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B40 STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE**Nazira Osman^{1*}, Fazmawati Zakaria², Mahani Mansor³, Majdah Chulan⁴¹ Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Malaysia
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Students from B40 families do not really perform well in Malaysian education. In school, they are not motivated, and even when they get into university, some drop out or are expelled from tertiary education. The graduates from the B40 income group are among those who are in the statistics of unemployment. To overcome the problem, it is suggested that the B40 students be equipped with grit and resilience, a construct in educational and psychological field. It is important for university graduates to have a high level of grit in themselves so that they will be more motivated and sustainable in pursuing their academic success and later not easily give up during job hunting. The Ministry of Higher Education has also outlined resilience (grit) as one of the nine Malaysian future-proof skill sets that need to be learned and practiced by Malaysian graduates to face the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). By using a desk-based research approach, this paper aimed to discuss the importance of grit and resilience in education and how the two traits can be applied in Malaysian Education. Grit and resilience can be enhanced among B40 students through self-regulated learning and concerted efforts by parents, schools and the government.

Keywords:

B40 Students, Grit, Resilience, Academic Excellence

Introduction

B40 is a household group that makes a monthly income of RM3,855 and below, have low wealth and non-financial asset possession, very susceptible to economic shocks and is desperately in need of governmental and non-governmental organizations support to survive (Malik & Ayop, 2020). Due to the poverty and inability of the B40 families to stand on their own feet, the Malaysian's Eleventh Malaysia Plan (RMK11) has focused on giving major assistance especially in terms of economics and education to this group. In terms of giving good education, universities and technical colleges provide allocations to B40 students to further their studies in higher education (Sani, Nafuri, Othman, Nazri, & Nadiyah, 2020). It is aspired that these students of B40 can graduate successfully, get a job and consequently upgrade their family's status income.

In line with the government's aspiration, Malaysian higher institutions also work to produce highly competent graduates who are holistic and balanced to face the fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Wahi, Musa, Mohdali, & Hassan, 2019). However, it is found that some of the B40 students at higher institutions are not able to graduate on time, and either dropped or expelled from university (Sani et al, 2020). The life of B40 families is further burdened as they need to pay back study loans when at the same time the students' opportunity to secure a high-income job diminishes (Sani et al., 2020). To overcome the problem, the B40 youngsters should be equipped with grit and resilience, two elements to ensure success in life. They are important elements to achieve life purpose and goals (ChongHui, 2017). Previous studies in social psychology have found grit as a significant factor of success in many academic and non-academic fields (Temouri, Plonski, & Tabandeh, 2020). The Ministry of Higher Institution has also outlined resilience (grit) as one of the nine Malaysian future-proof skill sets that need to be learned and practiced by Malaysian graduates for facing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Grit is defined as having passion and resilient in getting one's goals regardless of any constraints (Duckworth, Peterson, Mathews, & Kelly, 2007)]. It is a construct in educational and psychological field which is deemed significant in achieving success and positive outcomes (Gyamfi & Lai, 2020)]. It is important for university graduates to have high level of grit in themselves so that they will be more motivated and sustainable in pursuing their academic success and later not easily giving up during job hunting. A graduate with grit and positive mindset will take obstacles as challenges that need to be faced and get through. Having grit also will display confidence outlook and thus may alter any negative perception of prospective employers. Realizing the fact that grit can become a good and positive drive for academic success, this paper aims to discuss further on promoting grit for B40 students' academic excellence. The country will benefit when more B40 graduates work as professionals and experts that contribute to country's prosperity and advancement. This will also reduce inequalities and discrimination in relation to the country's SDG of urbanization and participation.

Literature Review

B40 Students in Malaysian Education

B40 or Bottom 40 is referring to the group of Malaysian households in lowest income group. According to the statistics by the Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2017 as cited by Allang, Awang, Ahmad and Ahmad (2019), 40% of the population in Malaysia consists of the B40

population. Despite the growth in income of the Malaysians, the spike in the cost of living would put pressure on the lower income group in many aspects of their lives, including in education aspect.

One of the challenges faced by the B40 students in education is gaps in digital learning platforms and infrastructure. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, to compete academically and get good grades, learners in the low-income group were only concerned with their more fortunate classmates who can afford private tutors. However, the focus on online learning during and post pandemic has made the gap between poor and rich students wider as they also have to compete digitally with these classmates as not all students are able to afford computers and Wi-Fi. This has been the woes of students living in rural areas and the students from the B40 group. Despite being smart and motivated in learning, not having access to these would make them lag behind their classmates (Datta, 2022). Thus, the government of Malaysia came up with an initiative to aid the students in need of learning devices. *Peranti Siswa Keluarga Malaysia* initiative under Budget 2022, smart devices were to be provided to B40 students in higher learning institutions so to allow them digital access during their studies. However, this initiative came short when this effort has been fruitless due to the inefficient delivery of devices and incompetent management systems (Dharshini, 2022).

