CHALLENGES FROM PHYSICAL CLASS TO ONLINE LEARNING IN YOUNG CHILDREN AND PRESCHOOL TEACHERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: As an urgent response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ministry of Education Malaysia mandated that all schools stop physical class and use online platforms to deliver lessons. Although preschools were not required to deliver online class and had no mandatory online educational programs, however online learning has emerged as a new method of teaching to support young children's learning. This research aims to explore the responses in young children and understand the difficulties faced by preschool teachers during online learning. A total of eight young children and three teachers participated in this research study. The findings in this study discovered that online learning is both beneficial to young children on laying foundational for better learning outcomes and helped teachers to improve techniques in dealing with young children virtually.

Keywords: Preschool, Pandemic, Early Childhood Education, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The global disruption by COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the operation of preschool and faced major changes that impacted young children. These impacts include social distancing, quarantines, isolation measures, and school closure. Preschool teachers and young children around the world were facing unprecedented challenges. Education institutions across the globe were forced to go for a lockdown and closing all the classes. This had made a switch of the learning method towards online learning and digital tools as the replacement. Preschools in Malaysia was inescapable to move online during this pandemic.

Apart from all that were mentioned above, the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 has aroused the debate about keeping schools fully open or closed with the execution of online learning. Different models of online learning have considered which pedagogical approaches and technologies are most suitable for children's learning needs. In comparison with students in higher grades, preschool students typically engage in more play-based activities with few independent activities with computers (Huser et al., 2016). Hence, effective online preschool teaching must consider the age of students to design tasks that maximize their learning. Because of short attention spans, Kim (2020) asserted that many educators believe children need to be immersed in real-life and hands-on learning experiences to enhance their cognitive development (Rushton, 2011). However, online learning is the only way to replace physical learning during this pandemic. This study brings to the attention of effectiveness in moving from physical class to online learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, COVID-19 was first detected in January 2020. Cases recorded then were rather scarce and mainly limited to tourists. Local outbreaks started to appear in March 2020; the main cluster was connected to a spiritual gathering, Tablighi Jamaat, in late February and early March, culminating in a sudden and sharp upsurge in local cases and those exported to neighbouring countries. Within weeks, Malaysia had registered the highest increasing number of COVID-19 contagion in Asia. Actions to mitigate the pandemic were promptly taken by the Malaysian government. On 18th March 2020, a nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) was declared, aimed at controlling the viral outbreak.

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the education sector all over the world and affected the learning of 1.6 billion children and young people in 200 countries (UNESCO, 2020). This pandemic shocked education systems in most countries around the world, constraining educational opportunities for many students at all levels and in most countries. For most countries there were no plans to systematically assess levels of students' knowledge and skills as schools reopened, and national systematic assessments were suspended in most countries. There was considerable variation across countries, and within countries, in terms of when schools reopened and how

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they did so. Ministry of Education of Malaysia has announced to move physical class learning to online class learning starting from April 2020.

According to Dias et al. (2020), in March 2020 educators were challenged to identify ways of delivering services and education for young children with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, stating that "the shift to remote learning and services increased inequities in early childhood education" (p. 39). Many children's needs had not been met with this shift due to limited access to technology, materials, and trained early childhood teachers (Mercer, 2020). Lapada et al. (2020) found that teachers' years of experience in teaching online demonstrated a direct relationship to their successes in supporting students with school readiness through online and distance learning during the pandemic; however, few were prepared.

Clearly the announcement made by the ministry constrained both the home conditions and the school conditions that support access to school, regular attendance, and time spent learning. Given the lower access that disadvantaged students had to technology and connectivity, and the greater likelihood that their families were economically impacted by the pandemic as mentioned above, it should be expected that their opportunities to learn were disproportionately diminished, relative to their peers with more access and resources and less stressful living conditions. As a result, the government decided to reopen schools when situation was more stable.

The Ministry of Education announced to resume school in stages starting July 2020. Preschools were allowed to operate in August 2020. With the reopening of schools and economy sectors, it caused the upturn of COVID-19 transmission. Consequently, the government declared to move back to online class learning at the end of October 2020. This learning mode has continued until the end of school academic year 2020. In the following year, in consideration of working parents and the holistic development of young children, preschools started physical class for the new academic year in January 2021. Physical class has been carried on continuously for five months. With the upsurge of COVID-19 in Malaysia again, all learning institutions from preschools to tertiary education were forced to move back to online learning in middle of May 2021. Online learning mode has continued until middle of September 2021.

