played a role in the healing process and the integration of wounds.

Participant SK made worship and spiritual life an important part of her daily activities, which strengthened her emotional resilience. Group prayer and participation in Christian family rituals become a foundation for self-strengthening, helping her face challenges with faith and hope. In counseling observations, SK said,

"I am grateful to God because I can get through this hard life."

Spirituality in this narrative is not only religious but also a source of meaning amid suffering, as SK believes God is present and guiding her toward her goals.

DTM's narrative recounts her rejection of prayers offered by those closest to her that were not offered sincerely. Her prayer and great hope for her mother's healing as the family's breadwinner, along with her constant feelings of guilt toward God due to wrong decisions, reflect a spiritual interpretation of inner suffering and a life that always hopes in and depends on God.

Participant RK expressed gratitude for receiving a scholarship provided by a lecturer who was also a family member. Suffering due to financial hardship and past wounds was interpreted as a process of forming faith and character. Participant MP repeatedly expressed gratitude to God in her narrative, while the strongest aspect in MPN's narrative was the spiritual dimension, which gave new meaning to suffering. She stated,

"God works... God opened the door for me."

Reflecting a reconciling spirituality that heals. She experienced existential repentance through pastoral experiences at church. She underwent a spiritual transformation from wounds to a calling; her willingness to serve as a deacon in the church reflects a gradual, deep spiritual transformation.

Participant IL also states that the path she took was due to God's favor. In observation, IL said,

"I am grateful to God for helping me."

Her decision not to pursue a dating relationship to focus on her studies became a life principle and a form of self-discipline. This is an indicator of spirituality integrated with personal ethics and future aspirations. Participant BW said,

"Praise the Lord."



In the narrative about her studies, receiving a scholarship, and when her mother became a source of strength. The suffering she experienced did not lead her away from faith. Theologically, BW demonstrates a form of practical faith-trust in God manifested in perseverance, appreciation for family, and commitment to education.

Through the reflective process, students constructed a new narrative about themselves. They acknowledged the existence of wounds but also began to see that these wounds did not define their entire identity. The concluding part of EM's narrative shows progress toward a positive direction. She was no longer entirely controlled by the past but was beginning to build a new identity as an independent student, with hope. Final observation notes recorded a smiling face and stable eye contact.

Participant AM had entered a phase of life that was much more emotionally stable and with a clear sense of direction. Her identity was now shaped by the values of courage, perseverance, and integrity, rather than by past wounds. AM built her life principles based on her negative experiences: treating everyone fairly, not discriminating, and living with an open heart. From past wounds, she now designs a future full of hope and meaning. She said,

“I have finished college, and I have forgiven them because they are my family.”

The final observation noted a smile and gratitude for being able to share her life story.

SK's narrative concluded with a strong statement about her new direction in life. She expressed her commitment to completing her studies despite limitations. Her identity was not shaped by her background of difficulties, but by the positive responses she displayed toward challenges. Her self-image shifted: no longer as a victim of the past, but as a capable, independent, and faithful individual with hope for a better future.

Participant DTM built herself as a responsible and hopeful woman. She wanted to complete her studies and support her mother's recovery. At this stage, DTM had a life vision pursued with full awareness and integrity. Participant RK hoped to complete his studies to repay his family's sacrifices. Positive identity was formed by awareness of the past, forgiveness, spirituality, and perseverance.

MP's identity developed as a reflective, resilient, and grateful person. Her awareness remained thankful and grew, indicating that she was forming a positive, emotionally mature identity. She realized that life is a long journey that is not always perfect, but is still worth living with hope.

Based on MPN's narrative, it was evident that she had experienced events that left a deep emotional wound. Her commitment to studying, working at a school, and serving in the church reflected a strong identity. MPN's identity was the result of reconstructing wounds into strengths. She said,

“I treat other children who live in my house well,”

While showing an optimistic face and smiling during the final counseling session.

In her narrative, IL chose not to be bound by a burdensome past but opened herself to a better future. During the counseling session, she said,

“I also work part-time.”

