

More support needed for B40 families in online learning



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B40 students are the most vulnerable group that benefits the least from online learning platforms. While various efforts have been channelled into improving Internet access for the B40, little is known about the extent that such assistance translates into effective online learning.

Since online learning was implemented for all students from primary to tertiary levels starting March last year, various grievances from B40 parents and students were reported, including:

Parents travelling 6km from home to get Internet coverage for their children; a university student in Sabah spending a day on a tree to take an online examination; siblings sharing devices which resulted in some having to do homework at midnight; older

siblings' studies being affected as they have to guide younger siblings on online learning or take care of toddler siblings; homes which are unsafe for studying due to escalating cases of domestic violence; limited monitoring resulting in the Internet being used for non-study purposes; and poor home environments, where crowding, noise and limited space impede concentration.

To address these issues, the government rolled out multiple initiatives:

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) via the National Digital Network outlined plans for full 4G coverage in populated areas; the Higher Education Ministry provided free devices and worked with Internet data providers on offering special packages to university students; state governments partnered with the tech industry to donate computers and data plans; MCMC introduced 837 "Community Computer Centres" to improve Internet use; MCMC, in partnership with telecommunication companies, provided free Wi-Fi hotspots to 130 selected People's Housing Projects; and, cash subsidies to buy devices.

Despite this, insufficient attention has been paid to the B40's psychological stress and other family hurdles, which need immediate attention as they distract B40 students in online learning.

Strategies can be developed to help B40 communities in online learning, based on Social Cognitive Theory elements that require "interactions, environment and individual actions".

Interaction levels (e.g. instructor and student, among peers) on online learning platforms have to be creatively incorporated with the help of technology and support from stakeholders (students, teachers, parents).

One way to promote interaction is using student-centred learning, where students work with their peers on assignments using digital tools and present them to the class virtually. Another is using free high-quality resources like virtual tours to inspire students and then get feedback on what they learnt.

Since B40 parents are not able (in time or capability) to help their children in manoeuvring Internet sources, others like local libraries, community halls and religious centres could play a role by allocating an online tutorial

room for B40 communities on their premises.

Those attending these tutorials could learn from each other, or from allocated volunteers to guide them on basic Internet skills. B40 students need confidence and capability in these skills for effective online learning.

Environment in terms of Internet access and continued accessibility has been greatly enhanced as a result of joint initiatives by government agencies, schools and industry players. However, the B40 home environment might not be conducive for online learning.

A few B40 university students in my class desperately wanted to return to campus, as they could not concentrate at home.

Universities should consider allowing B40 students to return to campus hostels, while schools should allow them to access classrooms or computer labs.

Individual actions in terms of doing assignments, studying independently, adapting to the new normal and sticking to the online learning schedule in the midst of other challenges, require discipline, resilience and clear personal goals to stay committed.

Having to deal with family

chaos, B40 students need constant encouragement. Schools, parent-teacher association, teachers and non-B40 classmates could play a role.

Schools and teachers could develop B40 support groups and allocate meeting slots for B40 students to discuss their progress and resolve issues.

Non-B40 parents and students could be encouraged to mentor a B40 friend on a long-term basis. Mentorship could start from Standard 1 and continue till Standard 6.

Education allows the B40 to break away from the chains of poverty. If B40 students' education is disrupted due to the pandemic, the earlier efforts in using education to close the income inequality gap will go to waste.

Woes concerning the pandemic and family health, loss of jobs, financial stress, domestic violence, hunger, and inability to support children's learning are overwhelming for B40 families.

More support should be channelled to enhance their wellbeing.

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