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SCHOOL CLOSURES DURING MCO

'ENSURE NO KID IS LEFT OUT IN E-LEARNING'

Educators draw attention to kids from B40 families who do not have access to IT gadgets, Internet

KUALA LUMPUR

As the closure of schools and universities due to the Covid-19 pandemic disrupts the education of more than 1.5 billion students and youth globally, educators have turned to online teaching to keep lessons going.

With the Movement Control Order (MCO) extended until April 28, millions of students in Malaysia, including more than 4.9 million school-goers, are confined to their homes.

Teachers have adopted e-teaching modes, from web-conferencing via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex, Google Hangouts Meets and Google Classroom to using WhatsApp and Telegram.

Educators told the *New Sunday Times* that while they were working hard to prepare learning materials, they faced challenges in terms of not only students' discipline or willingness to learn, but also a lack of resources and facilities. To offset the impact of school

closures, the government has introduced Kelas@Rumah, aired daily on the free-to-view TV Okey.

Teachers, however, said more could be done to ensure a smooth learning process. They also raised concerns about the socio-economic impact of school closures on students and potential rise in dropouts.

They called on the government to provide affordable Internet data packages for underprivileged students, TV Okey to offer content that caters to different levels of students, as well as monetary and food aid for students who depended on free meals provided by schools.

Norhailmi Abdul Mutalib, from SMK Jerlun, Kedah, who teaches Science, said he used WhatsApp to conduct lessons after taking into consideration his students' socio-economic background, where not everyone owned information technology gadgets or had an Internet connection.

He teaches Form 4 and 5 students, most of whom come from Bottom 40 per cent-income families.

"I formed a WhatsApp group for my students since the start of the school year. Although I received good response initially, now only half of them are active."

The numbers are decreasing due to problems such as lack of IT gadgets and Internet data. Since the MCO, I have been sharing materials like videos, articles, quizzes and Google Forms as they are user-friendly and do not take

Mohammad Nur Fadhlan, 12, concentrating on the lessons provided by his teacher via WhatsApp, at his home in Putrajaya yesterday. PIC BY MOHJ FADLI HAMZAH

up much Internet data.

"We are lucky that the Education Ministry is collaborating with TV Okey to provide content for a wider audience."

He said he also encouraged his students to use videos on EDUWEB.TV.

Norhailmi, one of Global Teacher Prize 2020's top 50 finalists, said he ensured that students were assigned tasks at least twice a week.

However, he said, it was crucial to allow flexibility in teaching and learning.

"I don't want to be so ambitious and push my students to the point of ignoring their limitations and hardship. Students who do not have the opportunity to be involved in the lessons could always use the videos and online materials post-MCO."

Although Norhailmi believed that e-learning would get a boost post-MCO, he said it could not replace traditional classroom learning that offered a personal touch and face-to-face interaction.

Since school closures added pressure on low-income families, his school worked with the parent-teacher association to provide food aid to students.

Following reports that extended school closures often led to an increase in dropout rates, Norhailmi said it was crucial to provide support and ensure that all students returned to school

once the MCO ended. "Our mental and emotional support for students is important. We don't know what they are facing at home."

Mohd Sirhajwan Idek, an international award-winning English teacher from Keningau Vocational College, said online interaction with students allowed him to focus on providing individualised instruction and feedback.

"Classes are conducted (via WhatsApp and Google Classroom) according to our timetable. We continue with assessments such as quizzes, slide shows and essays, but they are now done online."

"Students are responding well. Some have difficulties accessing the e-learning materials, so we rope in their peers to reach out and help them," said Sirhajwan, who teaches students aged between 16 and 19.

He said the MCO had elevated the role of digital learning as an integral part of mainstream education.

This, he added, created an opportunity to train teachers to be more skilful in using digital technology and to invest in infrastructure and resources that supported digital learning.

Sirhajwan's school has set up helplines that students could call

if they required help, including coping with stress or domestic abuse.

Vanesri Kasi, who teaches English and remedial classes for Year 4 to 6 pupils at SK Bertam Perdana, Penang, uses WhatsApp, Google Classroom and Zoom to provide learning materials, quizzes and videos in line with the syllabus.

She said more than 80 per cent of pupils showed positive response towards e-learning.

"Some children do not have access to a computer or Internet connection, while some parents are not reachable by phone. So I provide such children simple notes and quizzes, which I send via text messages, to get them involved in lessons."

"Time management is an issue because it is a burden to parents when teachers assign tasks to children simultaneously. Imagine a parent who has five children but only one mobile phone. It is very difficult to manage."

"So the school came up with a timetable that makes it more flexible for children to learn online."

Noorjahan Sultan, a Year Three teacher of Methodist Girls Primary School in Kuantan, Pahang, said 90 per cent of her pupils responded well to e-learning, con-

ducted mainly through WhatsApp.

