Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study on Elementary School Teachers in Indonesia

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Abstract
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Keywords
case study, Covid-19, elementary school, learning from home, teaching and learning

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Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: 
A Qualitative Study on Elementary School Teachers in Indonesia

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In this study, we explored how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or learning from home (LFH) period and examined the barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process in both contexts. We collected data through demographic profiles and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 teachers. We organized our analysis around their perspectives on teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic that they encountered emerged. Overall, an analysis of the text revealed that major themes related to the critical issues of (1) teaching and learning activities during school closure, (2) how teachers assess students’ learning progress, (3) how teachers maintained students’ motivation during learning from home period, (4) the most challenging subject to teach during the learning from home period, (5) support from school or the principals, parents’ ability to assist children learn during the pandemic, and (6) barriers to teaching and learning during the learning from home period. Future research and policy implications are also discussed.

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Introduction

The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is a highly contagious disease causing an epidemic of acute respiratory syndrome (COVID-19). Between January and April 2020, the epidemic turned into a global pandemic from its original center in Wuhan, China which until now has reached most countries around the world. In Indonesia, the COVID-19 Pandemic has led to the closure of schools, campuses, and universities. As a result of the closure, it has affected education and teachers are required to work from home including elementary teachers in various ways. The fast, unstable and “pushed” change from face-to-face teaching to distance or online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic has produced several complex challenges and obstacles for elementary teachers.

Research in teacher education during the COVID-19 period shows “emergency remote teaching” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) or emergency e-learning (Murphy, 2020) and difficulties related to poor online teaching infrastructure, inexperience of lecturers and students, information gaps (i.e., limited information and resources for all students) and the complex environments when studying at home (Zhang et al., 2020) have affected the quality of online or distance teaching during the pandemic. In addition, the lack of mentoring and support (Judd et al., 2020) and problems related to lecturer competence in using digital learning formats
(Huber & Helm, 2020) have also become separate problems for distance or online teaching during this time.

In Indonesia since March 2020, the government, like other governments in the world, has implemented a school closure and learning from home policy. The teachers suddenly must change their teaching activities from face-to-face at school to distance or remote learning. Parents also suddenly must homeschool their children and find ways to keep their children willing to learn. However, in a situation that is completely unexpected and urgent currently, there is no basic or fundamental research that examines how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or learning from home (LFH) period. Considering the relevance of all the conditions above, this study aimed to explore how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or learning from home (LFH) period and examine the barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process in both contexts. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What kinds of experiences have elementary teachers from diverse backgrounds faced because of unpredictable and “forced” transition from face-to-face teaching to distance or online teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
2. How have elementary teachers from diverse backgrounds dealt with those barriers because of unpredictable and “forced” transition from face-to-face teaching to distance or online teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The Context of the Study

In a qualitative study, the researchers should “explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interest about their research topic and process” and access to the participants (Creswell, 2002, p. 184). The principal investigator for this study is a faculty member in a private university in Indonesia who obtained her Ph.D. in Educational Sciences from a university in the Netherlands. She had experience and training in quantitative method in educational research and qualitative research. She formulated research goals and aims, methodology including data collection and analyses, and administered the research. The second author holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from a US public university. He had experience and training in qualitative research by taking qualitative research methods, qualitative data analysis, and research methods courses in education. He focused on methodology, reviewing, and editing preparing and/or presenting the work.

Our interest in exploring how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experience teaching and learning during school closure or LFH period was sparked by the fact that Indonesian elementary teachers are still struggling in working from home in an online situation. We also found that limited studies have been done in Indonesian context. We conducted this study as an attempt to provide information on how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas were challenged by the situation of working from home. We collaborated and started this project in April 2020, and it took nine months to conduct the study starting from identifying potential participants by making a good connection with teachers until finalizing the project.
Methodology of Research

Research Design, Sites, and Participants

Using a qualitative case study tradition, we expected to explore how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or LFH period and examine the barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process in both contexts. The case study tradition that we used in this study was Merriam’s (1998) work. She stated that a qualitative case study was an intensive and holistic description, explanation, and analysis of “a bounded system” (p. 27) on phenomenon such as a person, a program, an institution, a process, a social unit, a group, and a policy. Merriam (1998) additionally discussed that an exploratory case study was suitable when the focus of the investigation has not been examined exhaustively as is the case with how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or LFH period and examine the barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process in both contexts.

