

Challenges and Strategies to Enhance Quality Learning of Early Childhood Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study in Secang District, Magelang, Central Java, Indonesia

Tantangan dan Strategi untuk Meningkatkan Kualitas Pembelajaran Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini selama Pandemi Covid-19: Penelitian Kualitatif di Kecamatan Secang, Magelang, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia

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Abstract

The closure of school activities in Indonesia because of the Covid-19 pandemic brought a spontaneous shift from face-to-face learning to online learning. Early childhood education teachers were challenged to thoughtfully deliver a good quality lesson with the resource limitation due to pandemics. This study directly responds to the challenges and strategies of early childhood teachers to enhance quality learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic. This qualitative study surveyed teachers in the Secang district, one of the rural areas in Indonesia. The study shows that equity concern, digital tools and skills, and decreasing the quality of education were challenges that they experienced during Covid-19 pandemics. Home visits and blended learning were strategies that they used to enhance the learning quality of early childhood education. The paper concluded with implications for stakeholders to elaborate on online teaching and learning and strategies for supporting teachers in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Online Learning; Teacher; Early Childhood Education; Covid-19

Abstrak

Penutupan kegiatan sekolah di Indonesia akibat pandemi Covid-19 berdampak pada perubahan sistem pembelajaran tatap muka menjadi jarak jauh. Guru PAUD dihadapkan tantangan baru untuk memberikan sistem pembelajaran berkualitas. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi tantangan dan strategi guru PAUD untuk meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran di masa Pandemi Covid-19. Studi kualitatif ini dilakukan melalui survei guru-guru di Kecamatan Secang, yang merupakan daerah pedesaan di Indonesia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepedulian terhadap pemerataan, perangkat dan keterampilan digital, serta penurunan kualitas pendidikan menjadi tantangan yang mereka alami selama pandemi Covid-19. Kunjungan rumah dan blended-learning merupakan strategi yang mereka gunakan untuk meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran PAUD di masa Pandemi Covid-19. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat membantu pemerintah dalam penentuan kebijakan pengajaran dan pembelajaran daring serta strategi untuk mendukung guru dalam pandemi Covid-19.

Kata Kunci

Pembelajaran Daring; Guru; Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini; Covid-19

1. Introduction

The first Covid-19 case was reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Lin et al., 2020). Since then, Covid-19 has spread worldwide, become a pandemic, and seriously impacted health, economy, and society. On 17 January 2022, the number of infected people globally was 326 million, and 5.5 million deaths have been reported by this disease (Google News, 2022). The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Indonesia on 2 March 2020 (Aisyah et al., 2020). Moreover, Indonesia's high number of cases makes Indonesia the fourth-highest number of Covid-19 cases in Southeast Asia. On 25 January 2022, the number of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia was 4.29 million (Google News, 2022).

The Covid-19 virus has far-reaching effects in nearly all social areas, including education (Huber & Helm, 2020). UNESCO (2021) estimated that more than 1.6 billion learners had their education put on hold due to Covid-related school closures and millions more are at risk of never returning to education. Indeed, schools in Indonesia were closed in March 2020 and have been partially closed until now. School closure protocols varied across Indonesia under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The Indonesia Ministry of Education, by Letter of Ministry of Education Number 4 2020, mandated to close the school and move all the teaching processes to remote learning in March 2020. Then in August 2020, the new protocol from the Indonesia Ministry of Education mandated conducting offline learning with several requirements. As a result of these protocols, as of 23 March 2021, 78% of schools in Indonesia conduct online learning (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic affects all education levels, including early childhood education. Before Covid-19, early childhood education had an enormous challenge due to inequality in education. More than sixty percent in the region were not attending any early childhood education program before Covid-19 (UNICEF, 2017). However, at the height of the pandemic, at least 7 million children across the region could not continue their pre-primary education due to the school closure (UNICEF, 2021). This pandemic leads to learning inequities through school closure due to unequal access to learning

materials at home, most notably to online learning (UNICEF, 2021).

