

Challenges of Online Learning Faced by Working Parents in Urban Areas

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Abstract

This paper analyzed the challenges faced by working parents in guiding their children during online learning. It will focus on issues related to technology, time and parents' knowledge related to their children's online learning. Qualitative method was adopted and 41 parents were interviewed through Google form. Urban areas were chosen as there is a lack of studies conducted on parents' challenges in urban areas. Findings showed that parents have average to good knowledge on technology and they are willing to learn on the platforms used by schools and spend time to accompany their children's learning at home. However, parents stated that this role has also affected their office work.

Keywords: Challenges; Online learning; Working parents; Urban

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, Covid 19 pandemic started in March 2020 and has affected all industries including education. To date, there are 1,095, 486 cases of Covid 19 in Malaysia and the number is increasing each day. During the pandemic, education has brought a new chapter in parents' lives. Almost 200 countries shut down schools and over 90% of students are facing disruptions to their education. As a result, online learning is introduced.

Parental involvement in online learning has shown significant contributions to the success of the children in a virtual learning environment (Woofter, 2019). However, unfamiliar roles and responsibilities must be taken by parents as their children are experiencing new ways of learning.

Educating children in the learning process during pandemic Covid 19 is not only the task of the school teacher, but at this time parents are required to monitor and guide children at home. The multiple roles and tasks of parents, especially mothers provide challenges to them. Education is no longer the responsibility of formal educational institutions but also informally requires parental support (Situmorang and Purba, 2018).

At home, parents must know children's homework, learn school learning platforms or media and provide time every day to guide their children. These have created challenges for parents. During this challenging time, parents and teachers have equal responsibility in educating the children so they can continuously develop in education both formally and informally.

Parents play an important role of an educator in children's life. Due to pandemic Covid 19, parents have to become teachers at home. This has created challenges especially to

working parents as they have to juggle between working and guiding their children. This research aims to address the challenges that urban working parents face in guiding their children in online learning. Three challenges have been identified for this research: technology, parents' knowledge and time.

2. Literature Review

Parents are inevitably one of the main roles in ensuring their children's continuous learning throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. Parents and families need physical, mental and material preparation in order to provide the best services for their children (Nordin et al., 2021). In this study, we break down the challenges faced by parents into these categories, Technology, Time and Parents Knowledge.

Technology

Technology development such as online learning has been practiced worldwide and is now widely used especially for our country's education institutions during the current Covid-19 pandemic. (Zainol et al, 2021). Commonly, to facilitate online learning, the basic electronic resources and gadgets are required, such as desktop computers, laptops, or at least smartphones, with internet connectivity. (Odunayo et al, 2013). For parents, preparing these facilities then becomes an important part of the implementation of their children's online learning, such as providing devices, educational applications and the internet itself.

For parents who are not tech savvy, this can become a challenge for them to assist their children's online learning process. With the drastic implementation of this online learning due to the pandemic, parents were given only a small amount of time to get accustomed to the available media, learning resources, and the internet.

Inevitably, parents are left with no choice but to try to upgrade themselves in order to understand the internet usage needed and master the technology to help their children with online learning, or their children might get left behind (Situmorang and Purba, 2018).

Time

This pandemic has changed human lives including the change of time. Parents need to adapt with the new situation to balance between employment and their children's online learning especially in time management.

Given the lack of physical presence of the teacher inherent to online learning, it remains to be determined how to best provide the support to keep online learners focused on assigned tasks (Liu et al, 2020). Therefore, guidance and support from the parents play an important role to encourage their children in online learning. In this case, time management is the biggest challenge for most urban working parents.

The struggle to balance parent employment demands and learner needs was the single-most commonly reported struggle (Garbe et al, 2020). In addition, they also need to allocate time for house works, especially mothers. On the other hand, the level of struggle and effort in facing this challenge are higher when there are multiple learners at different levels to support and spend time with.

