



**COVID-19 in Indonesia:**  
**Experiences of Children and Families**  
Learning and Social Lives of Children



# Table of contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>How did we have conversations?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
Learning arrangements	8
How children spend free time	16
Impact on learning outcomes	18
<b>Implications</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Annex: Study locations and COVID-19 zone status</b>	<b>25</b>

# Summary

In 2020, the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on children's education in Indonesia was widespread and significant. This research brief presents findings on how children and families coped with the closure of schools and the impacts on children's learning and daily lives. A number of implications for policymakers and development partners seeking to understand how to provide more effective learning support and education services for students, parents and teachers are outlined.

The brief is part of a series of four research briefs looking at the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on families and children in a remote, longitudinal study held from May 2020 to February 2021<sup>1</sup>. Study participants were families who researchers had previously lived with, or spent extended periods of time, as part of qualitative and immersive studies carried out between 2015 and 2020. These pre-existing relationships provided a basis for open and trusted remote communication, using a range of digital tools.

## FINDINGS

**All children in the study were engaged in some form of learning, either full-time distance learning or a hybrid arrangement of distance and face-to-face learning.** Distance learning was primarily coordinated through WhatsApp or Zoom (for university students). In some areas, face-to-face learning resumed between August and October 2020 with significantly reduced contact time with teachers. Many of these children also continued distance learning. Schools established hygiene protocols but students did not use these consistently.

**Teachers found it hard to engage with and assess students and lacked guidance on how to support them with distance learning.** Teachers had many different approaches to managing their classes but communication was primarily one-way with little interaction or feedback for students who struggled to understand new concepts or ask questions. Children learning to read and those who had recently graduated to a more senior school had more difficulties.

**Adolescents struggled to stay motivated and were concerned they were falling behind.**

University and secondary school students supported each other with assignments; younger children relied on their siblings and parents for help. Parents commonly said they felt unprepared or unable to help their children learn at home, although they made efforts for younger children.

**Most children were able to access a smartphone for distance learning but many had to share with parents or siblings. The costs of Internet quota placed an additional burden on families.**

Where Internet connectivity was inadequate, children or parents met with teachers or visited schools to submit and receive assignments or made alternative arrangements, including small study groups. Some schools remained open 'unofficially' to teach younger children.

**Children had more free time but many missed the social aspects of school.** Some adolescents chose to work, either through internships, helping parents or part-time work. Girls were often expected to do additional chores around the house and take care of younger siblings. Parents worried that their children had too much free time and some were concerned about their increased time on the Internet.

<sup>1</sup> These included education, learning and social lives of children; health and hygiene; and livelihoods and social assistance.



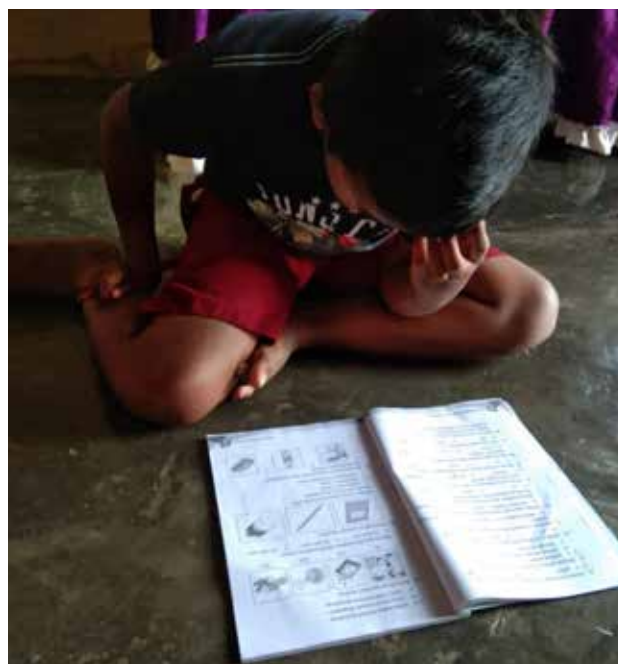
**Adjusting to distance learning was more difficult for rural communities but children in some remote areas were the least affected as schools reopened earlier.** Many rural schools had lower teacher capacity, poor Internet signal and high costs, low cell phone ownership and familiarity with technology.

## IMPLICATIONS

**Address the gaps in learning to improve learning outcomes.** Most students need additional support to catch up with their learning, including those who are attending reopened schools or who still rely on distance learning. Support could include adjusting the curriculum and resources for students to study more effectively at home (regular student groups and teacher visits, interactive online materials and activities). Specific support for reading and maths skills may be required for younger students and parents. Those students starting a new tier of school experienced particular challenges due to the need for extra support from teachers and lack of established peer groups.

**Provide guidance and incentives for teachers and honorary (guru honor) teachers to better engage with and support students** to catch up on lost contact time, manage curriculum adjustments, effectively use distance and hybrid learning approaches, assess student needs and give fair but accurate grades.

**Plan for and improve distance learning approaches.** There are opportunities to develop better national digital learning approaches to ensure learning can continue in any situation where schools cannot fully open. This would include a national digital learning blueprint, curriculum materials applicable to web-based platforms and guidance for teachers.<sup>2</sup> If distance learning is not possible due to lack of Internet connectivity or mobile ownership, ensure the blueprint can be adapted to fit local capacity and resources. More effective and appropriate financial support - from the private or public sector - to offset the additional costs of Internet access and data should be considered for those students who are able to access the Internet.



