

Transformational School Leaders Support Teachers to Foster Student Grit

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Abstract

Grit has drawn increasing intention in the field of educational research. As a crucial noncognitive indicator, grit has been used to understand individual success and performance in various fields. The past empirical research has shown inconsistent findings on the relationship between grit and academic achievement. The purpose of the study is aimed to explore how transformational school leaders support teachers to foster student grit through discovering what transformational school leaders' practices inspire teachers' practices in the classroom to the students. The semi-structural interview was conducted in the phenomenology study, and two school principals and eight teachers participated in the study. The researcher analyzed interview data guided by three theories of Dahlgren & Fallsberg's seven steps, cultural-historical activity theory, and the critical ecology framework. The Nvivo 12 program was utilized to code and to analyze the interview data. The study found that grit was a significant indicator of school improvement led by transformational school leaders' belief of core values such as hope, passion, excellence, resilience, and coherence. The study also found that grit fully or partially mediated the relationship between self-efficacy and school outcome and influenced among school leaders, teachers, and students. The significant finding was the strongest correlation between noncognitive factors and school leaders' belief and teachers' practices of grit, self-efficacy, mindset, and motivation. Results suggested that school leaders would promote grit as one of the school core indicators for school development; and suggested that the mindset needed to implement in the curriculum practice. Future researches would be recommended.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, School Leaders, Teachers, Student Grit
Gritty, Change

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Introduction

Grit has dramatically increased attention in educational research and plays a crucial role for school principals to support teachers in fostering students' grit on academic, behavioral, social, and emotional growth (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Grit, as an essential noncognitive indicator, has been used to understand individual success in various fields. Many studies showed that fortitude motivated students to set up their learning goals with courage and discover their learning disposition through self-reflection (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Students could have a better performance on facing learning challenges and better academic outcomes in the factory-oriented teaching and learning educational environment in China (Zhang & Koshmanova, 2020). Gritter individuals are more likely to engage in attention-absorbing activities and to seek meaning and purpose while learning from teachers. With gritty, students tend to believe that their abilities are malleable rather than fixed demonstrated higher self-efficacy. With a strong grit motive, students could positively confront their adversity, which leads them to have a better performance. Students with gritter individuals engage in self-regulated learning and deliberate practices in an effort for their learning goal that improves students' learning performance (Schimschal & Lomas, 2019).

Since grit plays a vital role in leading students' academic success in the exam-oriented educational environment, transformative school leaders help students to build their self-disposition, self-efficacy, and life-value (Yacek & Ijaz, 2020). The previous studies confirmed that cognitive skills influence students' academic achievement, and the school usually focused on more than the noncognitive in some schools. However, noncognitive ability affects students' outcomes, lifelong learning goals, and self-integrity (Duckworth, Quirk, et al., 2019). Specifically, students face many serious challenges, such as assignment burden, learned helplessness, learning difficulty, pressure, disorder, and lost confidence. In the exam-oriented educational environment, school principals, teachers, and students face the academic demands on passing the standardized test score as higher as possible by neglecting the importance of building a collaborative learning community, developing life-long learning goals, building disposition, and self-efficacy. The "devil training" approach causes teachers turnover, students' murder, mistrust, job dissatisfaction, and even complaints in the school environment (Duckworth, Taxer, Eskreis-Winkler, Galla, & Gross, 2019; Zhang & Koshmanova, 2020).

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the implementation and support of transformative school leaders in motivating students to develop their grit in the classroom, and to use courage to improve students' success and performance. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do transformational school leaders support teachers to foster student grit?
2. What improvements of the grit have been made?
3. How does the perseverance affect school leaders, teachers, and students to improve self-efficacy and school performance?
4. How do the transformational school leaders instruct the teachers to use the element of grit for curriculum and classroom practice?