Online learning has been widely promoted to replace traditional face-to-face learning with remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Online learning is a learning experience through the internet where students interact with teachers and other students and are not dependent on their physical location (Singh & Thurman, 2019). The use of online learning for early childhood education has been debated. Pangondian et al. (2019) states that online learning systems can be getting, including that it is not leaped by space and time and can be done anywhere, anytime. With the advancement of technologies, online learning can provide a rich, authentic learning ecology that can facilitate collaboration and interdependence between learners (Aldhafeeri & Khan, 2016). In addition, the major problem of online learning includes social isolation, lack of interactivity and participation, and delay in feedback (Dong et al., 2020).

For high-quality learning, purposeful interaction between teacher and student should be established. Teacher-student interactions during learning, particularly in distance learning, impact students' satisfaction, motivation, and ability to contend with learning assignments (Sason & Kellerman, 2021). Thus, framed within play-based learning requires teachers to engage with students. This matter becomes more challenging than ever when teaching and learning are turned online. Teachers were challenged to thoughtfully how to deliver a good quality lesson to young children with the resource limitation due to pandemics. The teacher should meet curriculum expectations within a distance learning context. As the challenges rise about enhancing quality learning in early childhood education, it is essential to understand the efforts of the teachers when moving their learning process from face-to-face to remote learning. In this situation, teachers should have abilities on digital literacy creation or digital transformation skills. This study directly responds to the teacher of early childhood education challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The qualitative method was used to gather data from early childhood education teachers on what they experienced in teaching students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative method was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interaction while producing non-numerical data (Pathak et al., 2013). Therefore, only words were gathered to form part of the data collection from the teachers.

A phenomenological method was employed to qualitatively analyze the challenges and strategies of the teacher to enhance quality learning of early childhood education during the Covid-19 pandemic. A phenomenological design helps the researcher clarify how people make sense of their lives by reviewing their experiences (Jameel et al., 2018). This study drew on teachers' past experiences in giving education to ECE students.

2.2. Site Selection

The study was conducted in the Secang district located in the Magelang region, Central Java, Indonesia. Based on [Indonesia Statistic Bureau \(2018\)](#), the Secang district is a rural area. The district has 71 kindergartens from state and private schools ([Indonesia Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022](#)). Five teachers who comes from 4 early childhood education schools in Secang District were deployed for this study. The schools' name who belongs to this study were PAUD Pandan Wangi, RA Masyitoh I, TK Lestari PGRI, and PAUD Madusari.

2.3. Participants

This study used a purposive sampling method which involved five teachers of early childhood education. Purposive sampling helps the researcher choose and identify the information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources ([Etikan et al., 2016](#)). The purposive sampling with the maximum variation sampling was used to meet the variation of teachers' gender, education, and job position.

2.4. Data Collection

For this study, the data were collected using semi-structured interviews since these types of interviews are verbal exchanges. The overall purpose of using semi-structured interviews for this study is to gather information from respondents who have personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs related to the topic ([DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019](#)). The sequencing and wording of the questions were modified by the interviewer to fit the interviewee and interview context best.

Due to the spread of Covid-19, it was challenging to conduct a face-to-face interview since it was risky for participants and the researcher. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews using WhatsApp calls. Because WhatsApp is a familiar application feature in Indonesia, it was easily accessible for respondents and convenient to use.

The open-ended questions will allow the participants to give their opinions regarding specific topics without being restricted. Verbal and electronic consent was taken from the respondents before the interview. The interview took approximately 30-40 minutes for one participant. At this point, participants started interacting by stating their gender, age, profession, and experience. All the interview was recorded by audio recorder.

The researcher would get consent from all respondents. Before the interviews, the researcher explained the study objective, procedure, risk, outcome, and compensation to the participants.

The participant was assured that all the information would be kept confidential, and they had a chance to decline participation in this study. The researcher would keep the privacy and anonymity of the participants so the participants would feel more comfortable answering the questions.

2.5. Data Analysis

This research used thematic analysis to get the transcript from the raw data. Thematic analysis effectively summarizes the most important features of a large data set, as it causes the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handle and process the data, helping to produce a clear and organized final report ([Nowell et al., 2017](#)).