Sorong. A primary school student trying to figure out school tasks on his own as part of distance learning.

**Consider more contextualized learning arrangements to meet local education needs.**

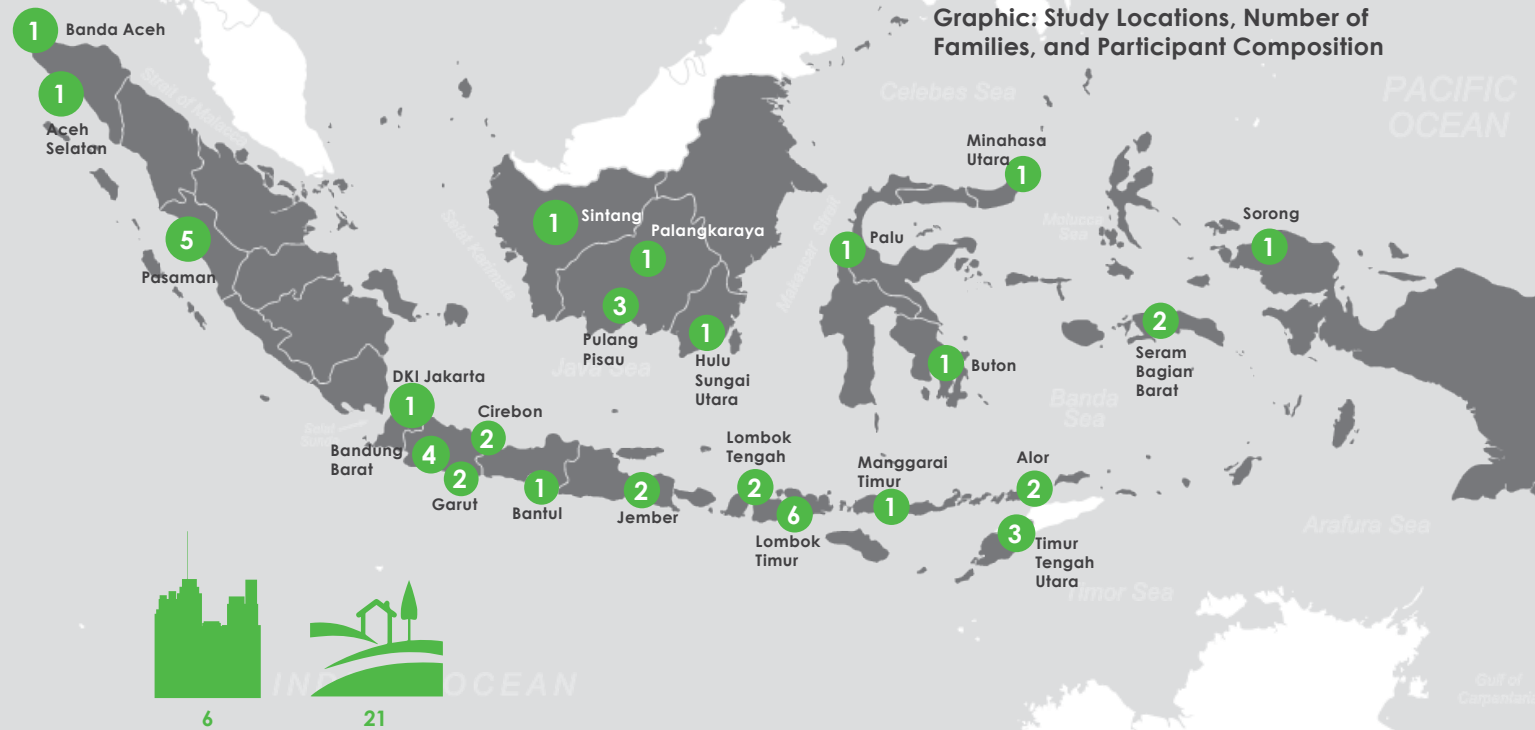
Enable schools to have more flexibility on learning arrangements taking into account local risks, resources and capacities. This includes strategies for more contextualized directives and response from the Ministry of Education and district education offices regarding school closure, risk mitigation and options for hybrid learning arrangements. Schools are best placed to assess risk at the community level and decide what is best for their students, provided adherence to COVID-19 guidelines are assured.

**Address the risk of school dropout due to declining motivation in students.** Many children are less motivated to learn with the disruptions in teaching. Initiatives are needed to monitor and address challenges with student retention, particularly for adolescents. Additional and improved vocational training opportunities and internship programmes that allow adolescents to work and earn income while still finishing their education can help support this.

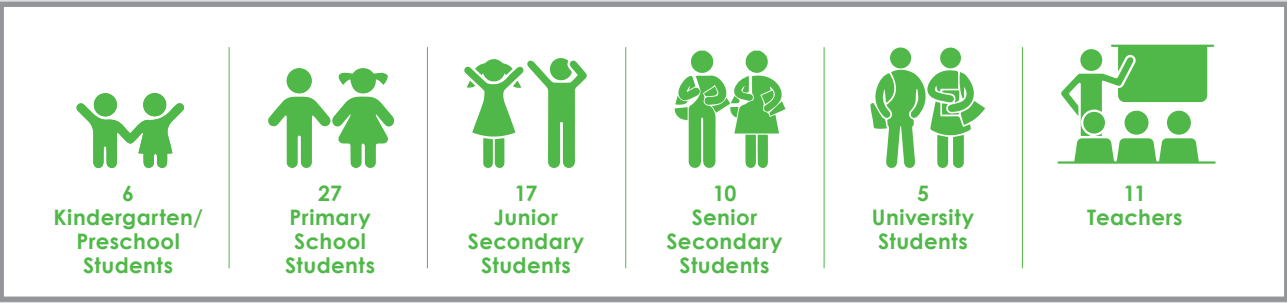
**Help parents to help children.** Many parents want to support their children to learn but do not know how. Guidance and support to help parents better support their children can address these issues and reinforce the message that parents are also teachers.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, 'Strengthening Digital Learning in Indonesia: Key Findings and Recommendations', Jakarta, 2021.

