

Attitudes and Experience of Malaysian Parents towards School Closure during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ting, Chuong Hock¹, Jeffery Stephen², Ahmad Khairi Hassan³, Norashikin Abdul Moris³, Noor Nasuha Noor Hamal³, Nurul Ain Amidar³, Mohd Azlan Rusdi³

¹Department of Psychological Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

²Department of Community Medicine and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

³Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Ting Chuong Hock

Corresponding Author

Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Email: chting@unimas.my

Abstract

In 2020, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had triggered the lockdown in many countries around the world. School closure was no exception as a measure to limit the spread of the disease. This step was expected to bring some impact on parents, especially if both of them were working. In this study, we aimed to investigate Malaysian parental attitudes and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted an online cross-sectional survey by using a structured questionnaire, between May and June 2020. A total of 273 parents with children aged below 18 years old were involved. Descriptive analysis was done to determine the sociodemographic data of the respondents, their attitudes, and their experiences associated with the school closure during the outbreak. 97.4 % of parents agreed with the school closure. The majority of them believed the outbreak was serious and the school dismissal was appropriate to

Manuscript Received Date: 31/12/20

Manuscript Acceptance Date: 31/06/21

Manuscript Published Date: 15/08/21

©The Author(s) (2021). Published by USIM Press on behalf of the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact usimpress@usim.edu.my

doi: 10.33102/uij.vol33no3.354



Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
<https://uijournal.usim.edu.my>

protect their children and the community. However, only 54.9 % were well prepared for the measure. 11.4 % of parents had difficulty arranging childcare. During the outbreak, 85.7 % experienced missing work and 71.4 % felt at risk of losing their jobs. The school closure also indirectly incurred additional costs for 88.6% of the parents and partially contributed to 75.5% of the parents losing income. Unexpected long-term school closure might cause some adverse outcomes to the employed parents during a pandemic, therefore, the health authority and education department should take this into consideration when mitigating this issue.

Keywords: *COVID-19, school closure, Malaysian parents, attitude, experience*

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Ciotti et al. (2020) suggested that the main route of transmission is human-to-human transmission via droplets, and the oral-faecal route may be another possible route of transmission. From experience, children without flu vaccination were noted to contract the disease easier, especially at the nursery or school. They were often seen as “super-spreader” as they could spread the virus at a faster rate, posing risk to other people who are susceptible to get infections (National Health Service England, 2017). This could be due to the children often staying close physically to one another, less initiation to practice hygiene behaviours, and naturally lower immunity to lots of infections (Brooks et al., 2020). In order to gain control of the COVID-19 outbreak, many countries had implemented school closures (Viner et al., 2020). School closure was applied during past influenza outbreaks as this could reduce social contacts between students and therefore curb the transmission of the disease (Jackson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2008).

In the past, many households perceived that school closures were appropriate and necessary to mitigate influenza transmission. A study on household responses to school closure resulting from the outbreak of Influenza B in North Carolina showed that 91% of respondents considered the decision to close schools was appropriate (Johnson et al., 2008). The reasons behind the appropriateness in closing down the schools were (i) to protect the health of the community, (ii) the number of sick children is high for schools to remain open, (iii) to protect children and families, and (iv) schools would be understaffed if they remain open during pandemic (Johnson et al., 2008). UNESCO (2021) reported over 177, 000, 000 learners were affected by decisions for the closure of academic facilities over the past year due to the pandemic. Although many parents agreed with the decision to close down schools, some parents may think otherwise due to the concern of impacts of school closures on their children’s education. As an effort to mitigate the impact of school closure, many schools started to offer digital learning to their students such as online classes and virtual classes to minimise the potential losses in learning (UNESCO, 2021).

Reviews on school closures during influenza pandemic noted that school closures would also lead to untoward effects including economic pressure to working parents, healthcare workers, or critical workers obliged from work to childcare, loss of parental productivity, the transmission of disease from children to the grandparents, loss of education, harm to child welfare and nutritional problems to those students who depend on free school meals as a crucial source of nutrition (Steelfisher et al., 2010; Viner et al., 2020). Undeniably, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on parental psychological flexibility in parenting during school closure could be far greater than expected. Despite there were documented parental responses to the school closures during the pandemic, the information on this issue in Malaysia is limited. Therefore, this study aimed to

explore the parental attitude and their experiences during school closures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia.

2. Material and Methods

A cross-sectional survey of sampled households in Malaysia was conducted from 4 May 2020 to 3 June 2020. Subjects of this study comprised of parents from all 13 states and three federal territories of Malaysia with a child aged < 18 years old whose school had been closed temporarily in response to Movement Control Order (MCO) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only one parent from every single household was required to respond to the questionnaire.