Literature Review

In the previous study, transformational school leaders can use the grit to engage school vision, mission, value, and culture in associating with the student, teacher, parents, and school leaders for lifelong school implementation (Adams, Olsen, & Ware, 2017). The school leaders aim to help the followers to build self-efficacy, self-disposition, resilience, and social coherence for school growth (Koshmanova, 2011). Meanwhile, school principals motivate followers to achieve their learning outcomes with a positive attitude and goal setting (Yulianti, Denessen, Droop, & Veerman, 2020). They face challenges through school-level perspectives, school building operations, instructional guides, and professional development for student achievement (Ozdemir, 2019). Other authors developed the student's motivation and skills to fulfill the school goals (Li, Liu, Chen, Yeh, & Yeh, 2017). Once the students have grit, they usually can face challenges with values of education, such as discipline, harmony, morality, peace, and self-cultivation (Queux & Kuah, 2020). The transformational leaders need to invite students, teachers, and parents for school improvement in using the educational values as transformative school culture.

Therefore, grit has a significant impact on students' performance in a transformative leadership with self-consciousness as grit-ability for student achievement (Carreiro & Oliveira, 2019). Transformative leaders have the potentials to suit diverse natural curiosity, interest, and motivation in studies in social-cultural context and school culture (Burgess, 2019; Flaherty & Overton, 2018). The transformative leaders seek the ways to develop teachers' activity and skills to foster student grit for their academic performance, and personal integrity in the cultural context (Ndlovu, Ngirande, Setati, & Zhuwao, 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

The phenomenology study was employed to analyze school principals' lived experiences in depicting the essential structure of knowledge based on the phenomenological reflective lifeworld analysis. This study aimed to focus on individual skills, beliefs, and perceptions of human exposure (Creswell, 2007).

The interpretative and descriptive analysis used to understand the school principal's view on grit phenomenon in this study and build knowledge of reality (Zorgo, Purebl, & Zana, 2018). This descriptive phenomenological analysis listed every expression relevant to the experience, reduction, and elimination, individual textual description, structural description, and individual textual-structural description of experience (Iseri, 2019). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) used to develop a dialogue between researchers, their coded data, and their psychological knowledge about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns (Smith et al., 2009). The steps are reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching connection across emergent themes, moving to the next case, looking for patterns across trials, and especially attending to the participants' use of language.

Aside from this analysis, the Dahlgren & Fallsberg's (1991) seven steps: familiarization, condensations, comparison, grouping, articulating labeling, and

contrasting data; cultural-historical theory, and back translation used in this study (Zoega, Valdimarsdottir, & Hernandez-Diaz, 2012). The back-translation method was employed to ensure cross-cultural sensitivity to school principals. Overall, this study suggested using a phenomenology study method to understand how school principals support teachers to foster students' grit through a depth understanding of school principals' experiences in a specific cultural context (Zhang & Koshmanova, 2020).

Positionality and Participants

The positionality of the research significantly impacts informants' access and understanding of experiences, beliefs, and perceptions through data analysis. The author received higher education in both western and eastern cultural context. The author observed some teacher's turnover, students' murders, and pressures due to the exam-oriented educational environment (Ro, 2019).

The study maintains ethical reports, beneficence, justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Correctly, the study has used the participants' anonymity to understand the school principals, teachers, and students' lived experiences in the Confucian context. The school principals (N=2) and teachers (N=8) participated in this study shown in the table.

Table 1 *Overview of the Participants at Y.C.* School in Beijing*

Name*	Position	Gender	Age	Years of Working Experience	Graduate Degree
Thomas	School Principal	M	42	15	MBA
John	Vice Principal	M	31	5	B.S.
Wong	Math Teacher	F	28	4	B.A.
Lee	English Teacher	M	25	1	B.A.
Wu	Chinese Teacher	F	28	2	B.A.
Xu	English Teacher	F	30	7	B.A.
Zhang	English Teacher	M	32	6	B.A.
Chang	Math Teacher	F	33	6	B.S.
Zhu	Science Teacher	M	35	9	B.S.
Sun	History Teacher	F	27	2	B.A.