# Introduction



Graphic: Study Locations, Number of Families, and Participant Composition

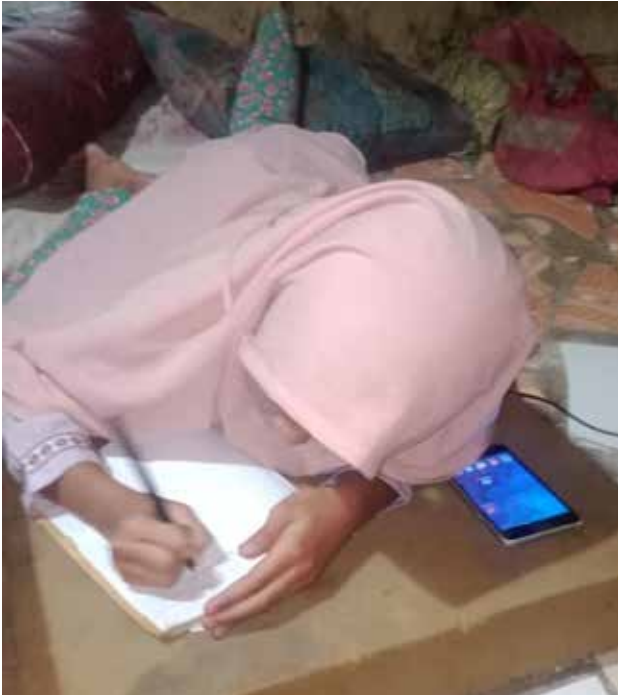


This brief explores how children's learning and social lives were affected by COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns in 2020 through remote interactions and conversations with 45 families across Indonesia. Across the country, schools have not operated normally since the pandemic began in March 2020. All schools have adopted some form of distance learning but some opened for modified face-to-face learning as early as July 2020.

The brief is part of a series of four research briefs looking at the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on families and children in a longitudinal study held from May 2020 to February 2021.<sup>3</sup> Key findings and implications are drawn from phone conversations, messaging, online group discussions and other digital interactions with families and other community members in October–November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Education, Learning and Social Lives of Children', Jakarta, 2020; UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Livelihoods and Social Assistance', Jakarta, 2021; UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Health and Hygiene', Jakarta, 2021.

# How did we have conversations?



The research was carried out by Empatika, an Indonesian-based organization who specialize in people-centred immersion studies. Study participants were families with whom Empatika researchers previously lived with, or spent extended periods of time, during earlier research studies. These relationships provided a strong basis for open and trusted online communication. Insights were gathered through remote conversations and interactions with family members and others using mobile phones and messaging applications, photo and video sharing, and group discussions. Conversation guides were developed around each of the three study themes to ensure consistency in interactions with families. For this brief, these interactions explored the changes in children's learning experiences and their daily lives caused by the pandemic.



Parents, neighbours, teachers and up to 65 children and adolescents from preschool to university participated in the study, living in 21 rural and 6 periurban/urban communities.<sup>4</sup> Sixteen districts were classified as orange or red COVID-19 zones at the time of these interactions with families (see Annex). Calls and interactions were made between mid-October to early November 2020, following a listening phase conducted from late May to August 2020. Data was collected prior to the announcement by the Minister of Education on 20 November 2020 that face-to-face schooling in red zones would be allowed to resume in January 2021.<sup>5</sup>

**Jakarta Timur and Palangkaraya: A junior secondary school student works on her homework with the help of a smartphone (above), and a university student's desk in their boarding house (below).**

<sup>4</sup> Overall, study participants included 45 families across 23 districts and 18 provinces in Indonesia.

<sup>5</sup> Provided certain measures were in place including: 1) sanitation and hygiene, access to toilets, handwashing facilities and disinfectants; 2) access to nearby health care facilities; 3) mandatory mask use; 4) use of thermogun for measuring body temperature; 5) mapping among teachers and students for any existing health conditions along with those who do not have safe transport and who may be coming from high risk areas; 6) approval from school committee and parent representatives.

# Findings

## LEARNING ARRANGEMENTS

All children in the study were engaged in some form of learning. Eighty per cent of students were learning from home full-time or through other hybrid arrangements including attending school in limited 'shifts' to just dropping off/picking up tasks at school. Other special arrangements were sometimes made for younger children but most followed the restrictions set by district governments.



### DISTANCE LEARNING

29 students 'Online' learning

13 students Drop off tasks school



### FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING

21 students Attending with rota / shifts

13 students Attending normally

\*some students have a combination of these arrangements.

## LEARNING FROM HOME

**Forty-three per cent of children in the study relied entirely on distance learning with no face-to-face contact with teachers.** These children live in both rural and urban/periurban communities. The remainder of students learned through face-to-face or hybrid arrangements with limited contact with teachers. At home, children often did their schoolwork in family communal areas. Although some said they preferred to work in their room, sleeping area or in different areas each time, most did not have a dedicated learning space or desk.