Having poor mastery in languages is also one of the barriers for B40 students to succeed in education. The B40 students have been examined as having low level of English proficiency (MUET Band 1-3), lack of critical thinking, communication skills and English literacy which are some of the important soft skills (Wahi et al., 2019). Thus, they are perceived as not having adequate soft skills for market expectation and this leads to high unemployment statistic of graduates (Seetha, 2014). Eggen and Kauchak (2010) as cited in Khan, Khan and Khan (2021) pointed that weak performance in the English language subject leads the students to perform badly in their sciences subjects and poor performance of school grades and college entrance. It was discovered that below-par performance of students in English language results in greater obstacles of the secondary level students to obtain good result in the board examination. In addition, poor performance in the national language also affects students' performance in school. A study conducted on the B40 students in Hulu Langat, Kajang found that the students encounter problems of mastering reading and writing skills which has significantly affected their achievements in Malay Language learning (Mahamod, Mazlan, Amin, & Rahman, 2021). This limited understanding of the language caused their inability to answer the Malay Language Reading Test well (Mahamod et al., 2021). Because of poor performance in English and the national language, some B40 students lose their interest in study.

Moreover, the B40 students are found to be lacking of school attendance, unsatisfactory participation in classroom activities, losing concentration and motivation in education (Kashfi, Hat, Noor, Osman, Rouyan, & Hussin, 2022). These are due to issues from the student's upbringing, working part-time job, and parental views (Mokshein, Wong, & Ibrahim, 2016). According to students' and parents' accounts, the main cause of dropout was a lack of interest in education, which was accompanied by other factors like a broken family, the influence of non-schooling siblings, poor academic performance, involvement with non-schooling friends, social issues, and parents' attitudes towards the value of education (Mokshein et al., 2016). The fact that 90% of students left school early owing to lack of interest in learning presents a fresh challenge to Malaysia's educational system. Some of them were unable to understand the value of education, and even their parents were unconcerned ((Mokshein et al., 2016)). This is

supported by Kashfi et al. (2022) who claimed that socio economic factors, student personalities and parental participation in B40 pupils' education all significantly influence the direction that they choose in their education.

Impacts of B40 Students' Low Academic Performance

The lack of academic performance of the B40 students that are due to their socioeconomic status or other related factors might show some impacts on their family. Without a proper education and the success of B40 children in school, the B40 family will be stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty. Education will help the B40 family break that cycle of poverty as education paves the way to increased employment opportunities. Being able to graduate from school is already a prerequisite to jobs that pay a livable wage and also the opportunities to postsecondary education and training that can lead to promising living-wage jobs (Graduation Alliance, 2023).

The lack in performance of the B40 students in the country will definitely go against the aspiration of the Ministry of Education to achieve its National Education Blueprint. It was launched in October 2011 in effort of raising international education standards and fulfilling the Government's aspiration of better preparing Malaysia's children for the needs of the 21st century, and increased public and parental expectations of education policy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). According to the blueprint, a fundamental aspiration of any education system is to ensure that its students are being equipped with the knowledge and skills required for success in life with strong emphasis on the development of strong content knowledge in subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and languages. The B40 students do not perform well in these subjects. It is a concern of the Malaysian government that the performance of its students may not be as the expectation of the international assessment standards such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the standards used to compare the quality of educational outcomes across different systems in terms of cognitive skills such as application and reasoning. It was found that the international assessments assert that Malaysian students' performance is declining. In addition, equitable student outcomes are not achieved in states with a higher proportion of rural schools, like Sabah and Sarawak. On average, they perform poorer than states with less rural schools in major examinations like the UPSR examinations and the Malaysian Certificate of Education or *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM).

The declining B40 students in either schools or higher learning has become a national problem. As among the reasons of the high B40 drop-outs in Malaysian education are due to lack of motivation and interest in studies, it is thus deemed necessary to use two psychological traits namely, grit and resilience as solutions.