*Pseudonyms

Data Collection

Data in this study were collected through semi-structural interviews across respondents (Yuniarto & Tjakraatmadja, 2017). Data included the authors' observation, field notes, memos, documents, and transcriptions from his working reflection from 2012 to 2019 (Glazier & Powell, 1992).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was started after data collection. The three-analysis framework was employed, which are the cultural-historical analysis (Lim, 2019), Yin's case analysis approach (Yin, 2006), Dahlgren & Falleberg's (1991) seven-step in this study.

The interpretative and descriptive analysis approach helps the author to understand how the school principals support teachers to foster student grit in their view (Ziskin, 2019). The authors used multiple cycling analysis to emerge the significant themes to understand the lived experiences of grit phenomenon through interaction, analytic memos, and associated with answering the research questions. The transcription, field notes, documents and memos imported into the N-Vivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software package that effectively helps the researcher manage data (Creswell, 2007; Zupanic et al., 2019).

In the first cycle, the author read, and re-read the transcription through coding, categorizing, and synthesizing the major themes to understand how grit affects the students' outcomes and school development. The analysis has emerged the concepts with the transformative learning and Junzi leadership with emerging cultural context by grit-ability in improving students' academic outcomes (Queux & Kuah, 2020).

Methodological Consistency and Trustworthiness

The research enhances the trustworthiness by strictly allowing Dalgren & Falleberg's (1991) analysis steps. Meanwhile, reliability was evaluated according to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model for establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. The model is a reliable method for determining trustworthiness for phenomenology studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Individual interviews with participants lasted up to 90 minutes. The adequate time or prolonged engagement with each participant as they describe their experiences is one of the best ways to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data from the participants' audio and written transcription journals note that coding patterns from data analysis software and the generated categories from the data analysis served as the audit trails to establish dependability. Data that set reliability are components needed for confirmability. The findings filled in the gap in the literature review (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Due to few studies through emergent themes, and the researchers can transfer the results into the cultural-historical context in the study.

Therefore, the lived experience with the emergent theme in this study ensures the authenticity of the data, which maintains the quality of data. Importantly, this study was invited to one of the Ph.D. candidates as peer feedback and followed the reflexivity in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Results

All data were merged into themes through the interpretative and descriptive analysis with reflecting the school principals' and teachers' views on grit. The phenomenology study regards school principals' experiences on courage how the students explore their academic and personal growth. Findings related to the importance of the grit interaction between school principals, teachers, and students present here per research questions.

Research Question 1: How do transformational school leaders support teachers to foster students' grit?

Findings show that school principals used three major themes to support teachers fostering students' grit. Firstly, school principals emphasize the core values of school engagement through motivation, passion, and life values. Since the school principal believes that courage encourages the students to face learning challenges in the exam-oriented educational environment, the principal Thomas said: "Both teachers and students should have the grit to handle the learning challenges in the exam-oriented educational environment." John said that encouraging students to commit what they do with involvement and engagement. Also, teacher Xu, Lee, and Chang indicated that only if the students comprehend what they need to do with hope, commitment, and passion, they may achieve their learning goals. Particularly, teacher Zhang said: "one of my students prepare for the standardized English test, and the students read tests in six hours with 15 reading articles in test module." Grit helps the students to pass the exam because of his resilience, and courage made them successful.

Secondly, school principals set up a grit training workshop, which can assist teachers in understanding the function of the grit. Then, teachers could emphasize the importance of courage in learning. Teacher Wong said: "I know that grit in my culture can encourage students to focus on their studies and pass the exam with a dreamed score." Teacher Zhang said: "students face pressures, even give up their study because they could not overcome their challenges. Some students might drop out because they cannot pass the exam with a higher score." Teacher Sun said: "Only I know what grit is, I can help students to practice in their daily life." Aside from them, Teacher Lee, Wu, Zhu, and vice-principal John indicate similar views on grit in learning for student outcomes.