"As I am teaching young children, who depend on their parents' mobile phones to learn, I give them two to three days to finish their tasks."

Noorjahan, who is in charge of the school library, said besides online classes, the school management and teachers also contacted relevant authorities to ensure food supplies reached children in need.

She hoped the government could monitor the aid distribution regularly and systematically to ensure no one was left out.

She did not dismiss the possibility of dropouts post-MCO.

"If there is too much homework and children cannot complete them before school reopens, it will add to their stress."

Universiti Malaya socio-political analyst Prof Dr Awang Azman Awang Pawl, who conducts online classes, said the Education Ministry must urge telecommunications firms to provide more discounts on Internet data packages, especially for students.

The ministry, he said, should provide universities the freedom to make the best decisions on teaching and learning.

"The methods of student assessment should be the same under normal circumstances without compromising the quality of teaching and learning."

Page 1 pic: Auji Abdul Razak, 10, (left) and her sister Saraya, 8, learning via online lessons at their home in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PIC BY ALFARIZ HAMZAH

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Are teachers equipped for digital learning?

KUALA LUMPUR: E-learning may not be a viable alternative to traditional classroom learning as teachers are ill-equipped for the shift to remote learning.

Students and parents believe many teachers lack the skills, training and tools required to make online learning a success.

Fifth-formers due to sit Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), meanwhile, have urged the government to consider postponing the examination to next year.

Nor Ain Batrisyia Saiful Bahri, a Form 5 student of SMK Shah Alam, said while e-learning offered the flexibility to do assignments at home, there was a lack of communication between the teachers and students.

Teachers, she said, should be helpful and accessible online.

"The teaching is primarily being conducted through WhatsApp groups. Teachers would send the questions and we would have to take pictures of our work and share it with them."

"But whenever I ask my teachers how to go about a specific task, they would reply late at night, when I'm asleep. Also, since there are many participants in the group chat, the teachers can't help everyone since not all students are willing to cooperate."

Teachers should share how to do a task instead of saying 'try again' when we don't know how to do it. I wish the MCO would not be extended further as I prefer learning face to face."

"Students could simply do a Google search for the answers online instead of working them out in online assessment."

Nor Ain Batrisyia said should the government decide to postpone SPM to next year, it would allow her more time to study.

Another SPM candidate, Fathul Ummairah Johari, 17, from SMK Tun Syed Nasir Ismail, Johor Baru, said the government could provide students free Internet access for learning purposes as some students were not able to join e-learning classes.

She also said students should have one class per day so that they were not burdened with tasks.

"We learn through Zoom and Google Classroom. It is, however, difficult to pose questions and get an immediate response."

"I hope the government could postpone SPM for at least one month or two months, allowing students more time to finish the syllabus."

'NOT PREPARED'
Damia Suraya, 13, of SMK Kg Dato' Seri Kamaruddin, Seri Manjung, Perak, said her teachers were not prepared to conduct

e-learning.

There were no clear instructions on how and when to do the exercises posted on the e-learning website, she said.

"There is neither video-conference nor question-and-answer sessions. Besides, several of my friends do not own laptops or have Internet access at home."

"The e-learning modules should be easy to understand and interesting to follow."

"The school should arrange a timetable for online learning instead of assigning homework through the website and asking us to read everything."

Her sister, Daryn Husna, 10, of SK Kg Dato' Seri Kamaruddin, said only main subjects like Maths, English and Bahasa Melayu were taught via e-learning.

LEVERAGE ON RESOURCES

Abdulmuiz Abd Aziz, a father-of-three from Kuala Lumpur, whose eldest daughter is in Form One, said there was no teaching involved in online lessons as only worksheets were provided to students.

"Sometimes, the teacher doesn't give anything, so it pretty much depends on the teacher's proactiveness."

"Once, the teacher provided the daily schedule for TV Pendidikan, but there were no lessons stated for Form One in the schedule. We're supposed to figure out how to access TV Pendidikan ourselves."

"I believe the teachers may have tried their best, but they are not equipped to use the tools at their disposal for e-learning."

"I checked the Education Ministry's TV Pendidikan and Eduweb portals."

"There are thousands of digital resources available, although trying to search for specific content, such as subjects and lessons, can be difficult as they are structured like blog posts and arranged by date."

Abdulmuiz said teachers could leverage these official resources, as well as others such as Astro TVIQ and Khan Academy to provide structured lessons through video content. This, however, was not used right now, which is unfortunate, he added.

"Schools and teachers probably need help from the Education Ministry to provide a standard structure and content for them to disseminate, and they can then add on with worksheets they see fit."

"This is more relevant for urban areas and places where Internet connectivity is not an issue. For rural areas, non-video resources would probably be more accessible."



Norhailmi Abdul Mutalib



Mohd Sirhajwan Idek



Vanesri Kasi



Noorjahan Sultan