**Teachers used web- or app-based platforms to stay in touch with their students where Internet connectivity was adequate.** One teacher explained they had not received guidance on managing distance learning, so each teacher and school decided what might work best (Manggarai Timur).<sup>6</sup> Children and parents said every teacher adopted their own approach. In some locations, junior and secondary school teachers made videos of themselves, sometimes

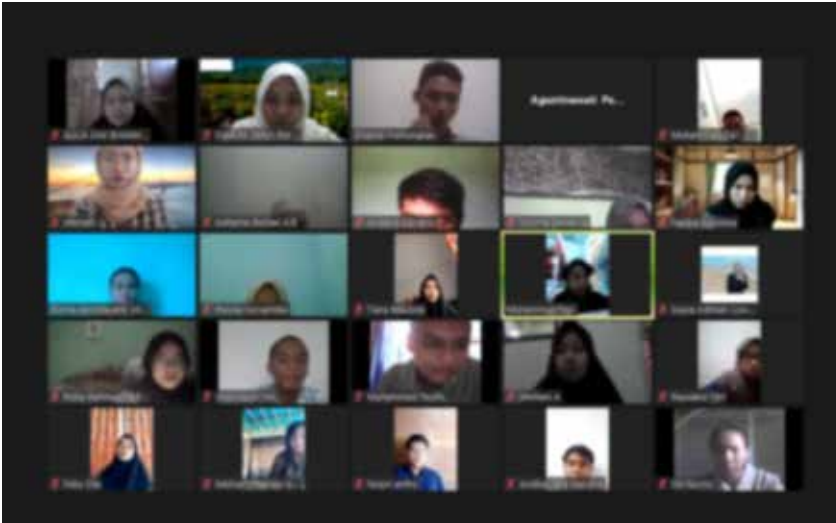
using PowerPoint. Children and parents said this was better than written directions or photos alone (Sintang, Palu, Jember). However, some teachers stopped when they realized their students were not always watching the videos. Other teachers referred children to existing videos on YouTube.

**WhatsApp was the most common platform used by teachers for distance learning.** For junior and secondary school students, teachers formed WhatsApp groups with each class, while primary school teachers formed groups with parents. Both students and parents said that teachers used these groups to direct students to complete specific pages of work; share photos of specific materials or give written explanations of the material. Communication was mostly one-way with relatively little engagement with students or parents. This was also the case for the small number of students that used Google Classroom and Ruang Guru (Lombok Tengah).<sup>7</sup> Some parents shared that they found

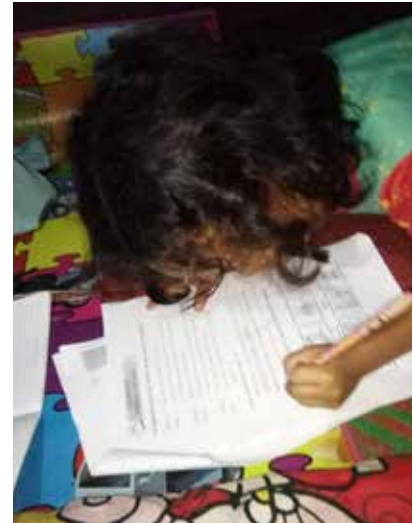
<sup>6</sup> Throughout this brief, participants' locations are listed using the district name.

<sup>7</sup> Ruang Guru is an Indonesian-based mobile platform for learning, similar to Google Classroom but also offers tutoring and teaching videos.





Palangkaraya. University students learn via Zoom with their teacher. The head of the class has to screenshot the meeting for class attendance.



Palu. Studying at home.

Google Classroom challenging to navigate and requested to switch to WhatsApp (Jakarta Timur). One girl in Lombok Timur said she could not find her lessons on Ruang Guru, so stopped using it. University students primarily used Zoom.

**Adjusting to distance learning was more difficult for rural communities but children in some remote areas were the least affected as schools reopened earlier.** Children in urban locations were more comfortable with distance learning but they lacked guidance and learning activities were mainly limited to fulfilling assignments. Many rural schools had lower teacher capacity, poor Internet signal and high costs, low cell phone ownership and less familiarity with technology. Parents in one village in Buton with very poor Internet connection explained that both parents and teachers had “given up” trying to do distance learning as the Internet connection was so unreliable. Education resumed only when schools reopened in July. School closures and other disruptions in learning negatively impacted many students' motivation.

**Almost all families had at least one smartphone in the house,** though these were often secondhand or low-cost that families considered affordable. While more than half of junior secondary school students had their own smartphone, many children (particularly in primary school) shared smartphones with their siblings or parents. Sharing phones meant students sometimes missed assignments or messages from their teachers, as they did

not always have access to the phone. Some families said they or neighbours had bought a smartphone to keep up with assignments and need to stay connected (Pulang Pisau). Children without smartphones relied on friends to share school assignments and updates, leaving them a further step removed from their teachers.

Particularly early on in the pandemic, some teachers briefly visited children who did not have phones to make sure they received the assignments but rarely had extended teaching interactions with them. A number of parents shared that these arrangements allowed their children to continue to learn, reducing the pressure to buy a phone (Seram Bagian Barat). Teachers said that meeting students even briefly at homes was better than not seeing students at all. However they noted that coordinating and making the visits was exhausting (Timor Tengah Utara, Palu).