An online survey was answered anonymously by parents through the web-based application Google Form. The Google Form which contained a questionnaire was shared through social media including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The questionnaire of this study focused on two epidemiological outcomes: the attitude of parents towards school closure and experiences encountered by them during school closures. It was adapted from previously published surveys conducted during past pandemics (Mizumoto et al., 2013; Steelfisher et al., 2010). The first section of the questionnaire was about the sociodemographic background of respondents. The second section was about the attitude of parents during the school closure, and the last section was about experiences faced by parents. This study had been reviewed and approved by the Medical Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). [Ref: UNIMAS/NC-21.02/03-02, Jld.4 (90)]

Data collected for sociodemographic, attitudes, and experiences of respondents were all analysed using descriptive statistics. All analyses were performed using SPSS ver. 26.

3. Results

There were a total of 273 respondents who responded to the questionnaire. The youngest respondent was 25 years old while the oldest was 64 years old. 61.2 % of parents had attended at least tertiary education. Most of the respondents (42.1 %) had their children attending secondary school. 57.9 % reported both parents were working (Table 1).

Attitudes of parents towards school closure

We found that 90.1% of parents agreed with the school closure, and most (97.4%) of them thought that it was an appropriate decision. Among the parents, 42.9% believed the COVID-19 outbreak was severe while the rest thought it could help to protect the children and community as well as the family. Almost half (44.3%) of them thought the school closure should be more than 5 days while the majority (49.5%) were unsure of the appropriate duration of school closure. The majority (90.1%) perceived the major reason for school closure was to reduce transmission by keeping the children apart. However, only 54.9% were well prepared for this measure. We noted also nearly 20% of the parents said school problem was a major problem to them.

Parental Experiences during school closure

When presented with a list of possible experiences, the most commonly reported experience was the additional financial cost incurred compared to other typical days (88.6%), followed by missing work (85.7%), and the children missed health services usually provided by the school (85.0%). Among them, losing income, feeling at risk of losing the job, and paying excessive financial cost are major concerns.

Table 1: Sociodemographic data for participating parents (N=273)

Characteristics	N (%)
State region	
East Malaysia	135 (49.5)
West Malaysia	138 (50.5)
Age	
25 - 34	42 (15.4)
35 - 44	86 (31.5)
45 - 54	107 (39.2)
55 - 64	38 (13.9)
Sex	
Male	68 (24.9)
Female	205 (75.1)
The level of education of parents	
Did not attend school	2 (0.7)
Primary education	8 (2.9)
Secondary education	73 (26.7)
Post-secondary education	23 (8.4)
Tertiary education	167 (61.2)
House area status	
Red zone	37 (13.6)
Yellow zone	63 (23.1)
Green zone	157 (57.5)
Do not know	16 (5.9)
The school attended by the child	
Kindergarten	50 (18.3)
Primary school	102 (37.4)
Secondary school	115 (42.1)
Special education needs school	6 (2.2)
Parent working status	
Both working	158 (57.9)
Other than both working	109 (39.9)
Neither is working	6 (2.2)

Table 2: Attitudes of parents towards school closure (N= 273)

Attitudes	N (%)
Having awareness for school closure	
Yes	266 (97.4)
No	7 (2.6)
Was school Closure appropriate	
Yes	266 (97.4)
No	7 (2.6)
Appropriate	
To protect community	71 (26.0)
To protect other students at school	21 (7.7)
To protect my child and family	57 (20.9)
COVID-19 is serious	117 (42.9)
Not appropriate	
COVID-19 illness is mild	1 (0.4)
Significantly impacts daily lives and work	3 (1.1)
Special arrangements required for childcare	3 (1.1)
Prepared for school closure	
Predicted and well prepared	150 (54.9)
Longer notice period is required before closure	15 (5.5)
Support needed to care for children during the closure	26 (9.5)
Prior notice regarding the length of closure required	82 (30.0)
How long should school closure be in days	
2	3 (1.1)
3	4 (1.5)
4	3 (1.1)
5	7 (2.6)
More than 5	121 (44.3)
Do not know	135 (49.5)
Should childcare or after school activities cancelled	
Yes	220 (80.6)
No	16 (5.9)
No activities were done	27 (9.9)
Do not know	10 (3.7)
The extent of school closure seen as a problem	
Major problem	53 (19.4)
Minor problem	116 (42.5)
Not a problem	90 (33.0)
Do not know	14 (5.1)
How much you agree with school closure	
Strongly disagree	10 (3.7)
Disagree	4 (1.5)
Neutral or do not know	13 (4.8)
Agree	137 (50.2)
Strongly agree	109 (39.9)