In many countries, primary schools have never widely experimented with online learning, especially in an emergency situation. During this pandemic lock-down, when children were asked to get connected for their lessons, parents were frequently involved in smart working (Ferri & Guzza, 2020). Designing a schedule will help parents in dividing their time between office work, house works and children's online learning.

Parents Knowledge

Parents not only face the challenges of mastering technology, but they also need to develop their knowledge in the children's learning to guide them in schoolwork. It is undeniable that parents are now taking the roles of teachers at home, teaching and assisting their children not just through online learning, but to complete the tasks given after their daily classes - as teachers become only facilitators, teaching from their respective homes - with very limited control over their students' learning.

Even with enough gadgets at home to cater to all the children's online learning needs, parents can still feel inadequate when there are too many tasks given to the children and the parents are not able to guide and assist them in the process. As a result, their children might get left behind as they are not able to follow the online classes, or complete tasks pertaining to the online learning process. (Situmorang and Purba, 2018). Through recent research on online learning by Midcalf and Boatwright (2020), the results for their surveys showed that parents said it was challenging for them to remember skills and facts that they haven't used in decades, and they have to relearn certain subjects in order to teach their children. This shows that parents' involvement and participation are important for their children's learning commitment towards online learning during COVID-19 lockdown. (Lawrence, & Fakuade, 2021).

3. Methodology

The current study is aimed at exploring challenges of online learning faced by working mothers in urban areas at the times of Covid 19. The study is to be conducted using an interview method in a qualitative approach. Structured interview questions were designed based on literature review. Due to limitation to conduct face to face interviews during Covid 19, informants will be given Google forms to answer. Google forms were distributed to working mothers that meet the sample criteria.

In this study, purposive sampling is used, and researchers have identified five criteria of the samples. The criteria are samples must be a parent (either mother or father), working, no helper/ maid at home, live in an urban area and have at least one child in primary school. 41 informants have responded to the interview in Google form.

Three targeted urban areas are chosen namely Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Putrajaya. These areas meet the definition of urban as defined by Department of Statistics Malaysia, gazette areas with their adjoining built-up areas, which had a combined population of 10,000 or more at the time of the Census 2010 or the special development area that can be identified, which at least had a population of 10,000 with at least 60 % of population (aged 15 years and above) were involved in non-agricultural activities.

The interview questions consisted of four sections: demographics, challenges of technology, challenges of parents' knowledge and challenges of time. For each challenge's questions, three open ended questions were asked. Data obtained were then analyzed using manual thematic analysis.

4. Findings

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the current data set: technological expertise among parents, time management spent with children for online learning and parents' knowledge.

Table 1 explains the demographic details of the informants.

Table 1: Demographics Information (N=41)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Parental category		
Mother	27	66
Father	14	34
Race		
Malay	37	90
Chinese	4	10
Indian	0	0
Others	0	0
Total number of children		
1-2	18	44
3-4	20	49
More than 5	3	7
Number of children in lower primary school		
0	0	0
1	25	61
2	5	12
3	11	27
Number of children in higher primary school		
0	20	49
1	21	51
2	0	0
3	0	0
Enough devices for online learning		
Yes	41	100
No	0	0
Type of internet service use		
Home wifi	28	68
Mobile data	4	10
Both	9	22
Days working from home in a week		
Everyday	19	46
Once a week	5	12
Twice a week	4	10
More than three time a week	13	32
Location		
Kuala Lumpur	4	10
Selangor	35	85
Putrajaya	2	5

Theme 1: Technological expertise among parents

This theme consists of three sub themes: a) knowledge of technology b) ability in dealing with unfamiliar online learning platforms c) sufficient internet access at home.

Knowledge of technology

It was revealed that parents' knowledge of online learning is in between average to good. Most parents believe they have technology knowledge in helping their children's online learning. Some of the parents mentioned:

'I am fairly well verse with technology'.

'Moderate, however I am not so good on Google Meet, but I can google it'.