As mentioned, the pandemic caused temporary school closure since March 2020 and continue inconsistently for both physical and online class after then. This came so quickly to teachers, young children, and parents. All preschool teachers were faced with the responsibility of figuring out how to best teach during what would be the 2020-2021 school year. As preschool teachers began to focus on the 2020-2021 school year and began to consider exactly how to plan for it, they faced the challenge of how to structure their teaching. Notwithstanding, preschools were struggling to come out with a better way for young children to feel valued and connected to the teacher and to other students in the class. A strong classroom community allows children to display individuality, voice their identities, and empower themselves with a sense of agency (Lash, 2008). Due to the fact that teachers and students were forced into a virtual learning environment during temporary school closure, young children were unable to come together physically to work together and empower each other through play and collaboration.

On the other hand, teachers were faced with challenges in developing their young children's skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. Holod (2020) found that early childhood teachers faced challenges related to recommended best practices and young children's exposure to screen time. When considering developmentally appropriate practice, as it applied to young children, it was recommended that educators should limit young children's use of computer screen time (Coban, 2020). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2016), only one hour a day of screen time was recommended for young children ages two to five years of age. Holod (2020) further explained that due to the circumstances related to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, American Academy of Pediatrics had relaxed these limitations. Holod (2020) recommended that teachers should focus on learning at a distance rather than solely relying on online learning. To support young children's learning during the pandemic, preschool teachers with their professionalism and understanding of child development, they are the best person to facilitate best online in young children.

Researchers found that preschool teachers were more concerned about the correct usage of technology than attending to classroom management strategies that promote young students' social emotional growth and development (Churiyah et al., 2020). They discovered that students expressed low self-regulation skills during distance and online learning. Bowdon (2020) found some media used in the virtual classroom distracted learners; he recommended that preschool teachers should keep special effects and animations at a minimum because they distract young children from learning.

Another challenge of concern to preschool teachers was the difficulty for building relationships and forming attachments with children during social distancing periods. Holod (2020) suggested keeping interactive videos short. Teachers were encouraged to work on activities that would create interaction and relationship building. Because parents were often involved in online learning by young children, Cross (2020) suggested that parents should use media and online tools for social connections with peers during the pandemic. Preschool teachers used online tools to encourage young children's social interactions to build relationships with peers (Cross, 2020).

It is said that experiencing a shared sense of belonging is essential to foster a classroom community (Dunn, 1988). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, preschool teachers had to figure out on their own how to virtually build a classroom community. In the past, when teachers succeeded in creating a caring classroom community, young children were more likely to report that they enjoyed school, trusted their teachers, and cared about academic learning (Battistich, 2008). Now, as a result of the pandemic, preschool teachers had to come up with different ways to establish a connection between young children using the computer screen. This also includes the young children who have not attended school before. The challenge of helping to create a safe environment that helps build sense of belonging while supporting the growth of practicing and learning important social skills in the beginning of the year.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Online learning for young children has been conducted under this unique and special circumstance in Malaysia. Without professional training and adequate preparation, parents and preschool teachers have been engaged in this unexpected online learning and teaching method for young children. Therefore, teachers might have encountered many difficulties, problems, obstacles in this unexpected experiment. Accordingly, this study aims to address the following research questions:
1. How do young children response to online class?
2. What are the difficulties in shifting physical learning to online class?

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research involving observation and interview of one group of eight young children at the age of four from a private preschool. Due to the preschool COVID-19 SOP, researchers were not allowed to enter the settings. However, video recording was taken when teachers were implementing the learning process with the young children via online platform. Video recordings were obtained from teachers for further data analysis. This method gave a direct encounter with the phenomenon investigated, by directly observing people and places at the research site (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2012). The young participants' behaviours during online classes were studied to understand the effectiveness of online class. After each lesson, the teacher was required to jot down notes. An interview session via ZOOM was carried out to further understand the difficulties of conducting online classes. Interview session was recorded with permission granted from the teacher.

Data Analysis

Observation and interview data were analysed by going through the process of identifying and dividing the data of interest into ranges that comply with the discovery of categories and patterns in the information provided by the respondents and in our observation journal. These patterns may be cyclical and developmental, or linear (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They mentioned that researchers can detect repetitive themes which pull together many different pieces of data. The emergent patterns were not causal. It was important to explore various ways to find similarities and differences within the diverse contexts during data collection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Observation

The research question one was answered through observation. Engagement and participation during class were seen during online class. A preschool physical or online classroom should focus on the child's emotional and intellectual development in their learning environment. The group discussion revealed positive engagement which involved day-to-day activities during online class.

Teacher B: Let's see what's in our classroom (Teacher shared screen to show virtual classroom on GatherTown). The first thing we come in the school is to sanitise our hands. This is hand sanitizer (Teacher enlarged the hand sanitizer picture). Kai Jie, tell me what is this?

Kai Jie: Hand ….. sani…ti…zer.

Teacher B: Wesley, now your turn to tell teacher, what is this?

Wesley: Hand sanitizer

Teacher B: Yu En, can you tell me what is this?

Yu En: Hand….sa…ni..tizer

Teacher B: Ok, very good.