Attitudes and Experience of Malaysian Parents towards School Closure during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The perceived major reason for dismissal*	
To reduce transmission by keeping children apart	246 (90.1)
To reduce transmission by cleaning the building and surfaces	40 (14.7)
Because school cannot operate effectively with high student absenteeism	24 (8.8)
Because school could not operate effectively with high teacher absenteeism	16 (5.9)
Because school would lose funds for high students' absenteeism	9 (3.3)
Effectiveness of dismissal of school closure	
Very effective	127 (46.5)
Effective	129 (47.3)
Neutral or do not know	11 (4.0)
Not very effective	2 (0.7)
Not effective at all	3 (1.5)
Plan for childcare	
Had a plan in advanced	242 (88.6)
Had problems arranging the care	31 (11.4)
Who cared for the child	
Adult in household	225 (82.4)
Family members outside of the household	26 (9.5)
Friends or neighbours	1 (0.4)
Professional care provider	11 (4.0)
The child stayed at home alone	10 (3.7)
Site and activities visited by the child	
Friends' houses or friends visiting the house	13 (4.8)
Grocery shopping	12 (4.4)
Fast food restaurant	5 (1.8)
Public events	6 (2.2)
Shopping areas or malls	1 (0.4)
Social events	1 (0.4)
Participated in at least one of these activities	20 (7.3)
Do not participate in any activities	215 (78.8)

*Respondents are allowed to choose one or more than one choice

4. Discussion

COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted conventional school education in most countries around the world, with over 90% of the world's students affected by national and local school closures (UNESCO, 2021). To minimize the potential losses in learning, innovative approaches such as creating online courses for delivery through TV broadcasts and the internet has been worked out (UNESCO, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). It has been proposed that government should provide guidelines and principles for online learning so that the effectiveness of online learning can be maintained and the courses meet the educational requirement, and at the same time students are not overburdened (Wang et al., 2020). Besides, to make these educational materials truly effective, the courses should also be age-appropriate and intriguing as well.

Good parenting skills become essential when children are confined at home during the period of school closure. School closure provides a good opportunity for parent-children interaction. Perrin et al. (2016) believed parents can best nurture their children and maintain the children's well-being

when they are given adequate support and parenting education. Apart from monitoring children’s performance and behaviour, parents need to help their children mold self-discipline skills and at the same time respect their identity and needs (Wang et al., 2020).

Table 3: Parental experiences during school closure (N=273)

Experiences	Responders experienced consequence N (%)	Respondents experienced consequence as			
		Major Problem N (%)	Minor Problem N (%)	Not a problem N (%)	Do not know/ Not applicable N (%)
Missed work	234 (85.7)	53 (19.4)	100 (36.6)	81 (29.7)	39 (14.3)
Child missed free or reduced-cost school meals	200 (73.3)	10 (3.7)	34 (12.5)	156 (57.1)	73 (26.7)
Lost pay or income	206 (75.5)	78 (28.6)	54 (19.8)	74 (27.1)	67 (24.5)
Financial cost in excess during the pandemic comparing to typical days expenses	242 (88.6)	55 (20.1)	95 (34.8)	92 (33.7)	31 (11.4)
Missed appointment with potential financial impact	191 (70.0)	44 (16.2)	53 (19.4)	94 (34.4)	82 (30.0)
Missed another kind of important appointment or event	204 (74.7)	33 (12.1)	79 (28.9)	92 (33.7)	69 (25.3)
Felt at risk of losing job	195 (71.4)	71 (26.0)	43 (15.7)	81 (29.7)	78 (28.6)
Child missed health services usually provided by school	232 (85.0)	28 (10.3)	70 (25.6)	134 (49.1)	41 (15.0)

This study found that most parents were aware of the severity of COVID-19 and how it could affect the household members. The unprecedented tsunami of this outbreak could have caught of their guard in the preparedness for school closure. Despite this, most parents perceived school closure as an appropriate and effective way to restrict the transmission of COVID-19 by reducing social contact.

Although we acknowledge that many good causes for school closure during the pandemic, the measure should only be in place with caution (Brooks et al., 2020). It was observed a high level of staff absenteeism in the past influenza pandemic (Cauchemez et al., 2009). Parents may need to have dismissed from their work to look after their children during school closure. This inevitably could pose significant concerns on household economics and job security. This experience might be different according to the geographical area where a family comes from due to the proportion of working parents. In a survey done to assess how families responded to the school closure during an influenza epidemic, the intervention caused little disruption to the households in a rural area

where more than 50% of the households have at least one adult that does not work outside the home or can work from home (Johnson et al., 2008).

