

Education during COVID-19

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Introduction

There are 1.5 billion students from over 165 countries who are out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic as announced by UNESCO on 26 March 2020.¹ Malaysia is one of the 165 countries which has closed schools due to the pandemic. School holiday in Malaysia has been extended by 3 weeks after the school holidays in March. At the time of writing, there is still a possibility of the extension of the Movement Control Order (MCO) beyond 14 April 2020.

There are many scenarios that might play out after 14 April 2020. First, we might resume back to business as usual, where businesses and schools will be reopened. Second, the MCO might be extended. Third, we might resume businesses and schools but would go back to MCO if there is another surge in the number of infections. In these circumstances, what would happen to our children's education? What would happen to their learning?

Currently, school children in public primary and secondary schools could access online learning from eduwebtv and cikgootube. Starting from 6 April 2020, Kelas@Rumah will be aired on television at TV Okey at 9am and 1pm daily. Teachers have additional access to some support and training materials via platforms such as Portal e-Guru. While parents and students could access the materials on EduwebTV and cikgooTUBE.

¹ UNESCO, 2020.

What are some of the education challenges during this crisis?

COVID-19 has shown a huge gap in digital divide among our students. In order to learn online via these platforms, a student would need to have access to the platform and guidance from parents.

In terms of access, the prerequisite to learn via the online platform would be to have internet and a device such as computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. In urban areas, there are complaints that children have to share devices and they could not fully utilize the lessons online due to slow internet connections or lack of devices. However, in rural and remote areas such as the Orang Asal villages in Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak, the coverage of the internet is limited. Some villages do not even have access to electricity, or it is very limited for night-time usage.

In order to help and provide guidance to the children, parents would need to be educated. Children with parents who are less educated would be at a disadvantage and are left to figure out themselves on how to utilize and learn via the platforms.

This crisis has also shown that our education system is lacking in terms of digital preparedness. This issue pertains to most countries globally who are trying to transfer learning from classrooms to online. Many teachers are not technology savvy and are forced to adapt to conduct their classes online. These online platforms have always been a supplementary teaching material to use in classrooms. Now, it has become the only means to reach and teach students.

Besides learning, school is also a place to provide meals for students from poor families. During school closures and MCO, these children are at a higher risk of going hungry. Livelihoods of poor families are more likely to be affected during MCO and this is the time that food aid must reach out to poor families as soon as possible, if not, these children would go hungry.



One of the unintended consequences is the mental well-being of children during this crisis. As highlighted by Winthrop, there is a need to support children to ensure their well-being and reduce anxiety during an emergency.² Children are restricted to stay at home during this period, naturally they would feel restless physically and emotionally. Therefore, it is important to ensure that there are strategies to help them cope with this “new normal” so that they could express their feelings on this new experience.

² Winthrop, 2020.

What are some of the changes needed?

1. Education policies response to COVID-19 must have a long-term perspective

The education policies and response to COVID-19 must have a long-term perspective, look beyond MCO. A working paper by UNICEF challenged the concept that education in emergency situations is a “stop-gap” measure to restore to normalcy.³ Short term responses and measures are needed to continue learning online but long-term planning for post-MCO is required. There is also a need to consider education policies to implement if MCO is extended. Education policies must ensure that vulnerable children such as the poor, indigenous and special needs are not left out of this learning process. Besides online learning, a plan post-MCO on how schools would resume operation should be laid out. As some have highlighted, social distancing is still required post-MCO. Moreover, health experts have warned that there might be another wave after this. Therefore, more long-term planning is required to ensure that education is not disrupted.

2. Relook the purpose of education and move beyond exams

The primary concerns on education that are highlighted focus mostly on examinations and how to catch up on the syllabus post-MCO. However, the purpose of education is beyond examinations. It could not be denied that examinations are still a very important part of education, especially for those who are going to take Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Pelajaran Tinggi Malaysia (STPM). We could not just fixate on learning to pass and excel in examinations. The primary focus on the online learning platforms seems to be mostly on syllabus in school. The purpose of online learning is to ensure that teachers have covered all the topics in the syllabus by the end of the academic year.

This COVID-19 crisis has shown us that digitization and globalisation are very much embedded in our society. What differentiates our students from machines? It is the ability to think critically, creatively and relate to other people. The traditional rote learning and cramming of knowledge for examinations would not prepare our students for the work of the future. Furthermore, education is also not just about work or the economy, it is about equipping and training our young ones in a holistic manner. This is more than having the capability to earn a good income. This crisis is an opportunity for us to reflect and make changes to our education system.