Lastly, school principals encourage teachers to use the rewarding system to foster students' grit. Principal Thomas said that both teachers and students have a solid exam preparation, which is imperative for students to gain a higher score. Teacher Chang, Wu, Sun, and Zhang stated similar views on raising the grit for students to pass the exam through hardworking. Principal John said: "once the students can confront challenges and pass the standardized tests, the school rewards Chinese Yuan 20, 000 scholarship. The prerequisite is that the students can receive TOEFL score over 100; SAT scores over 1500; and A.P. is 5." The school principals and teachers believe only the students set up their explicit goals and work every day, which makes it possible. Teacher Chang and Lee said: "students need to pour all energy on learning with passion, resilience, and hardworking; they can reach their learning goals." Therefore, this study found that school principals used the three major strategies mentioned above to foster students' grit.

Research Question 2: What improvements to the grit have been made?

Three improvements were discovered in this study. Firstly, the school learning environment becomes a positive, supportive learning community because some of the students pass the exam with a higher score through their hardworking and grit in learning. Since some of the students have been insisting on studying with the courage to get a higher score, they recognized that their long-time hard work could help them achieve success. Therefore, grit motivates teachers, students, and school principals to

build a positive learning environment. School principals Thomas said: "students feel positive to face their learning challenges." Teacher Lee and Zhang said: "students with gritty can help them to improve their learning and testing performance effectively." The vice-principal John, teacher Chang, Zhu, and Sun said: "grit motivates students to work hard." Therefore, grit helps students to pass the exam with a higher score, and teachers are praised and awarded by the school principals. The student's high academic score increases the school's social reputation and enrollment rate. This positive educational outcome improves the school quality of education and social image.

Secondly, grit helps students feel proud of their school. The gritty students help them to study in the top university accepted by parents because most of them believe that the Chinese learning environment is around the test results and reputation in schools. Once the students can pass the exam, the school can increase the enrollment rate and school reputation. Teacher Wong stated: "since my student, Tony feels happy because he passes the exam and can insist on learning for success." Teacher Xu, Lee, and Zhang said: "facing the challenge of score performance, students have the grit to focus on learning toward academic performance." Therefore, grit helps students to pass the exam and teacher's recognition from school principals, parents, and society toward a learning performance.

Thirdly, students, school principals, and teachers believe that grit is essential for students to engage their learning goals. Teacher Chang said: "I remember some students face pressures because of the standardized test forces, thus causing them to feel the struggle." However, school principal Thomas and John promote the grit with cultural contexts. This study found that students reduce their pressure and feel better, as some of the teachers believed because of gritty. Therefore, there are three improvements: grit creates a positive, supportive learning community; courage helps students to have a better academic outcome, and courage allows students to face pressure positively.

Research Question 3: How do the perseverance impact school leaders, teachers, and students to improve self-efficiency and school performance?

This study found that perseverance impacts students, teachers, and school principals' self-efficacy and performance. Most school principals, teachers, and students believe that passing the standardized and national exam with a higher score is the best way to motivate students in learning, increases the school social reputation, and improves the school enrollment rate. Although most of the school key stakeholders believe that grit may impact students' academic and exam results, some consider that the school leaders need to promote coherence, which is vital for students' support because each of the students has a unique talent.

The current problem is that the competitive learning environment causes students' mistrust. Therefore, principal and teacher Zhang think coherence and a supportive learning environment is vital for school not only increasing school reputation but also building a positive, supportive learning environment in this study. Specifically, once students can insist on learning and exam preparation, students can develop their self-efficacy because of grit. For example, teacher Wong said: "my students pass the exam

with a higher score. Therefore, they become confident and talkative because they realize that they can manage their learning goals and vice versa."

Principal Thomas said: "only if the students can insist on learning and never stop in learning, students can face challenges with a positive result." They can have the opportunity to change their behavior through cognitive ability with a positive attitude. Teacher Zhu, Wu, Xu, and Sun said that students with hardworking improve students' test scores, thus leading students' academic performance and self-efficacy. Therefore, perseverance always affects students, teachers, and school principals in building confidence, self-conscience, and goals for higher test results required by top schools.