This study reminded us of the importance of weighing the potential negative consequences of school closure from the perspectives of parents while considering its potential beneficial effects on the reduction in cases. There are several limitations of this study during its conduct. First, bias could have happened as the entire study was conducted online instead of face-to-face interviews and questionnaire answering sessions. Second, we noticed that the participation of the respondents was higher in certain groups compared to the others. For example, in terms of school grades, the respondents' children were higher among those in secondary school compared to the others. Third, accessibility had become a major obstacle throughout our study as only those who had internet coverage would be able to answer whereas those who live in the rural areas with poor internet connection or coverage would likely be unable to take part in this survey.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that some of the parents were significantly affected by the school closure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic when they needed to be absent from work to take care of their children at home. The school closure might have directly affected the parents' working incomes and parents might fear losing their jobs. Despite the perceived consequences resulted from the school closure, most of them had shown a positive attitude towards such policies as they were aware of the impacts of the COVID-19. School closure had significantly affected the working parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government and health authorities should weigh parents' perspectives in the management of disease outbreaks and consider potential solutions to solve these issues.

6. Acknowledgement

We sincerely acknowledge Prof. Dr. Md Mizanur Rahman from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, who helped us in analyzing the data of this study. We thank all the participants who had contributed to this study, for their time, cooperation, willingness, and understanding.

References

- Brooks, S. K., Smith, L. E., Webster, R. K., Weston, D., Woodland, L., Hall, I., & James Rubin, G. (2020). The impact of unplanned school closure on children's social contact: Rapid evidence review. *Eurosurveillance*, 25(13). <https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.13.2000188>
- Cauchemez, S., Ferguson, N. M., Wachtel, C., Tegnell, A., Saour, G., Duncan, B., & Nicoll, A. (2009). Closure of schools during an influenza pandemic. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 9(8), 473–481. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(09\)70176-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(09)70176-8)
- Ciotti, M., Angeletti, S., Minieri, M., Giovannetti, M., Benvenuto, D., Pascarella, S., Sagnelli, C., Bianchi, M., Bernardini, S., & Ciccozzi, M. (2020). COVID-19 outbreak: An overview. *Chemotherapy*, 64(5–6), 215–223. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000507423>
- Jackson, C., Vynnycky, E., & Mangtani, P. (2016). The relationship between school holidays and transmission of Influenza in England and Wales. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 184(9), 644–

651. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww083>

Johnson, A. J., Moore, Z. S., Edelson, P. J., Kinnane, L., Davies, M., Shay, D. K., Balish, A., McCarron, M., Blanton, L., Finelli, L., Averhoff, F., Bresee, J., Engel, J., & Fiore, A. (2008). Household responses to school closure resulting from outbreak of influenza B, North Carolina. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 14(7), 1024–1030. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid1407.080096>

Mizumoto, K., Yamamoto, T., & Nishiura, H. (2013). Contact behaviour of children and parental employment behaviour during school closures against the pandemic influenza A (H1N1-2009) in Japan. *Journal of International Medical Research*, 41(3), 716–724. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0300060513478061>

National Health Service England. (2017). *Health experts say “super-spreader” children should get flu vaccination to protect grandparents at Christmas.* <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2017/11/super-spreader-children-should-get-flu-vaccination-to-protect-grandparents-at-christmas/>

Perrin, E. C., Leslie, L. K., & Boat, T. (2016). Parenting as primary prevention. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 170(7), 637–638. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2016.0225>

Steelfisher, G., Blendon, R., Bekheit, M., Lidden, N., Kahn, E., Schieber, R., & Lubell, K. (2010). Parental attitudes and experiences during school dismissals related to 2009 Influenza A (H1N1) - United States, 2009. In *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (Vol. 59, Issue 35). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yjpd.2011.01.006>

UNESCO. (2021). *Education: From disruption to recovery.* <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosures>

Viner, R. M., Russell, S. J., Croker, H., Packer, J., Ward, J., Stansfield, C., Mytton, O., Bonell, C., & Booy, R. (2020). School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks including COVID-19: A rapid systematic review. *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, 4(5), 397–404. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30095-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30095-X)

Wang, G. H., Zhang, Y. T., Zhao, J., Zhang, J., & Jiang, F. (2020). Mitigate the effects of home confinement on children during the COVID-19 outbreak. *Journal of Shanghai Jiaotong University (Medical Science)*, 40(3), 279–281. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1674-8115.2020.03.001>