'Well versed'.

'Very helping in setting and managing my children's daily online learning'.

Only few parents responded they have low knowledge of technology in helping their children's online learning:

'Not so familiar'.

'I am not good and lack knowledge on technology and gadgets. There are tools that I am not sure of'.

Parents' knowledge on online tools and platforms

Research shows most parents will either refer to Youtube, search from the Internet or ask other parents if they have issues in using online tools or platforms. Some of the parents responds are:

'Refer tutorials on Youtube or call friends to ask for help'.

'Google search and check with other parents'.

'Ask help from friends to get to know more about tools or platforms'.

On the other hand, some parents took initiatives to explore online learning platforms even though it is difficult for them.

'Struggle at first due to the different learning requirements by teachers'.

'Stress! But I will try till I get it'.

Sufficient internet access at home

Many parents agree that internet connection at home is sufficient. This can be seen from the evidence below:

'Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God). No issue on internet connection on Unifi'.

'More than enough to cater to online learning and also our daily work'.

'Strong internet connection for them (the children) to join online classes'.

'It's very sufficient for my children's online learning.'

Only a few parents noted they are having difficulties in accessing the internet.

'Good enough although sometimes not stable'.

'Not so good in the morning and at night. So the children will have to finish and submit asap (as soon as possible)'.

Theme 2: Parents Time Management

This theme consists of three sub themes: a) time allocation to accompany children
b) division of employment and children online learning c) effects on work commitment

Time allocation for accompany children

Parents' involvement in children's online learning is very important especially with children in primary school. Most parents will allocate their time to accompany their children. This can be proven from parents respond as below about the hours they allocate for their children online learning:

'Average 3 hours'

'Minimum 2 hours'

'Every time'

'More than 6 hours a day'

'Most of the time since working & study area in the same room'

However, there are also some parents who are committed to work and only can spend time with their children after working hours.

'At night after dinner during weekdays. Around 2 hours'

'At night and weekend, and only help them when they ask'

'I am only available at night'

Division of employment and children online learning

Parents not able to give full attention to their children but manage to divide their time and be flexible as they mentioned below:

'Do a timetable to divide the work time and tutorial time for kid and follow strictly'

'When I have free time or break in between my work'

'Will accompany my children when there is no meeting schedule'

'Focus on online classes in the morning. After lunch only focus on work until 5pm'

Still some parents find it is difficult to handle during daytime due to their working schedule with remarked:

'Cannot divide because I have my own work. Only can monitor at night'

'Do own important jobs first then helping children'

'I will make sure the tablet is set before going to work. After work, I'll check the progress or homework, if there is any'

'It's hard actually but we will try to sit down and do during the weekend or at night'

Effects on work commitment

Children's online learning affects most parents in many aspects, especially in relation to work. To this some of the parents mentioned:

'Cannot focus 100% on work'

'Affected a lot because have to manage both things at the same time & have to manage small children also'

'Working extra hours especially at nighttime'

'Less job done for me'

'90% of my wfh (working from home) are affected'

Children today are advanced in technology. They have no issue in online learning and operate by themselves. Other than that, some parents have mentally prepared to face and adapt with this new situation. They mentioned that:

'Will follow kids timetable and adjust my own time for other tasks'

'Quite a hassle at first. But we are coping with this situation from time to time'

'Literally working side-by-side most of the time - adjustment has to be made'

'Not so much as I will cook in the morning, it would be easy for them to find something heavy for lunch without asking me and to have more snacks in the cabinet.'

'Affected but manageable.'