Grit and Resilience

The founder of grit was a well-known psychologist named Angela Duckworth. Grit is defined as one of the psychological traits which explains one's ability to sustain determination and motivation for a long time though there are failures or hardships in life (Duckworth et al., 2007). It is regarded as the capability to overcome difficulties while maintaining wishes for long-run objectives (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014; Howard, Nicholson, & Chesnut, 2019). Crede (2018) defines grit as one of the non-cognitive attributes which includes perseverance, self-reliance, motivation, consciousness, and goal setting while Lozano-Jiménez, Huéscar, and Moreno-Murcia (2021) believe that grit is having passion and

decision to achieve long haul goals whenever one experiences personal concerns and problems or facing crucial situations.

Resilience, on the other hand, concentrates on the dynamic process which allows positive adapting to stressors, or the ability to “bounce back” when one experiences adversity or failure in life (Straus et al., 2020 as cited in Hossain, Chen, Bent, Parenteau, Widjaja, Haft, Hoeft, & Hendren, 2022). It is related to how a person can be better when he faces difficulties and to how he copes with it (Portnoy, Relyea, Decker, Shamaskin-Garroway, Driscoll, Brandt, & Haskell, 2018). Apart from that, resilience is also a process which focuses on the relationship between learners and their setting. It measures the relationships between various mental well-being aspects and the learners’ academic achievement (Van der Meulen, Van der Velden, Van Aert, & Van Veldhoven, 2020). This means that resilient individuals do not allow negative situations to impede their performance, instead they develop the ability to deal better with mistakes and challenges (Wang, 2021). Resilience can thus be understood as a process of accumulating strength and perseverance although Duckworth (2016) stated that resilience is contrary to grit as the former refers to one’s capability to overcome major challenges while the latter, is the ability to deal with daily obstacles, setbacks, and challenges. Considering that grit and resilience mean having strong determination and high motivation, they are indeed important for excellent academic performance.

Grit, Resilience and Academic Excellence

Grit and resilience are significant elements that have been widely studied in terms of its relation to academic achievement (Lam & Zhou, 2019). According to Strayhorn (2014) within academic context, grit indicates a possible crucial impact on results such as learners’ commitment, engagement retention, involvement, success, and the possibility of graduation. A study by Strayhorn (2014) found grit influences learners’ academic performance where gritty learners were more likely to perform better on exams compared to those learners who were less gritty. As supported by Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014), learners who were grittier were also more hopeful about education and acquire higher levels of education. Meanwhile, Hossain et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study which adapted the Grit and Resilience Scale to investigate whether grit and resilience were related to students’ anxiety, depression, academic performance, and quality of life (QOL). The findings of the study indicates that grit and resilience are significantly related to students’ mental health and academic performance.

Furthermore, Montas, Rao, Atassi, Shapiro, Dean, and Salama (2021) conducted a study to assess the grit levels and resilience of dental students in United States. The results show that dental students with high grit scores and resilience scores obtained higher GPA and have better class ranks. In addition, a study by Rojas (2015) found that there is a relationship between undergraduate college students’ motivation and their grade point averages (GPA), that is mediated by grit. Besides that, Calo, Peiris, Chipchase, Blackstock, and Judd (2019) investigated the physiotherapy students’ traits of resilience, grit and mindset and explored whether these traits were related to one another. According to Tang, Wang, Guo, and Salmela-Aro (2019), a learner who has grit will achieve his own goals in life. Meanwhile, in Malaysian context, there was a quantitative study conducted by Mustaza and Kutty (2022) to identify the grit level and resilience of UKM students as well as the relationship between both variables. The results showed that the respondents had a medium-high grit level ($SD = 0.866$) and high resilience trait level ($SD = 0.738$). Past studies have proven that grit and resilience play significant role in enhancing students’ academic excellence. It is expected that they have

highlighted the importance of grit and resilience in enhancing academic excellence and how these two traits are understood in teaching and learning context.

Implementing Grit and Resilience in Education

Grit is portrayed in academic frameworks as potentially having a key impact on outcomes including learners' dedication, engagement, retention, involvement, achievement, and likelihood of graduating (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). It consists of two things: persistence in effort and persistence in desire (Duckworth et al., 2007). The ability to persevere with a single goal is what defines continuity of desire, which helps learners stay concentrated on the goals they were given at the start and avoid getting easily side-tracked (Duckworth, 2016). As learners struggle to finish their assignments and get their desired results, they continue to make an effort. They must be sufficiently motivated to manage their thought processes, performance, and behavioural reactions to the demands of the classroom. In relation to this, learners must be self-regulators that is a person's ability to control their emotions, actions, and context while studying or pursuing a goal (Butler, Schnellert, & Perry, 2017). This is because it can improve motivation, cognitive processes, psychological wellbeing, and behavioural control (Duru, Duru, & Balkis, 2014). Teachers and instructors are urged support self-regulated learning (SLR) to assure learners' academic success (Anam and Stracke, 2016; Zhang and Zhang, 2019).