She did not blame life but found solutions to live it. Participant BW still held wounds toward her father's side of the family. She said,

“I don't like my father's family because they don't support me and speak ill of my mother, but I prefer my uncle because he cares.”



She placed great hope in her mother's side of the family. The final observation of BW showed a smiling face and hope, because she received a scholarship for her education.

This discussion is presented using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, focusing on the students' in-depth experiences of insecurity while living with foster parents. The main themes emerged from interpreting the meaning structures within the participants' life experiences, as expressed through reflective, dialogic narrative.

To provide a comprehensive overview of this study, the following section summarizes the main themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. These themes, while struggling with feelings of insecurity. A summary of the research findings from nine participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of Research Findings

Main theme	Description of Findings
Early Experiences: Feelings of Insecurity in Relationships with Foster Parents	Participants reported emotional insecurity due to a lack of attention, excessive control, or unfavorable comparisons with biological children.
Narratives of Internal Wounds: Internalization and Self-Abuse	Feelings of guilt and inferiority emerged, often accompanied by self-harming behaviors as a way of releasing inner pressure.
Life Story Writing as a Space for Awareness and Reflection	Writing life stories provided a reflective space, helping participants express past wounds and gain new awareness.
Shifting Meaning: From Wounds to Resilience	The participant began to perceive suffering as a valuable experience that shaped personal resilience.
New Direction: Building Hope and Positive Identity	Participants demonstrated renewed hope, positive self-identity, and stronger commitment to a better future.

Based on Table 1, each participant had unique experiences; however, in general, there is a noticeable shift from insecurity toward resilience and the development of a positive identity. The explanation of each theme is presented below, beginning with the experiences of living with foster parents.

Discussion

The instability of caregiving resulted in experiences of rejection, being yelled at, and discomfort living with different foster families. Children from broken homes are more vulnerable and more likely to experience psychological disturbance (Lesmana et al., 2023).

The nuclear family is an inseparable part of an individual's life. When someone separates from their nuclear family, they still maintain strong emotional attachments, both positive and negative, to that family. The same is true when students leave their parents and live with foster parents.

The majority of participants reported experiences of subtle or overt rejection from their foster families. Some students felt they were treated differently from biological



children, in terms of food, attention, and academic expectations. In this context, insecurity can be understood as a psychological condition marked by anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional instability (Daramola, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2023). Mental health is strongly dependent on the quality of safe and supportive relationships, particularly within family or caregiving environments; the absence of such security contributes to a lower quality of life and weakened personal resilience (Williams & Feeney, 2024). When children do not receive emotional attachment in caregiving, it hurts their mental health (Supini et al., 2024; M. Wang et al., 2024).

Analysis of the life stories from the nine students showed that, overall, they felt uncomfortable living with foster parents. Of the nine, only one reported never experiencing hurtful words from foster parents, although this participant had suffered very poor treatment from biological parents, while the other eight reported feeling insecure due to unpleasant treatment and words from foster parents.

From a psychological perspective, insecurity is a state characterized by doubt, anxiety, fear, shame, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and difficulty trusting one's surroundings (Markova et al., 2024; Saltzman et al., 2023). When caregiving environments do not provide a sense of safety, individuals tend to develop defensive self-protection mechanisms and withdraw from social connections (Daramola, 2023).

When caregivers become a source of fear, children lose a sense of protection and trust. Even within extended family relationships, in patriarchal societies, children and women often lack the freedom to express themselves (Maslamah & Muhsin, 2023). Insecurity in this case also involved experiences of accusation, loss of control, and pressures that restricted self-actualization. Insecurity can originate externally, such as through neglect or injustice in interpersonal relationships (Bai, 2024). In developmental psychology, repeated injustice during caregiving can foster a mindset of self-doubt (Melinsi et al., 2024).