3. Public health education is lacking

Education needs to address the reality that children are living in. Good efforts are being made to transfer lessons online. However, there seems to be lack of teaching on public health education especially on COVID-19. Education must address the “new normal” that our children are experiencing. What is happening and what is this COVID-19 crisis all about? Why do they have to stay at home? What could they do to mitigate the risk of being infected?

³ Pigozzi, 1999.

What could be done?

If MCO is extended...

This means that children would be at home for a longer period. There needs to be consideration of how to continue learning from home. If the MCO prolongs, how much longer could we extend the academic year? In the case of Ebola, many schools closed for around 5 to 9 months, during the virus outbreak.⁴ This would impact the learning opportunities of students especially those who are underprivileged. Therefore, if there is a need to close schools for a prolonged period, more vigorous measures need to be taken.



i. Distribute devices and increase access to online classes

In order to reduce the digital divide, many countries have taken measures such as distributing devices to increase the access to online classes. In Finland,⁵ some states in China,⁶ and United States,⁷ students could borrow digital devices from the schools to access the online learning platforms. There are also private companies who have contributed devices to children who are in need.



ii. Expand reach to students through television

Another way to expand the reach of digital lessons is through television. The usage of television to air lessons should be expanded further. Malaysia has already started this initiative since 6 April. At the moment, Kelas@Rumah airs for two one-hour slots on Okey TV daily. This could be expanded further to provide more classes to children of all ages and throughout the day.

According to the ICT Use and Access by Individuals and Household Survey in 2018, only 87% of households have access to the internet while only 71.7% of households have computers.⁸ In comparison, households that have access to television is 98.6%. Therefore, the coverage of students via television is wider than online platforms.

⁴ World Bank, 2015.

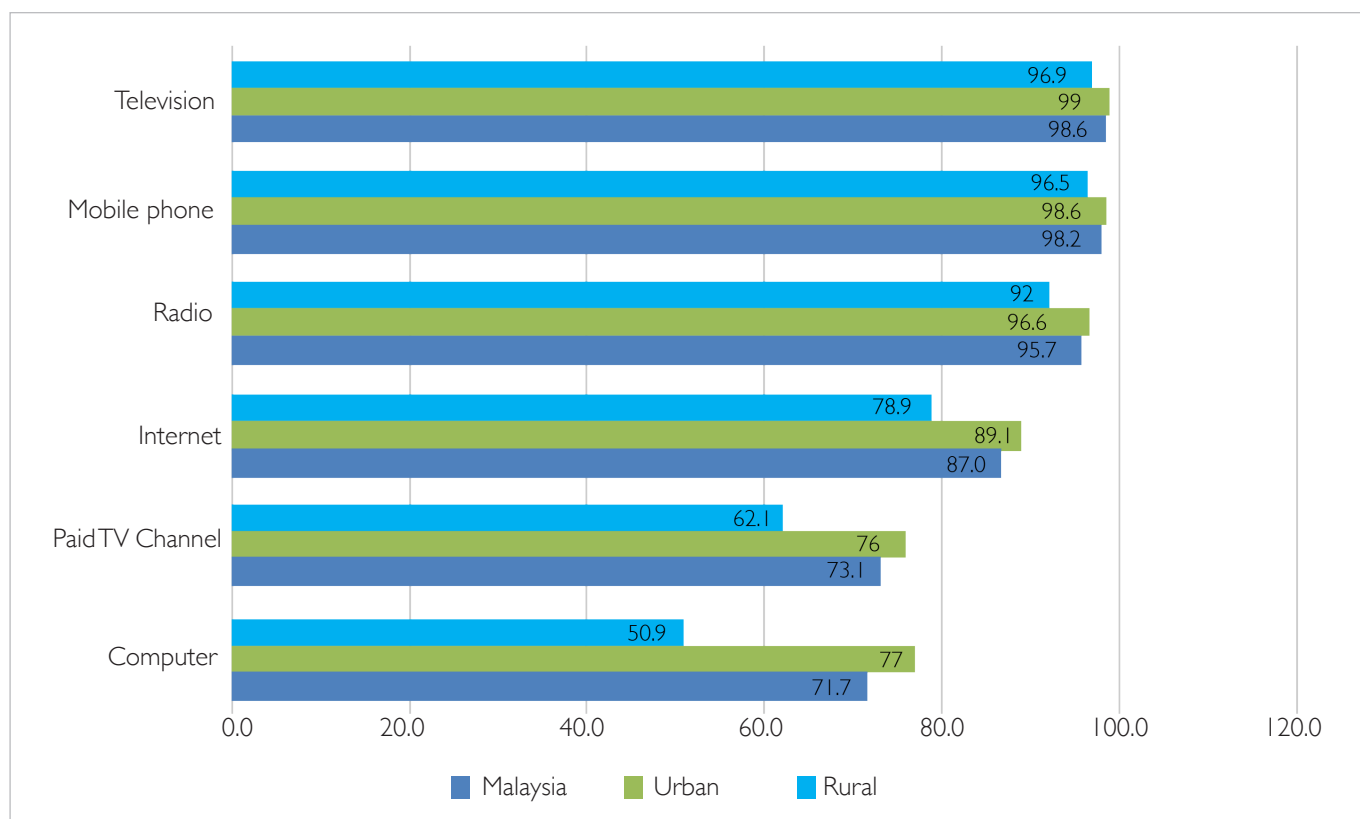
⁵ Rinta, 2020.