In the same recording (P3PO, 27/9/2021, 1.56-), during the occasion of mentioning new changes to the children. Teacher B engaged children in the conversation again.

Teacher B: When we come back to school this time, there is no sharing table anymore. You can only sit one child one table. No more sharing table. Do you want to choose which table you want to sit? Shu Chen, can you tell me?

Shu Chen: Yes, I want to choose to sit one table.

Teacher B: Yes, one child one table. How about you, Vharun?

Vharun: I want to sit two table(s).

Teacher B: You can only sit at one table.

Xin Zen: Teacher, I want…..I want to sit one table.

According to Wade (1994), most students can obtain the benefits such as the enjoyment of sharing ideas with others and learn more if they are active to contribute in class discussion. During the observation, young children were seen to participate during the activities. Before Teacher B started the lesson via Zoom (P3PV, 20/9/2021), she explained to them that this activity was to refresh their memory of what the young children need to do when they were back in school the following week. Teacher B stated, "I am going to show you the picture, then you have to tell me what's next you need to do, ok?" The young children responded almost in unison "ok". Throughout the 18 minutes lesson, a few children responded accordingly. At times, they had a little short conversation about their long awaiting to be in preschool. When Teacher B started, children joined in the conversation simultaneously as below:

Teacher B: "What can you do with your hands?"

Wesley: Teacher, my *kor kor* (brother) always use his hands to hit me.

Teacher B: Oh, then did you hit him back?

Wesley shook his head and answered: No.

Teacher B: Good. Children, tell teacher, what can we do with our hands?

Children: …….

Teacher B mimicked eating action.

Xin Zen: Eat.

Teacher B pointed to Xin Zen and showed her thumb up, "Correct, Xin Zen."

Teacher mimicked writing action.

Vharun: Writing…..writing….writing…

Teacher B: Yes, correct. Come, what else we can do with our hands?

Kai Jie: Play toys.

Young children love listening to expressive stories, singing songs, and interacting with the peers and teachers. From the observation, preschool teachers included these activities during their online class sessions. This helped

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to catch young children attention span and has led to an increase in positive interactions and relationships with the young children.

Interview

The second research question was answered by interviewing three preschool teachers. The main difficulty faced by teachers during online class was the attention span of the young children. Some children lost attention in the middle of the lesson. Teacher B mentioned,

"Just a few children answered and focus on the lesson. Some children didn't pay attention on lesson and keep on running away." (P3D, TB, Lesson 3:7)

In addition to that, Teacher B also revealed the difficulty to gauge children's responses. When teaching in a classroom, she could observe the children's body language and read their response. She stated,

"I missed some of the children's facial expression when sharing screen. I cannot hear clearly what children are saying when all of them want to talk at the same time." (P3D, TB, Lesson 3:7)

A structured environment is required for online class. Children are easily distracted. Teacher A put on the note,

"It's difficult for me to make some of them move and dance together during the class when I am doing the lesson (*Lesson 1:6: Importance of making friends*)." (P3D, TB, Lesson 1:6)

The nature of young children is to move around freely. They usually need a lot of movement and exploration in an environment. However, during online class they are being requested to sit and stare at the screen.

"A child fell asleep during the lesson." (P3D, TB, Lesson 3:5)

Three preschool teachers discussed the need for them to spend time learning and developing their knowledge, skills, and understanding of online instruction to help young develop classroom skills and follow online class rules.

Nothing we see or hear is perfect. But right there in the imperfection is perfect reality. This module was not a perfect one so difficulties faced were unavoidable, and the most important thing was how we solve the difficulties. For activities that were not able to be carried out during this pandemic, the three preschool teachers were looking forward to doing it one day in the future to assist the young children.

Besides, activities and practices are aimed to develop skills for young children. By laying the foundation for their learning, creating similarities of common goals are emphasized during lessons. Each teacher noticed obvious positive experience towards establishing a shared foundation for learning. The three teachers perceived that the most critical areas for young children to achieve success were their ability to communicate needs and wants, to follow routines and directions, and to play cooperatively. All teachers mentioned the importance of creating a routine that children can predict and feel connected to the learning process. However, children were not allowed to share toys during online class prevented teachers to execute the concept of sharing toys could only be done with watching videos and reading them stories about sharing. No practical activity could be done to let them experience. Teachers were unable to observe their doings to further explore their understanding of toys sharing.

Teacher B voiced out the difficulty faced by executing COVID-19 SOP in the classroom:

"Some of the activities I understand they are useful for the children but some I think it's quite hard as now we need social distancing." (P3I, TA, Line 21 & 23)

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic created an education crisis which challenged young children's opportunities to learn what they were expected to and caused them to lose skills they supposed to develop during this period. It is hoped that skills can be developed and revert the learning losses. On the other hand, preschool teachers have learnt to upskill by collaborating to learn the new technology and support each other's growth in overcoming daily challenges by sharing of best practices.

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