Theme 3: Parents Knowledge

This theme consists of three sub themes: a) familiarity on platform used b) assistance in learning process c) knowledge in syllabus

Familiarity on platform used

Urban parents are exposed to the latest trends and in advanced technology, especially working parents who use a variety of online platforms for working purposes. Therefore, they are familiar with the platform used for their children's online learning and has no problem with that as some of them commented:

'Easy'

'Very Good'

'Advanced level. I am kind a tech savvy'

'I am aware and know to handle their google classroom'

'Google Meet & Google Classroom is fairly well to navigate & understand'

On the other hand, there are still minority urban parents who are not familiar with the platform used for their children's online learning as mentioned below:

'Fair'

'Not too good'

'Low to medium level'

'Basic level of knowledge'

Assistance in learning process

Time that children spend with teachers rather than parents is less. Therefore, parents are expected to collaborate with children in their learning process to make sure they get connected. Most parents have responded as below regarding assisting their children learning process:

'100%'

'Almost all the time'

'Most of the time during online class session'

'It seems most of the time teachers are/were relying on parents' assistance/guidance to the fullest'

'I would love to be by their side to make sure that they really pay attention. If all look good then I will leave them and will check their homework before submit to the teachers'

Because of parents' commitment to their work, some of them would just spend time in their children's learning process and assist them only when it is needed. Rarely children can do on their own, but some parents mentioned that in some circumstances such as instructed from the teacher, they will assist them as they have mentioned below:

'Minimum'

'I could say at least 2-3 hours per day'.

'For technical difficulties only'

'Guide my children during when need to do the homework'

'Class teacher sometimes reminded on WhatsApp group on homework'.

Knowledge in syllabus

Unfamiliar topics in children's online learning caused parents to spend more time in the learning process with their children. Time available is not only in guiding the children but also used to 'relearn' in order to assist their children. Internet technology will be first choice of urban parents seeking for answers beside asking teachers or other parents and refer to textbook, as most of them remarked:

'Ask google for answers'.

'YouTube or ask teacher'.

'Google search or check with other parents'.

'Browsing the web and additional exercise sheets'.

'If I can't manage to explain to them, I will ask them to go on Youtube learn from it and read the textbook over and over again'.

A few parents are still practicing traditional ways to assist their children in learning. Without using the internet, they refer to textbooks, asking teachers and other parents, which highlighted by the parents in the following words:

'Ask her tuition tutor'.

'Ask my kid to refer back to teacher'.

'Revise their text/ activity books'.

'Ask some friends who also teacher'.

5. Conclusion

Parental involvement has increased during home-school. The findings revealed that the major challenges of working parents are related to managing their time between fulfilling the job at home and helping their children with online learning. This is in line with research by Situmorang and Purba (2018) in which they stated no matter how busy the parents are, they must provide time for their children because online learning using gadgets needs to be accompanied by parents. This challenge makes parents really need to spend their time to ensure their children can follow online learning.

Findings also revealed that working parents are willing to learn the school syllabus in order to guide their children and thus they could create educational support at home. Similarly, the outcome of Trung Tran et al (2020) supported that when parents provide their children with required support, it stimulates the home environment and cognitive development of the children.

This pandemic and lockdowns revealed emerging vulnerabilities and challenges in our education system, therefore it is important to conduct this study to understand the challenges faced by urban working parents in Malaysia throughout their children's online learning process. Since online learning is currently still on-going in the country, it is crucial to highlight the issues and struggles faced by these urban working parents.

Parents have been playing active roles as teachers at home in and outside of class time, for their children to learn at home. From the study done on 41 informants, it is true that the challenges faced by urban working parents when their children are undergoing online learning are mainly technological expertise, parents' knowledge on the online learning and platforms, and time spent with their children for online learning.

This indirectly demands that parents must change and follow changes, especially in this post-modern era. Parents need to equip themselves with the skills and knowledge, as well as willingness to learn and synergize with the digital revolution to adapt to their children's online learning experience and indeed these enhancements will result in a better experience for both parents and their children.

For future research, separate studies on challenges faced by mothers and fathers would add to the knowledge gap in this area. Furthermore, a larger scale of study by using quantitative methods could give better understanding on the challenges of parents in dealing with their children online learning classes.

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