For sampling, Creswell (2007) wrote, “The concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problems…” (p. 125). In this study, we used a purposeful sampling with a convenience case strategy. Creswell (2007) wrote, “convenience cases, which represent sites or individuals from which researchers can access and easily collect data” (p. 126). We used this strategy because we had access to teachers and research sites. The findings of this study should not be generalized to the participants.

18 teachers from 10 schools in urban and rural areas of Indonesia participated in this study. The teachers’ experience of teaching ranged from less than five years to more than 20 years. Our 18 participants were from six research sites. Three participants were from Jakarta City, four from urban Central Java, two from urban Sumatra, two from rural Sumatra, two from urban Kalimantan, one from rural Kalimantan, two from rural Sulawesi, and two from rural Papua. In terms of gender, five participants are male, and the rest of participants are female.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted this study from 20 April 2020 to January 20, 2021. We used the background survey, semi-structured and in-depth WhatsApp calls, and phone interviews. We use survey to gather information about age, gender, educational background, and working experience that participants taught. The semi-structured and in-depth WhatsApp calls and phone interviews were audi-taped lasted between one and half hours and conducted online. A total of 18 teachers were interviewed. We asked participants to narrate their accounts and perspectives such as on teaching and learning activities during school closure, how teachers assess students’ learning progress, how teachers maintain students’ motivation during learning from home period, the most challenging subject to teach during the learning from home period, support from school or the principals, parents’ ability to assist children learn during the pandemic, barriers to teaching and learning during the learning from home period.

In a qualitative study, both data collection and analysis influence each other (Creswell, 2007; Mukminin, 2012). For our study, after we conducted interviews with our first participant, we audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and carefully analysed and categorized all interview data into temporary codes that we created. For example, teaching and learning activities during school closure or the most challenging subject to teach during the learning from home period. This process was done for every participant. After we interviewed all participants, we reanalyzed and compared all the transcripts among the participants to find out similarities and
differences related to our codes. To address the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mukminin, 2012) of our research, we used member checking (Merriam, 1998). Member check feedback was received from our participants. Furthermore, we provided rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 1998) related to our findings. These ways have been supportive of the trustworthiness of our research.

Ethical Consideration

We would like to state that the manuscript entitled, Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study on Elementary School Teachers in Indonesia” had not undergone the IRB process as it is not a must in country like Indonesia. However, our participants’ decision to participate in this study was completely voluntary and their identities were concealed. More essentially, we provided our participants with an informed consent form that they had to sign, and they were free to withdraw from participating in this study. We finally had 18 participants from six research sites.

Findings

The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to the closure of schools in Indonesia. This closure has affected education and teachers are required to work from home including elementary teachers in various ways while the fast, unstable and “pushed” change from face-to-face teaching to distance or online teaching has produced several complex challenges and obstacles for elementary teachers. Several interrelated themes related to teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic were (1) teaching and learning activities during school closure, (2) how teachers assess students’ learning progress, (3) how teachers maintained students’ motivation during learning from home period, (4) the most challenging subject to teach during the learning from home period, (5) support from school or the principals, parents’ ability to assist children learn during the pandemic, and (6) barriers to teaching and learning during the learning from home period.

Teaching and Learning Activities During School Closure

Teachers in three urban schools in this study (two schools in Jakarta and an urban school in Sumatera) implemented online learning [in Indonesian language we call it pembelajaran daring during the school closure. WhatsApp was the most common online media used by the teachers. Teachers used WhatsApp chats to send learning materials, assignments, and taking students attendance. For teaching, teachers used both WhatsApp chats and video calls. A teacher in Jakarta shared this with us:

When the government through the Ministry of Education and Culture implements LFH policy, teaching and learning activities are switched to online. I use WhatsApp (WA) both chats and video calls to give instructions and assignments. I also use videos from YouTube and send the link to WhatsApp Group and ask my students to watch. I rarely use Zoom because not all students have access to unlimited internet. Besides, not all students have smartphones and computers so that they have to wait until their parents come back from work and use their mobile phone.