These findings indicate that feelings of insecurity in relationships with foster parents have a significant impact on the psychological condition of students. Insecurity is not merely a temporary reaction but a form of ongoing emotional instability, marked by fear, low self-esteem, doubt, and withdrawal from social environments (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Maslow emphasized that the need for safety is foundational in the hierarchy of human needs; when this need is not met, individuals cannot develop a strong self-identity, maintain healthy relationships, or live a meaningful life (Maslow, 1942).

Although there was no indication of self-abuse in the physical sense, there was a tendency toward social isolation and feelings of helplessness as psychological responses to the wound. Self-isolation has been shown to have the strongest link with loneliness (Senese et al., 2024). Adversity in early life is associated with a range of problems in adulthood (Sales et al., 2024).

Research shows that although individuals may state attitudes, their behavior in real-life situations often does not consistently reflect those attitudes. Retrospective self-reports may not reflect an individual's cognitive state during decision-making, leading to inconsistencies between beliefs and behavior (Yuan et al., 2023).

Childhood trauma contributes to anxiety, depression, and relationship problems in adulthood, with self-blame acting as a key mediator in negative coping strategies; trauma also impacts social anxiety (Arijina et al., 2024; Lesmana et al., 2023). Inner wounds play an important role in adolescent identity formation, often prompting them to question authority and fairness within social environments (Bonnie, 2019).



When a close relationship adequately validates emotional needs during childhood, individuals are at risk of developing difficulties in emotional regulation, particularly in aspects of the self that carry past wounds (Suryana & Latifa, 2023). Deviant behaviors such as smoking, drinking, fighting, multiple body piercings, becoming a gang member, and repeated imprisonment reflected “acting out” in response to unspoken pain. Research shows that adolescent acting out is influenced by childhood trauma (Malcorps et al., 2024). Such deviant actions can also be considered self-sabotage, driven by broken relationships and feelings of worthlessness (Sahputra, 2024). MPN’s delinquency was a language of silent suffering. Childhood adversity and family dysfunction have long-term effects on negative behaviors in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998).

Her emotional bond with her mother indicated a healthy internal working model (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). This strategy is referred to as passive coping (Little, 2018). Through the conscious writing of life experiences, students can recognize and reflect on feelings of insecurity, which stem not only from living with foster parents but also from various unresolved problems from the past. Telling one’s own story can be an act of self-compassion, as it involves relating to oneself when facing life mistakes, perceived shortcomings, or difficult life experiences (Neff & Knox, 2017).

This reflects an act of separating the wounded self from the growing self. In the Internal Family System (IFS) therapy approach, an individual is understood as a psychological entity consisting of various parts of the self, such as the wounded part, the protective part, and the healthy or developing part (Schwartz, 2021).

According to McAdams and McLean, narrative identity is formed when a person can construct life experiences cohesively and find meaning within them (McLean, 2017). The ability to reconstruct life experiences as part of identity formation is referred to as autobiographical reasoning by McAdams (Bonnie, 2019). Social support has a positive impact on students’ academic activities (Chan et al., 2022).

When a person experiences emotional wounds, the natural response is often an attempt to protect oneself. Some choose a defensive stance of withdrawal, closing off emotionally, while others express it offensively by attacking or harming others or themselves. Wounding experiences can shift from being a source of pain to becoming a source of strength or resilience. There is a sense of relief in being able to pour out feelings through writing. Writing one’s own life story guides us toward embracing our own life, feeling it, loving it, touching it, even when the story is painful, full of struggle, suffering, death, and deep grief (Jørgensen, 2023).

Maternal emotional warmth helps build a strong sense of life meaning (Lin et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). In positive psychology, individuals like SK are thought to experience post-traumatic growth, psychological growth that emerges after traumatic experiences, especially through discovering new meaning in suffering (Lin et al., 2025). Psychological resilience emerges when a person can adaptively cope with life stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Participant IL came from a family with an economically disadvantaged background and experienced complex relationships within her foster family, yet she did not give up. After graduating from high school, she worked for two years to save money independently without relying on her parents. She was able to manage inner conflict, social pressure, and financial limitations in a healthy way. Her decision reflects determination and the ability to delay gratification for long-term goals, which is often associated with a resilient personality (Babić et al., 2020). Emotional resilience often



manifests as the courage to take responsibility for one's life, even when the environment does not provide full support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Having lost her father during adolescence and experienced unpleasant treatment from some family members, BW did not give up. She persevered until she was able to attend university with a scholarship, which became a turning point that strengthened her determination, marking a shift from trauma indicators to self-empowerment. Economic hardship is not the end of everything (Hagens, 2020), because there are people who genuinely care for her.