Employing SRL in the classroom enables learners to manage their cognitive capacity, interest, attitude, and environmental elements in order to achieve their academic goal. Self-regulating learners are those who are involved in and conscious of their educational growth. They plan, perceive, and modify their activities in accordance with a purpose and have a clear knowledge of why and how a certain self-regulation approach is used. They can alter their behaviours and attitudes to become better learners by putting SRL into practise (Colthorpe, Ogiji, Ainscough, Zimbardi, & Anderson, 2019). As a result, when faced with demanding academic environments, these learners are more likely to persist and produce better results (Wang & Guan, 2020). Furthermore, these self-controlled learners who are energetic and robust in their education on the intellectual, emotional, and psychological levels are more likely to have successful professional careers. It has been shown that second language learning benefits from language learners' SRL and that it has a significant impact on higher education. By applying SRL, the learners can acquire self-regulation regardless of their educational background and have a higher chance of succeeding in educational environments (Zimmerman, 2002).

Apart from promoting SRL as a means to develop grit and resilience among students, teachers and educators can also adopt ways to develop and enhance the two traits among students. Warren (2021) for example, offered numerous suggestions for educators to foster grit and resilience in their students and to foster a sense of community and fun in the classroom. Among the strategies are:

1. Be present and genuinely pleased to be around the students.
2. Provide a culture of compassion and support that gives students a sense of worth.
3. Provide direction that helps each learner recognize his or her capacity for improvement.
4. Provide chances for critical conversation and creative expression.
5. Foster a sense of community among learners and provide them chances to assist one another.
6. Urge learners to seek assistance.
7. Appreciate and encourage emotional expressiveness.
8. Encourage learners to see setbacks as chances for improvement.

9. Assist learners in recognizing harmful and self-defeating behaviours so they can modify them.
10. Assist learners in managing their stress. With them, discuss potential sources of stress and come up with stress management ideas.

In short, educators must be knowledgeable of the elements that affect learners' ability to self-regulate, techniques as well as strategies for identifying and encouraging SRL in learners that will increase their level of resilience in the face of difficulties if they are to be successful in their studies. With SRL, hardworking learners can learn how to control their feelings, emotions, and reactions. They are able to develop short- and long-term goals for their education, create a plan to attain those goals, serve as a motivator, and keep their focus on their goals and academic performance. Apart from that, curriculum creators, material developers and syllabus designers should concentrate on creating classroom activities and materials that can motivate and inspire learners to be accountable for their education.

Conclusion

Some argue that the B40 students have access to government monetary assistance to help them cope with the cost of education such as from PTPTN, MARA and other scholarships that are available to Malaysians. This is because, one of the concerns of SPV2030 is addressing wealth and income disparities and social well-being. However, many B40 students are still lacking behind in education. This problem needs to be addressed differently. As grit and resilience can be two traits that can be imbued in students for academic success, it is suggested that parents, teachers, curriculum planners, policy makers work together to ensure that the B40 students are equipped with the two traits. As suggested in the literature, the B40 students can be exposed to self-regulated learning to make sure that they are persistent and persevere in learning either at school or tertiary levels.

Moreover, the B40 parents should be made aware of the need to motivate their children at all time. This is because, researchers often cited poverty and lack of involvement of parents in their children's education as the factors to failure in school performance. A review of some studies suggest that parents play an important role in the education of their children especially when children need both physical and moral support in difficult socioeconomic conditions. This supports the Havighurst theory where poverty can affect children's cognitive functioning (Allang et al., 2019). Indeed, parents play a critical role in determining the future education of the students.

In addition, school and teachers should take the initiative to promote SRL in school compounds and classes. The school environment can be created in such a way that the B40 students feel welcomed and have opportunity to involve in variety of school activities. The students should be praised when certain tasks are accomplished. In classrooms, teachers can creatively find ways to make the students utilise instructional strategies and assess their own progress. Make the students discover their own self-potential and give them the chance to feel confident and pick their own learning style.

The government, as policy makers play an important role to enhance grit and resilience among B40 students. They can come up an educational plan which encourages self-regulated learning as well as carrying out campaigns to create awareness and motivate the B40 students to be grittier and more resilient in pursuing knowledge. It is time to not only providing monetary

assistance but more than that to give realization to the B40 students to improve themselves and move forward. It should begin in the B40 homes, educating the parents first which in turn will change their children. University programs, courses and training can be tailored in providing inputs that instil grit and positive mindset in students. Students who have sustainable effort are gritty, will be successful and finally reaching their aimed target over time.

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