Research Question 4: How do the transformational school leaders instruct the teachers to use the element of grit for curriculum and classroom practice?

In this study, transformational school leaders instruct teachers to use several frameworks to prepare curriculum and classroom practices. School leaders use the self-reflective analysis steps to build self-disposition through silence, recall the experience, analyze experience, comparison experience, and decision-making for an act. This self-reflective meditation could help school leaders to transform the beliefs of grit on learning and academic performance. While preparing the curriculum, school principals emphasize the school's core values of education, such as passion and personality growth.

Also, the school principals encourage teachers to practice the grit in the classroom through peer case analysis, group discussion, and hardworking habits through coaching, instructional and checking the curriculum practice in teaching and learning. Some school leaders observed classroom practice performance through self-reflective practices. Therefore, findings show that the school principals always emphasize the core values of education that need to consider the cultural, historical impacts on the school promotion. School principals encourage teachers to guide students to practice learning activities and projects through coaching, instructional, transformative, and timeline in leading school development, along with grit practice.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations for Future Studies

This study revealed that school principals need to promote grit in learning. In the exam-oriented educational environment, only if the students have courage, the students could pass the exam and get a better score for their academic outcomes. Meanwhile, grit helps students to overcome their challenges in learning. The noncognitive skills, such as grit, passion, have a correlative relationship with students' academic outcomes. The previous studies showed that resilience mediated the relationship between vigorous learning activity and consistency of active learning for students to have better educational results (Yulianti et al., 2020). Once the students can practice grit within the characteristic of conscientiousness, the school could build a positive, supportive learning environment and reducing students' stress because the previous studies show that students with grit can thrive under pressure, and through adversity become more self-confident individuals. Also, students can endure perseverance to overcome challenges as essential to avoid discouragement from long term goals. Therefore, the grit characteristic recognized as least necessary for success was striving for excellence (Quinn, 1996).

Another result showed that school principals must promote grit as a vital role for students' academic and personality growth with a better outcome. The previous studies show that school principals practice the transformative school leadership values, core spirit, and providing individualized support to build collaborative learning processes for school outcomes (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). This learning style could help students to engage the learning goal and ensure significant learning outcomes. Students face too much pressure on learning for exams to overcome learning challenges and improve learning efficiency in the exam-oriented learning environment. This viewing suggested that school principals need to build an ethical interpersonal relationship through Confucian virtues of trust, empathy, and humanity in the Chinese context (Cetzal, Mac, & Munoz, 2018).

The other finding is that grit plays a vital role for school principals, teachers, and students to prepare their learning for driving a good test result (Arar, 2018). This exam-oriented approach could not help the students to engage what they want for life-values. This study showed a lack of professional development regarding grit and parental involvement for school leaders and teachers on building home-school partnerships and working with students with gritty (Yulianti et al., 2020).

The findings in this study may imply that the school principals should aim professional development to support teachers in inviting parents to be involved in their children's education (Hernandez-Amoros & Martinez Ruiz, 2018). This study concluded that school principals need to create integrated professional development activities for encouraging teachers to practice grit. They understand how the teachers could use the Chinese cultural context such as Confucian Junzi for creating a friendly working environment and Junzi has presented as a form of transformational leadership (Lowery, 2019).

Therefore, future studies would suggest conducting mixed-method research to explore how school principals promote grit for students' academic outcomes and personal growth. The qualitative research aims to discover how gritty leadership supports teachers, students, parents, and school principals in educational settings. The quantitative analysis aims to find out what factors impact the students' grit and student academic outcomes. Another study would use a comparative qualitative research design to understand how noncognitive characteristics such as grit, self-efficiency, hope, passion affect the students' learning outcome between secondary school principals in the United States and high school principals in China.

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