After 24 hours of the interview, the recordings were transcribed, and each transcript was double-checked for inaccuracies. Themes were drawn from the theoretical idea and from the raw data itself. First, the researcher listened to each recording gathered by each participant. While listening to the recordings, the researcher transcribed each interview word by word to ensure everything was not missed. Then the researcher overlooked all the data, took notes by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Then by highlighting interesting sentences, codes were generated. Open coding line by line was used. After generating initial codes, the researcher searched for themes related to the research question and the topic being explored. This step is where the researcher reviewed the codes that identified similarities between codes. Themes were generated by identifying patterns among codes. Themes were reviewed to ensure they are accurate representations by splitting, combining, discarding, or creating new themes. Based on the final list of themes, each theme was named and defined.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The total number of participants was 5 teachers from Secang district (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants in the Study

Participants	Age	Gender	Educational background	Years of experience in ECE
SG	44	F	Bachelor degree	14
HW	47	F	Bachelor degree	10
RN	26	F	Bachelor degree	4
FW	59	F	Bachelor degree	35
HS	49	F	Master degree	13

3.1.1. Theme 1: Equity Concern

The thematic analysis of the interview results found six sub-themes about equity concern from teachers as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Equity Concern

No.	Sub-themes	Respondent	Response Sample
1	Inequitable access to technology	RN	"Parents reported they don't have internet quota or don't have a signal"
		HS	"One parent still does not have a cell phone"

2	Sharing of technology	HW	"Some families have three children. The parents will prioritize the older brother"
3	The government's compensation was insufficient	FW	"Although parents were given compensation for internet quota, they reported not enough"
4	Parents were not familiar with meeting application	SG	"We wanted the group meeting using google meet or zoom, but parents refused because they don't have the application and they don't know how to operate it."
5	Working parents	HS	"Parents are too busy because of their job."
6	Educational support to the children	SG	"Many parents do not have a high educational background, and even some are illiterate."

3.1.2. Theme 2: Teacher Digital's Tools and Skills

The thematic analysis of the interview results found two sub-themes about teacher digital's tools and skills as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Teacher Digital's Tools and Skills

No.	Sub-themes	Respondent	Response Sample
1	Lack of digital equipment	RN	"We don't have a special phone that schools provide for online learning."
		FW	"We have 69 students and six teachers, but we only have two laptops."
2	Lack of digital knowledge	HW	"We should think and think again about what media interested the student in online learning."
		HS	We don't have enough knowledge in conducting online learning

3.1.3. Theme 3: Decrease in Quality Learning

The thematic analysis of the interview results found three sub-themes about decreasing the quality learning as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Decreasing the Quality Learning

No.	Sub-themes	Respondent	Response Sample
1	Impact on students' academics	HW	"Many learning targets cannot be achieved"
		HS	"It's very difficult to build children's characteristics because it needs a habit"
		SG	"Before the pandemic, it was effortless for us to ask the students to memorize, but now it is not working"
		RN	"The pandemic graduates are very different from students who graduated before the pandemic."

2	Parents providing too much help	RN	"We found parents helping so much in students' assignments"
3	Decreasing the quality of learning	HS	"We found that our learning quality decreases because of the time limitation"

3.1.4. Theme 4: Home Visit as a Teaching Strategy to Enhance the Quality Learning

The next theme that emerged from teachers is the implementation of home visit as strategies to enhance the quality learning during pandemic as shown as in [Table 5](#).

Table 5. Home Visit

No.	Sub-themes	Respondent	Response Sample
1	Home visit during a pandemic	HS	"We consider conducting face-to-face learning in the children's house."
		SG	"We conduct the home visit every day. In a day, we visit two houses"
		HW	"We borrow the house of resident here and invite five children in that house."
		RN	"Five children are gathered in one house than we came there"
2	Materials of home visit	FW	"We start with a reading session, learn basic math, art lesson, memorizing daily prayers, etc."
3	Application of health protocol	FW	"We used the masks, brought hand sanitizer for children washing their hands."
		FW	"Children were so excited when we got there."
4	Positive impact of home visit	RN	"The children look happier when meeting their friends. They gain social skills through interactions with their friends."

3.1.5. Theme 5: Blended Learning

The thematic analysis of the interview results found two sub-themes about blended learning as shown in [Table 6](#).