The spiritual dimension becomes a source of comfort and strength in facing suffering. This shows that the religious aspect is a foundation in building new meaning from past wounds, as religious individuals are better able to face suffering (Skoko et al., 2021). Viktor Frankl's concept states that humans can find meaning even in the most painful suffering (Bushkin et al., 2021). The presence of heartfelt expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment of God's presence in every life event is evident (Avila & Acena, 2020). In logotherapy, Frankl states that suffering gives life meaning (Arthur, 2019).

Humans often face suffering that leads to despair and a loss of direction in life. Suffering can arise in various situations, including when a child leaves their parents and must live and adapt with others. A Christian existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Michael, states that suffering provides an opportunity for a person to understand themselves and build relationships with others and with God (Partisipan & Gabriel, 2025).

Through life story narratives, students spiritually believe that the life they live remains in relationship with God because of his presence and intervention in both joyful and painful past experiences. This is evident from heartfelt expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment of God's presence in every event they experience. Expressions of gratitude often appear in life events (McAdams, 2015). A person with strong faith will have good resilience (Avila & Acena, 2020).

Identity grows not from pity but from spirituality and the awareness of responsibility (Chen et al., 2023). Based on post-traumatic growth theory, severe suffering does not always destroy a person but can become the starting point for resilience in life (Liliana et al., 2022).

A narrative can serve as a source of pride, whether about pleasant or unpleasant past events. In any story, there will be both positive and negative experiences. Pleasant stories can have a positive effect on oneself (Lang et al., 2024). Reflection on participants' narratives shows that writing a life story can evoke hope amid past wounds.

However, this study has several limitations to consider:

1. The findings cannot be broadly generalized because participants come from only one study program. The counseling provided was reflective in nature, and not all participants were able to write personal narratives openly, which limited the depth of exploration.
2. Students in their final semester found it difficult to continue counseling because they were about to graduate and would no longer be enrolled.
3. The study's analysis focused only on students as subjects and did not include foster parents as research participants.
4. Conducting individual counseling required considerable time, making it less efficient for addressing multiple emotional wounds revealed in the life story narratives, as not all issues could be resolved in one or two counseling sessions.

The practical implication of the study is that universities providing counseling services, both preventive and curative, can utilize the life story method as a narrative



counseling technique to assist students, particularly those living with foster parents. The period when a child is separated from their parents and lives with others, whether due to study, parental separation, or divorce, is a vulnerable condition that represents a critical developmental stage. Therefore, universities need to pay special attention to this condition (Duffy et al., 2019), as students who have experienced childhood suffering can become great helpers, provided they receive appropriate support and understanding (Newcomb et al., 2015).

Future researchers are encouraged to expand the number of participants from various academic backgrounds. Additionally, it is important to monitor the long-term effects, as writing a life story can reopen sensitive old wounds that require careful handling.

CONCLUSION

Life story writing affects students who experience insecurity while living with foster parents. Through writing their life narratives, participants were able to express long-buried emotional wounds, reflect on their experiences more honestly, and develop healthier self-understandings. Initial narratives filled with insecurity and self-abuse gradually shifted into narratives of resilience, hope, and positive identity. Beyond serving as a medium for reflection, life story writing also functions as a form of self-counseling, in which participants find spiritual strength and new meaning in suffering. This intervention enables participants not only to address psychological wounds but also to reconstruct a whole and resilient identity. Therefore, life story writing can be recommended as one approach in guidance and counseling services, particularly for students living with foster parents and familial relational dynamics, as well as painful past experiences.

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