Teachers in urban Central Java, urban Kalimantan and rural Sumatra in this study reported the combination of online and offline learning [the term offline in our language is
pembelajaran luring] to help students who have limited facility and internet access. A teacher in Urban Kalimantan shared this:

During this pandemic, I have to admit that teaching and learning activities are disrupted. Instructional delivery becomes a big challenge. Although we live in the city, not all parents are able to provide their children with facilities like smartphones and computers and the internet. There are parents who do not have steady jobs and income. The government recommends the combination of online and offline modes of learning. But, since I have students who come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, I decided to do offline learning more often than online. Just imagine, if we use Zoom for an hour, we spend 1.2 GB, not all of my students can afford that. Thus, I do luring [offline]. I prepare the study materials and homework. Parents pick them up at school. Students study at home and do their homework. Then, their parents hand in their homework to me. We take turns, so not only parents, my colleagues and I also visit our students, to give them study materials and homework to monitor and keep our students’ motivation.

The excerpts indicated that teachers in urban Central Java, urban Kalimantan and rural Sumatra had to teach online and offline. They did it because there were several challenges (e.g., limited internet connection, smartphones, and computers) that students and parents faced at home although they lived in urban areas as they are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. In terms of the offline mode, teachers provided study materials and homework for their students and parents took those materials from schools for their children. After their children finished their work, parents returned the work to teachers. This kind of offline teaching and learning encouraged teachers to visit their students’ house to give study materials and homework to their students and to monitor their students’ learning progress.

In a predominantly high socioeconomic status school, the teachers used various online platforms namely WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Classroom. In addition, they also used videos from YouTube and videos which they created themselves. This teacher shared this with us:

Students in this school come from middle-upper class families so they do not have any problems with the internet and devices like computers or smartphones. I provide learning materials in Google Classroom. For example, today we had a Science subject, and I uploaded the materials in advance. For teaching, I use Zoom. We use WhatsApp Group as a means of communication. I also use videos that I produced myself using an app. In addition, there is a learning program provided by our Ministry of Education and Culture in TVRI (Televisi Republik Indonesia). I ask my students to watch and learn from this program.

The interview data provided us with an understanding that students from high socioeconomic status schools studied in the online mode. They had no problems with the internet connections and devices such as computers or smartphones. Teachers enjoyed teaching by using Zoom and WhatsApp Group to deliver their teaching materials for their students. Teachers in rural areas in Central Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua reported offline mode of teaching and home visits due to the students’ age factor, limited access to the internet and weak infrastructure. A teacher who taught first grade students in a school located in a rural area in Central Java shared this during the interview:
I teach first grade students. Most of them are still learning to read, so that I focus on teaching them how to read. I only have 10 students. I divide them in two groups. During this pandemic they study in my house because it is difficult to teach first graders how to read through online learning. I also do home visits regularly to maintain their motivation to learn. I know I have to comply with the government rule and policy, but our students need to learn, so that I decided to teach them in my house.

**How Teachers Assess Students’ Learning Progress**

As during the COVID-19 pandemic the students could not go to school for quite a long time, there is a possibility that this pandemic affects their motivation to study. Some teachers in this study reported that they also maintained communication with parents to remind them to keep motivating their children to study at home. A teacher in Jakarta (the capital) shared this during the interview:

This pandemic is like a disaster, a global disaster, especially for us. But we must maintain communication with students and their parents. I advised my students to keep studying at home because it is important for their future. I told them that learning from home is also fun. If they miss school, they can ask their parents to drive them here just to see it from a distance. I also talk to parents and ask them to motivate their children to keep studying at home.

Teachers encouraged parents and students to keep studying at home during the pandemic. They always communicated with parents and students regarding study materials and homework. They also allowed their students to come and visit schools if they missed their schools. This kind of communication is part of teachers’ efforts to motivate and monitor their students’ learning progress.