⁶ Wang, 2020.

⁷ Woolley, Sattiraju and Moritz, 2020.

⁸ DOSM, 2019.

Figure 1: ICT Access by Malaysian Household, 2018



Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia.⁹

Instructions and guidance to parents could be channelled through mobile phones to have a wider reach than online. It can be seen from the chart above that 98.2% of the parents have access to a mobile phone.



iii. Encourage learning outside of the classroom

The MCO is a good time for parents to instil learning outside of the classroom and help children to explore areas that they are curious about. Curiosity is the source of creativity and critical thinking. Learning outside of the classroom would give children the freedom to explore things beyond their textbooks. It is also at home, where children would be able to learn soft skills and build character ensuring a holistic education.

⁹. Ibid.

If school reopens...

In the event if school reopens, MOE will need to consider measures to ensure safety and social distancing in schools. Although there are no strict measures as to how long we should continue to practise social distancing, there is a need to continue this beyond MCO.

How would school look like if social distancing is required? According to the Malaysia Educational Statistics,¹⁰ Malaysia's average class size in 2017 is 27 students per class for primary and 26 students per class for secondary school. This means that every class is a small gathering, and social distancing would be important to ensure safety in schools.



i. Improve hygiene and sanitation in schools

In an article by McInerney, revealed that in a survey of 6000 teachers in the United Kingdom, 37% said that there is no soap and hot water for students to wash their hands.¹¹ This is alarming since soap is an essential hygiene practice to protect against infection. Hygiene and sanitation is an important issue, adequate provision of soap and sanitizer as well as clean toilets and sinks would be necessary to ensure that students are protected against infection in school. Students should be allowed to wash their hands when necessary and not just during recess time. This is the time to teach students how to maintain their hygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic.



ii. Implement a monitoring and prevention plan

A monitoring and prevention plan must be planned, coordinated and implemented to ensure that all school management and teachers are aware of the guidelines on how to prevent and respond to cases of infection in schools. Measures such as taking temperature and ensuring that all students wash their hands regularly would be needed. Apart from that, how could we practise social distancing and wearing of masks in schools are also questions to address. Play and social contact is natural among students, what should be done to ensure social distancing?

Apart from that, an emergency or crisis plan should be formulated to ensure that the education system is better able to adapt and respond to future emergency or crisis. Preparation for digitization needs to be rolled out immediately to ensure that the platform can provide organised and effective online learning for all students in the event of another wave of the pandemic.



iii. Expand the coverage of digital access to include all children in Malaysia

From the chart above, it shows that even if lessons are aired on television, which is most commonly owned by households, there are children that would be left behind if schools are closed. There are 1.4% of households that do not have access to a television.

¹⁰. Ministry of Education, 2018.

¹¹. McInerney, 2020.

According to the Household Income Survey 2016, there are 0.3% of households in rural areas that do not have access to electricity.¹² This is more prevalent in East Malaysia, where 0.5% of households do not have access to electricity in Sabah and 0.4% in Sarawak. Although this seems like a small percentage, it would be an estimate of 1,905 households that do not have electricity.¹³ These statistics do not include villages with access but limited electricity.

Children living in households without electricity would not be able to access the online learning platform nor would they be able to view the television lessons. Therefore, more development and long-term measures are required to ensure all communities have access to necessities such as electricity, water and sanitation, internet and road access.

The COVID-19 pandemic caught us off guard. It is a “new normal” for all of us including our children. Our education system needs to change with this “new normal”. Let us not lament on whether we are ill-prepared for this pandemic, but to look to creative solutions and collaborated efforts that are required to adapt and change with this “new normal” and the future. This is an opportunity to rebuild our education system. Malaysia is not alone in addressing education challenges that arise due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are 164 countries besides us who are trying to find solutions to this. Even if we have imperfect solutions and policies, we must do the best that we can. During this COVID-19 crisis, we must protect our children’s education and future.

¹². DOSM, 2016.

¹³. This is author’s own estimation which is based 2010 census. The 2010 census is the latest census available and it records 6.35million households.

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