**Families using the Internet for distance learning found it expensive,** spending between IDR 25,000 and IDR 150,000 per month. These costs varied by location, student and with how many others in the family were using the Internet. On average, families spent approximately IDR 75,000 per student per month. Regardless of whether students were studying remotely full-time or not, all now required more Internet quota to communicate with teachers and classmates, and to research topics online. Some mothers explained that they only bought Internet quota when it expired and they had cash. Previously this

was not a problem but now children could not receive or submit assignments when the quota expired.

University students spent from about IDR 150,000/month to as much as IDR 100,000/week on Internet costs. They found these extra costs burdensome on top of rent and food costs. One university student supplements her family allowance of IDR 1 million/month by selling accessories online to cover the extra costs (Palangkaraya).

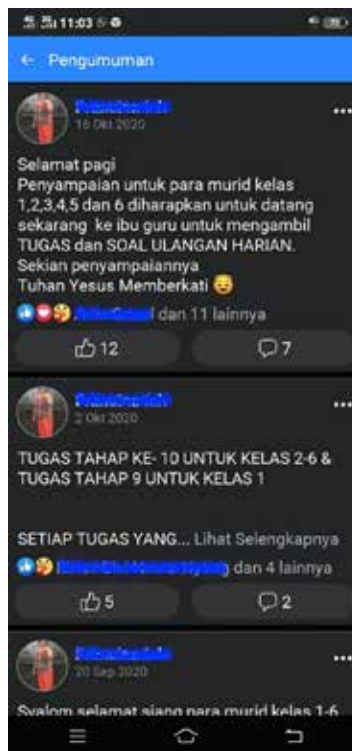
Internet costs also increased with children spending more time at home and less time socializing offline with friends. Many children played online games and watched videos, often unchecked by parents (Sorong, Pasaman, Lombok Tengah). One father said that rationing his young children's use of the Internet was harder because "they needed to be occupied" (Lombok Timur). Older students whose parents rationed monthly Internet use often struggled to make sure they had enough Internet for both school and entertainment.

*"They don't give any instruction so without phone credit how can we find the answers?"*

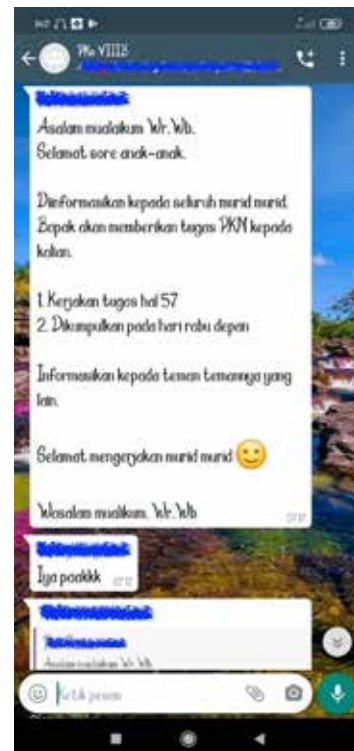
- Junior secondary school student in Lombok Timur

**Some children received government or school support to cover Internet costs but this scheme was inconsistent and not well understood.** One senior secondary school student in Central Lombok said that he received 10 GB from the government (via Telkomsel) but only for official educational platforms, not for WhatsApp or YouTube, even though those platforms were being used by his school. Some students and parents knew they received some Internet quota from the government but did not know how much or how to use it (Timor Tengah Utara). One parent in Jember explained Internet quota was only provided to children submitting regular assignments. Another said the child's teacher provided quota to her students, although did not know how much. Most university students had not received any quota. One student said that the

**EXAMPLES OF ASSIGNMENTS SENT VIA WHATSAPP GROUPS, GOOGLE CLASSROOM, AND FACEBOOK:**



Sorong. A primary school teacher announces in Facebook for parents to pick up their children's homework at school.



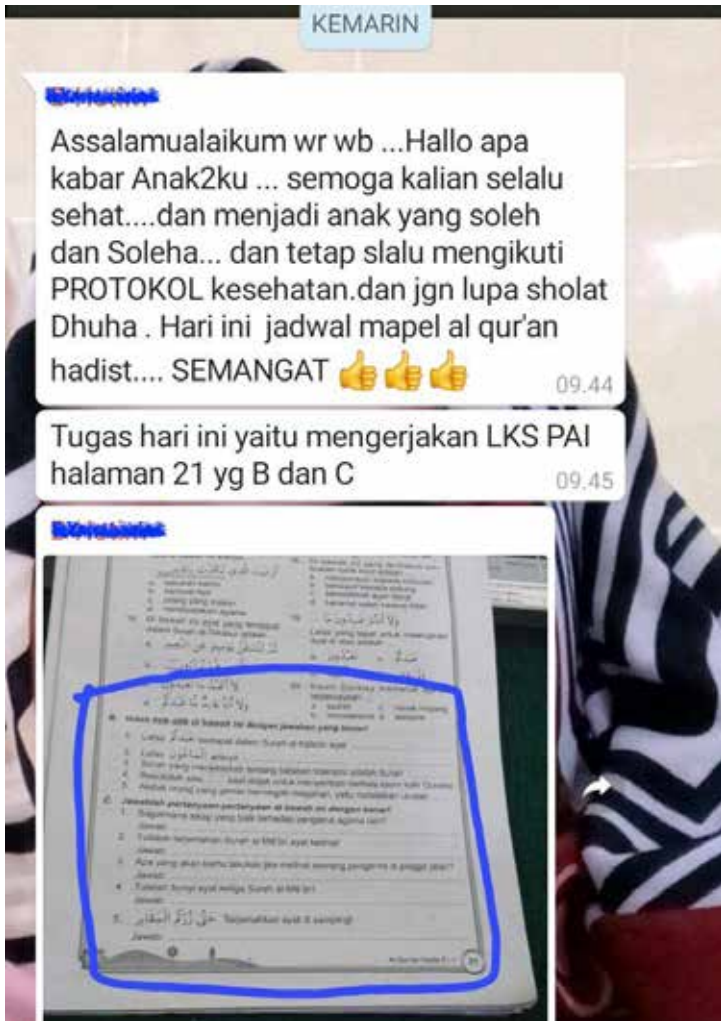
Pulang Pisau. This junior secondary student shared that she doesn't like distance learning because teachers give assignments without any explanation, and it's hard to learn by herself at home, especially when her mom is mostly busy with her baby sister.