**The Most Challenging Subject to Teach During the Learning from Home Period**

Regarding the most challenging subject during the learning from home period, there are two subjects that most teachers pointed out, namely Indonesian language and mathematics. For example, a teacher in Jakarta shared this with us:

Based on my experience throughout this pandemic or learning from home period, the most difficult subject to teach is Indonesian language. For example, teaching how to find main ideas in a reading passage. To check my students’ understanding, I do video calls with them. In every video call, there are only four people: 3 students and me.

The interview data above revealed that teachers faced a variety of challenges in teaching during the pandemic. In terms of subjects, our participants reported that they had a problem in teaching Indonesian language, particularly teaching specific issues such as main ideas in reading passages as teachers taught their students by using video calls. The video calls made teachers difficult to explain detailed issues in reading passages to have their students’ understanding on the subject.
Support from School or the Principals

During the pandemic, some schools supported their teachers by providing some internet packages, face masks, and hand sanitizer. Some teachers in this study also reported that the school principals showed support to teachers by checking up on them through WhatsApp video calls periodically. A teacher in rural Sumatera told this:

Thankfully we got support from the school. Teachers got some internet quota per month, face masks, and hand sanitizer. Our school principal also shows his support by routinely checking up on us through WhatsApp calls or video calls to make sure that everything is going well and to see whether the teachers are in good health.

The support from schools was important for teachers as they had to keep teaching and motivating their students during the pandemic.

Parents’ Ability to Assist Children Learn During the Pandemic

In general, parents showed their support, and they were cooperative. As mentioned earlier, to help the students who did not have technological devices to support learning and do not have access to the internet, parents showed their support by coming to school or teacher’s house to get the learning materials, assignment, and homework. Then, once the students have finished their assignments or homework, parents handed them into the teachers. However, in terms of helping their children to learn, there are parents who complain, especially when they cannot help their children with homework. A teacher in urban Central Java said:

Our students come from different backgrounds. There are students whose parents highly educated [went to college and hold a university degree], on the other hand there are also students whose parents have low education. Parents with university degree don’t really have problems in helping their children learn. On the contrary, parents with lower education are starting to complain particularly when they have difficulty in helping their children do their homework. They also keep asking “when school is opening again?”

Our data indicated that due to different parental backgrounds, our participants encountered a variety of issues from parents. Parents from a low socioeconomic status wanted to have their children learn at school as they had problems to help their children in learning at home while parents from a high socioeconomic status did not complain in helping their children learn.

An interesting story shared by a teacher in urban Central Java. Parents in her school support the school or teachers by providing their places for offline learning activities (face-to-face learning in a small group of students outside of the school) to help students who did not have smartphones and access to the internet. The teacher shared this with us,

We are lucky to have some supportive parents in different grades. They offer their places for our disadvantaged students to study. Then, we made some arrangement such as teachers’ visits, some small groups of students, and the schedules for them to study at those parents’ places.
Barriers to Teaching and Learning During the Learning from Home Period

As we have reported above, except the teachers in the predominantly high SES school in Jakarta, most teachers in this study reported that the barriers to online learning during the learning from home period is the limitations of students access to internet and computer and gadget or smartphone facility. Not all parents are able to provide those facilities, so that there are students who must wait until their parents come back from work and use their parents’ gadgets to get the study materials and homework sent by the teachers through WhatsApp. A teacher in urban Kalimantan shared this story:

Not all students have smartphone. Those who don’t have a smartphone have to wait for their parents to return from work. These students can only start doing their homework when their parents are at home. That is why I give option. For students who don’t have gadget and internet facilities, they can come to school and pick up learning materials and homework. I also do home visits to ensure my students are doing well and motivate them to study during the LFH.