Table 6. Blended Learning

No.	Sub-themes	Respondent	Response Sample
1	The implementation of blended learning	FW	"We divide the class into two groups: group A and group B. Each group attended 3 days"
2	Increasing the quality of learning	HW	"I think combining offline and online learning is the best solution for this pandemic situation"
		SG	"This type of learning, which combines face-to-face and online learning, helps us reach our target"

3.2. Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed five themes: equity concern, teacher digital's tools and skills decreasing quality of education, home visit as teaching strategies, and blended learning. The results captured within these themes show the challenges and strategies of early childhood teachers to enhance the quality of education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Teachers reported concern with the parents' inequitable access to the technology regarding equity concerns. Connectivity issues, sharing phone with siblings, busy parents, lack of knowledge in using learning applications, and the low educational background of the parents. Connectivity issues are prevalent in Indonesia, especially in rural areas. Not all parents have enough connectivity to access the learning materials from the teachers. This finding is in keeping with the study of [Farooq et al. \(2020\)](#), who examined the challenges of online medical education in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic and found that students living in rural areas often complain of problems with connectivity during attending video conferences for lectures.

The lack of connectivity issue will affect the study motivation of the students. Based on [Hassan \(2020\)](#), there was a relationship between motivational and internet networks aspects. Another concern regarding inequitable in parents' knowledge. This study shows that children have different educational backgrounds families. In the case of rural areas, teachers reported that several parents do not have high educational backgrounds, even illiterate. The lack of knowledge of parents will affect the learning process. In online learning, the role of parents is as a substitute for teachers at schools.

The involvement of parents in supervising children has a tremendous influence on children's success, such as help in writing, reading, and doing the assignments ([Puspita, 2021](#)). The parents' educational background also contributes to their involvement in the learning process. Parents who are well-educated exhibit a higher level of involvement in their education compared to less-educated parents, especially in home-based involvement ([Handayani et al. 2020](#)). Concerning parents' jobs that affect learning, teachers reported that parents who are

busy with their work communicated rarely. Even the assignment of the children was not submitted. Complimentary to this study, [Youn et al. \(2020\)](#) highlighted that student whose mothers are part-timers exhibited an advantage in academic learning because of the increased school participation and parent-child interaction.

The next challenges for the teacher in the pandemic situation are digital equipment and skills. The student and the teacher found difficulties conducting online learning due to the digital equipment. Regarding materials that have to be delivered by phone, teachers found difficulties because they are still unfamiliar with the digitalization methods. The transition from face-to-face learning to remote learning forces teachers to be flexible, creative, and imaginative. The teachers provide brief, clear, interesting, and simple media to increase students' interest in learning ([Sutarto et al., 2020](#)). The teacher must be flexible and imaginative when it comes to preparing and selecting learning content ([Klieme, 2020](#)).

This result indicates that teachers should be provided digital training that supports their distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. This demand seems inevitable, as research by [Konig et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that teacher competence and teachers' opportunities to learn digital competence are instrumental in adapting to online teaching during Covid-19 school closures. [Lusiana and Maryanti's \(2020\)](#) study examined Indonesia's effective media in distance learning: WhatsApp, virtual meeting applications, and google classroom. During the school closure, teachers should be provided with appropriate technical equipment such as laptops and cell phones to enhance the good quality of remote learning ([Wu, 2021](#)). However, this study's result shows different that teachers use their laptops and cell phones to conduct online learning.

Teachers' discussion regarding digital's equipment and skill continued in conversations about the effects of online teaching on quality learning. One major problem of decreasing the quality of learning is due to time limitations. The teacher reported that several learning objectives were not achieved. It is because of the lack of a differentiated approach from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning. The study by [Scalise \(2007\)](#)

mentioned the five types of differentiation between offline and online learning: differentiation of content, process, product, affect, and learning environment. The teachers should consider these differentiations. Some evidence shows the effects of online learning on students' academics. [Ananga and Biney \(2021\)](#) stated that face-to-face students reported higher satisfaction and a more positive perception of the teaching methodologies utilized than online students. This study highlights the demand for a progress program that can narrow the academic gaps and strategies to enhance the quality of education using online learning.