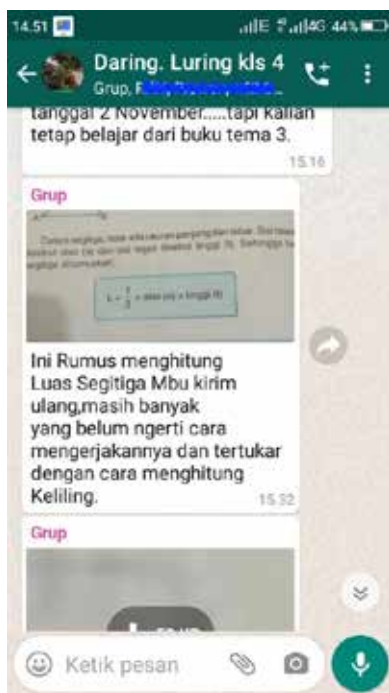
Lombok Tengah. A senior secondary school student receiving assignments.



Pasaman. Senior secondary student. Assignment directions in Google Classroom.



Jember. A primary school student receiving workbook instructions for the day.



Bandung Barat. Primary school student. The teacher resent this math material as students still didn't understand the formulas.

government had provided quotas for students at her public university but pandemic-related administration bottlenecks meant she had not yet received it (Lombok Tengah).

Teachers agreed that the process of distributing Internet quota was not effective. One teacher explained that because their Internet signal is so weak, they have not been able to upload the students' phone numbers to the central database to allow them to obtain the quota (Sorong). Other teachers knew the assistance was available but did not know how to access it (Jember).

*"Now we already buy our kids phones, at least use it properly [in an interactive way], not just for sending assignments. At least for talking with the students."*

– Father in Jakarta Timur

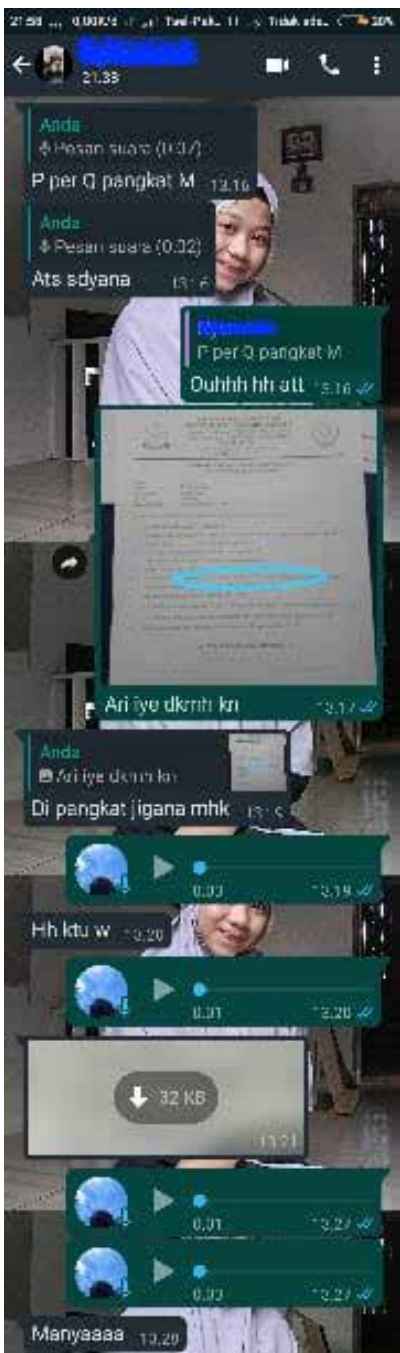
### COLLECTING AND SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS

**In locations with poor Internet connectivity and where schools remained closed, children met with teachers at home or visited school to collect and submit assignments.** This was the arrangement for 14 children from the study families who explained that these meetings were generally once per week.

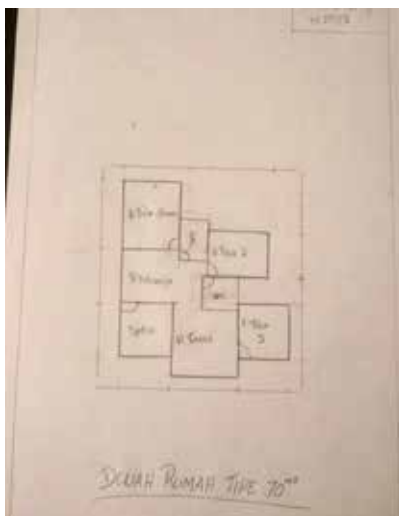
**In some locations, parents of primary school children would collect and submit assignments, though some complained that these visits were time consuming and disturbed their morning work** (Pasaman). Some parents only visited the school every couple of weeks to drop off their children's assignments and collect new ones, although some students or parents also had the option to submit their work via WhatsApp if and when the Internet connection allowed (Pasaman, Pulang Pisau).



ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION VIA WHATSAPP GROUPS:



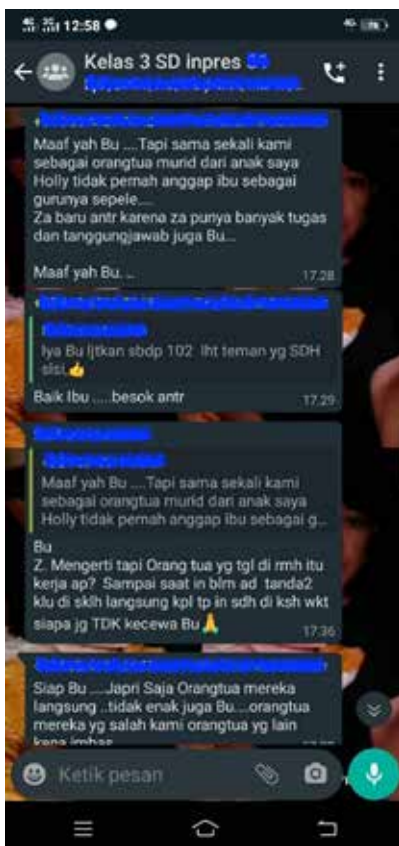
Garut. Junior secondary students discussing homework with peers via WhatsApp.



Lombok Tengah. A senior secondary school student sending one of their assignments via WhatsApp.



Jakarta Timur. A screenshot from a video recorded by a primary school student to fulfill a physical education assignment.



Sorong. Some parents of primary school students here are sharing their frustrations with the teacher about the way the teacher is communicating tasks and the expectations put on them as parents, along with their children. Across locations many parents shared that they felt unprepared or unable to give the necessary support to help their children learn from home.



Sorong. A primary school student sending photos for their physical education assignment.

"This is not kids going to school, this is parents going to school."

- Father in Pasaman

## INTERACTIONS WITH TEACHERS

**Adolescents (junior secondary school and above) learning from home said they generally received 5–10 core subject assignments per week. Primary school students often received 1–2 assignments per week.** Students said that teachers generally sent assignments in the mornings; senior secondary school students often needed to complete the assignment(s) by the same day (Jakarta Timur, Pasaman) whereas younger students often had a few days to complete their work. Some teachers felt that students were not learning as much and some thought students may be getting assignment answers from others, the Internet or their parents.

**Almost all students learning remotely said that they received little feedback from their teachers.**

Children rarely messaged teachers with specific questions, as some felt 'strange' messaging the teacher directly (Lombok Tengah). Some children used their WhatsApp groups to discuss assignments with other students, while others said that only the teacher was allowed to post in the group chat (senior secondary school students in Garut). A junior secondary school student in Aceh Selatan was frustrated that all she received after submitting an assignment was another assignment. University students also complained about one-way lectures without discussion, with some lecturers directing students to Google if they did not understand the material (Lombok Tengah).

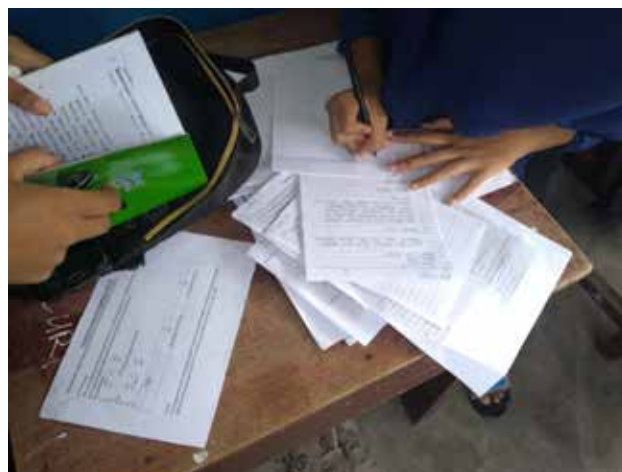
"The teachers should know, the more assignments they give, the more students will not have motivation [to complete them]."

- Junior secondary school student in Sintang

**In a number of locations, students at various levels of schooling did not believe their assignments were being graded** and only saw automatically generated scores for online quizzes (Jember, Lombok Tengah). Some children asked for feedback but teachers did not respond. In Seram Bagian Barat, senior secondary school students, who were mostly learning remotely, did get immediate feedback when they physically met with teachers to submit assignments.

**Teachers in four locations taught younger children face-to-face in their homes, even when schools were closed.** One family in Sorong explained that the primary school teacher shares tasks via WhatsApp, then meets the students for 15–30 minutes per week in their homes to review the previous week's homework, answer any questions, and plan the following week's assignments. Here, teachers also visited kindergarten students in their home to do simple activities for 1–2 hours per week. Another family said that their child in kindergarten would meet with the teacher for 30 minutes to 2 hours per week, but otherwise parents were supposed to help manage assignments.