Discussion

While we all realize that the fast, unstable and “pushed” change from face-to-face teaching to distance or online teaching due to the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought a number of complex challenges and obstacles for elementary teachers, it’s far less clear what teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced in teaching during school closure or LFH period and what barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process in both contexts. A study should be done to look at the fast, unstable and “pushed” change from face to face to online teaching. In the present study we investigated the changes in teaching and learning activities during the school closure in times of COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia. We conducted this study through interviews with teachers to get a better understanding of how teaching and learning were conducted in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia during COVID-19 pandemic. Our study results shed important light on what teachers faced in online teaching and learning. Our study revealed that six major and critical issues that teachers had including: (1) teaching and learning activities during school closure, (2) how teachers assess students’ learning progress, (3) how teachers maintained students’ motivation during learning from home period, (4) the most challenging subject to teach during the learning from home period, (5) support from school or the principals, parents’ ability to assist children learn during the pandemic, and (6) barriers to teaching and learning during the learning from home period.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational institutions in a major part of the world including schools and universities in Indonesia. The pandemic forced school closure and the disruption has affected teaching and learning (Sahlberg, 2021). Some teachers in urban and rural elementary schools in this study were among those who had to switch instructional activities into online learning during the LFH period. In line with other studies, the migration came with several challenges such as unreliable internet connection and students’ limited access to the internet, and the provision of technological devices such as computers and smartphones (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

The teaching and learning process during LFH was susceptible to danger due to insufficient instructional deliveries by the teachers as most teachers who switched to online learning practices reported that they only sent learning materials and homework through WhatsApp and made small group video calls to teach and check their students’ understanding in restricted times. Sonnenmann and Goss (2020) argue that “when teachers are not well trained
in how to teach remote lessons to a high quality, students are likely to learn less” (p. 9). Daniel (2020) proposes the use of asynchronous learning as it gives teachers flexibility in preparing learning materials and allow the students to juggle the demands of home and study. In line with Sonnemann and Goss (2020), this study shows that during LFH, it was also harder to assess students’ work and progress and there was less opportunity to give face-to-face feedback.

The Indonesian government has provided internet packages for teachers and students, but the coverage has not reached all students. In addition, the infrastructure in some rural areas was poor causing weak internet connection. Therefore, to help students who did not have technological devices and have poor access to the internet, teachers both in urban and rural areas aided by home visits and offline learning in small groups of students in their homes or teacher’s homes. Vulnerable students in the age of COVID-19 pandemic were disadvantaged students and students in rural areas (Azzahra, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). These students were likely to have learnt less during remote schooling. Underprivileged students often have a home environment that is not conducive to learning, have poor access to the internet and are not equipped with technological devices (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). Parental assistance is essential for online learning (Zhou et al., 2020). However, in this study some teachers reported that there were parents, especially parents with low socioeconomic status and educational background, who had insufficient ability to support their children’s learning. Parents with low levels of education have low efficacy beliefs in helping their children’s learning and to be actively involved in their children’s education (Yulianti et al., 2019).

As a result of the COVID-19 social distancing and school closure policy, teachers in this study reported some students and parents started to feel tired and anxious. The school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic was anxious time for students and parents (Daniel, 2020; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). The uncertainty about when life will return to normal adds to anxiety (Daniel, 2020). Professional development for teachers should aim to boost student well-being and improve learning (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). The first professional development should incorporate teaching of social and emotional learning including how to self-regulate emotions (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). The second professional development should incorporate mental health literacy to help teachers identify students who have poor mental health and who may need extra help (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). Students who already had mental health problems before the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to find them get worse during the school closure or learning from home period.

We are aware that this study has limitations in the possibility of the participant selection bias and the limited range of the study. However, the results of this study provide a rich picture of how COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education sector and changed teaching and learning practices in urban and rural schools in Indonesia specifically in the context of elementary school levels. The study found that the changes of teaching and learning during learning from home period provide some opportunities for further research. For example, research on school improvement which focuses on the role of school leaders in supporting teachers doing their work during the school closure. Regarding the study finding that showed students’ anxiety problems, it also provides some opportunities for further research. For example, research on how professional development for teachers related to mental health literacy to boost the well-being of teachers and students. While the findings of this study may potentially provide the sort of evidence on how teachers in elementary schools in urban and rural areas in Indonesia experienced teaching and learning during school closure or LFH period and what barriers that hindered the teaching and learning process, generalizability of our findings to other Indonesian teachers should be cautioned. Future quantitative research may include a larger sample of Indonesian teachers from different areas.
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