The following themes are regarding teachers' strategies for maintaining good teaching quality during the pandemic. Almost all schools in which the teacher participated in this study conducted the home visit as a strategy to maintain interaction and make quality time with the students. Another rural area in Indonesia also uses this learning during a pandemic. A study by [Nirmala and Annuar \(2020\)](#) examined the implementation of a home visit in a rural area in Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, stating that 84.3% of teachers in this area implemented a home visit strategy as learning during a pandemic. The teacher home visit group had statistically significantly higher levels of academic achievement in mathematics and language arts courses, higher levels of positive classroom behavior, and higher levels of parent involvement ([Wright et al., 2018](#)). Further, [Meyer and Mann \(2006\)](#) stated that the teachers' visit leads to improved communication with the parents, a better understanding of the child, and a better understanding of the impact of the child's home environment. The home visit method makes students motivated to learn so that it can improve learning outcomes ([Prasetyo et al., 2021](#)). The implementation of home visits continues to prioritize health protocols in the middle of a pandemic. Each school has different methods of a home visit. It depends on the resource and capacity of each school. The research about the implementation of home visits in schools in Indonesia by [Mokodompit \(2020\)](#) reported that home visits were not maximal due to the unbalanced ratio of teachers and students.

The discussion with the teachers continues to be the next strategy in the pandemic. This study revealed that teachers prefer to conduct blended learning than online

learning. Blended learning refers to an integrated learning experience controlled and guided by the instructor, whether in face-to-face communication or his virtual presence (Bryan, 2016). Realizing that young children need special attention rather than higher-level children, meeting in person with children is a valuable thing during this situation. Although only conducted once or twice a week, the teacher is more satisfied rather than online learning for a full week. From the teacher, students also reported enjoying the blended learning. Aji et al. (2020) argued that the benefits of blended learning are more flexible learning, motivation, interaction, and improving Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills. This study's result indicates that teachers feel more comfortable and believe that their learning target can be achieved due to the limited resource during a pandemic. The study suggested that government should endeavor to adopt the blended mode in their learning process during the pandemic and the following years, even the pandemic end.

The result captures the voices of teachers' challenges as they explored unfamiliar domains and changed to remote educating and learning. We present several suggestions for how to work on remote instructing and advancing as well as methodologies for supporting face to face learning in the Covid-19 pandemic:

- a) Improvement of teachers' ability on digital and technological skills by training and professional development. The educational background of the teacher should be considered due to several schools still having teachers who did not meet the requirements for early childhood teachers.
- b) More support for students and parents on appropriate technology used for remote learning. Ensuring every parent, especially in a rural area has a cell phone and internet access conducting online learning.
- c) A requirement for an integrated curriculum to enhance the good quality of early childhood learning. Making a realistic learning objective which is possible to achieve in this condition.
- d) A need for an integrated approach to reach children and families in remote learning. More individual guidance to parents and children to meet the goals of the learning process.

- e) Encourage the home visits program while students could not enter the school due to the restriction of Covid-19 pandemic and maximize the quality learning although the home visit only once a week.
- f) Empowering blended teaching which combines face-to-face and online learning. The improvement of the connection between teachers and parents is needed for high-quality blended learning.
- g) Quality inclusive consideration needs to be the focus of education for all.

This study provided perspective from teachers' experiences in teaching during pandemics. Additional research is necessary to gain another perspective from parents and students. This result would offer the opportunity to understand distance learning programs more. Only one district in Indonesia was sampled, and only five teachers were participated, potentially jeopardizing the generalizability of the results. Further research in a different area in Indonesia is needed to gain various insights from the teachers regarding challenges and strategies in teaching during the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

Given that the Covid-19 pandemic affects the education sector, especially early childhood education, early childhood schools face many challenges while conducting remote learning. The extensive changes from the face-to-face method to the online method have had consequences for teachers, parents, and students. This study revealed three themes related to challenges of the teachers to enhance the good quality education and two themes related to strategies that the teacher uses to manage the challenge. The five themes revealed from the thematic approach are equity concern, digital tools and skills, decreasing the quality of education, home visit, and blended learning.

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