In Seram Bagian Barat, parents shared that children entering preschool visited their teacher's homes two days per week to do activities like drawing, colouring and singing. Some primary school students met a teacher at a village kiosk in Minahasa Utara once a week for two hours of classes to help improve their reading skills. In Pasaman, a teacher held classes for eight primary school students in her house twice a week for three hours. As these lessons were held outside and people felt that the village is COVID-



Palu. Collecting and receiving assignments at the junior secondary school.





Timor Tengah Utara. In-class learning had resumed for primary school children although with shorter classes. Children and teachers were supposed to wear masks although many acknowledged that this wasn't always followed.



Palu. Primary school teachers doing home visits, which they said was helpful but also very time consuming.



Timor Tengah Utara. Before in-class learning resumed here, primary school teachers gave remote lessons to small groups of students.

safe due to its remoteness, masks were not typically worn.

## FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING

**Overall, 54 per cent of children (from primary to secondary school) were engaged in some form of face-to-face learning.** In-person learning began between July and October 2020, after full-time distance learning since March. Children of all ages usually attended school for 2–4 hours, usually in the morning, and usually 1–3 times per week. In Alor, a junior secondary school student said she attends school every day, while larger schools in some locations had moved to holding some classes in the evening to limit numbers at the school. In Aceh Selatan, junior secondary school students were only attending school every other week.

**Students understood that the reduced teaching time was due to social distancing restrictions, but many wished to spend more time with their teachers.** In two locations, parents were frustrated that teachers did not always show up when school was scheduled, adding to missed contact time for their children (Lombok Timur, Pulang Pisau). No university students in the study attended classes in-person.

**Students in four locations had attended face-to-face learning despite schools supposedly not receiving approval to open.** These schools were located in yellow and orange COVID-19 zones and had allowed Grades 1 and 2 to attend primary school for two hours, between two and five days per week since August 2020 (Pulang Pisau, Lombok Timur, Garut, Lombok Tengah). Parents explained that these schools had opened as it was so difficult for young children to learn remotely. Students were asked to not wear uniforms in case the schools were reprimanded for being open. For some families, this led to children asking for new clothes which families could not afford, especially as they had already purchased now redundant uniforms (Lombok Timur).

**Limited contact time has led to cursory engagement with core subjects** such as maths and Bahasa Indonesia and often no time for sports, art or extra-curricular activities (Alor, Timor Tengah Utara, Manggarai Timur). For

example, one senior secondary school student said that their teachers cover 5–6 subjects (30 minutes per subject) when they meet in person one day per week (Lombok Tengah). Another senior secondary school student explained that the teacher spends 15 minutes discussing the homework, teaching for 1–1.5 hours for all subjects and leaving students confused. One junior secondary school maths teacher in Alor noted that because of the short class time, she is not able to cover the full curriculum and cannot review materials for children who have questions, as she would normally do.

**Many children doing face-to-face learning at school are still doing much of their learning through distance learning as well.** On days when they do not attend school, some students in junior and senior secondary schools still receive assignments from their teachers electronically. Although they discuss assignments with the teacher on the days when they attend school in person, some students reflected that they still spend more time learning on their own than with the teacher (Lombok Tengah, Timor Tengah Utara). Nevertheless, students preferred this blended approach compared to only doing distance learning.

## COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS IN SCHOOLS

**All students attending school in person said that their schools had measures to help prevent COVID-19.** Rural communities feel the risk is low and it appears the measures put in place are more about compliance than actually protecting health. Measures often included using a rota system to reduce class sizes to a maximum of 15–20 students per class (Garut, Lombok Tengah, Aceh Selatan, Manggarai Timur). Schools with smaller class sizes had less frequent classes (Buton, Lombok Tengah, Alor).

**The fear of being reprimanded for non-compliance encouraged mask-wearing.** Children, parents and teachers wore masks to avoid being questioned or fined by district school authorities (Alor) or stopped by the police and army, rather than to reduce spread of the virus.

“Why do we need to use masks, we play football together?”

– Student in Buton

In some locations, teachers enforced mask wearing in class, even for those in kindergarten (Jember), but children said they generally removed their masks when the teacher was out of the room (Manggarai Timur, Lombok Tengah, Alor). Other children said that teachers did not correct them when they wore their masks with their noses uncovered (Minahasa Utara) or did not require students to wear masks at all (Buton, Lombok Timur). Teachers generally wore masks at school, although some only wore them in front of school officials (Timor Tengah Utara, Palu).

Many children said that the masks were hot and made it hard to breathe but did not complain that it was hard to understand teachers or others who were wearing masks. Some teachers gave students a break to go outside and take off their masks, but this reduced already short contact time with teachers. (Aceh Selatan).

**Handwashing stations were newly installed near many schools, although children did not consistently use them.** Many washed their hands before entering school (Aceh Selatan, Minahasa



Lombok Timur. A mother who is also a preschool teacher asked some students in a video, ‘Why aren’t you wearing your masks?’ and the children replied that, ‘It’s exhausting and difficult to breathe’.

Utara, Manggarai Timur, Lombok Tengah). Parents noted that teachers rarely supervise handwashing, although some students said that teachers occasionally check their hands before entering the class (Lombok Tengah). Some schools provided hand sanitizer instead of handwashing stations (Manggarai Timur, Lombok Timur) while others provided both (Palu, Alor). In Timor Tengah Utara, children said that the teacher suggested they bring eucalyptus oil as they did not have hand sanitizer. Similarly, while some schools checked students' temperatures before entering the school (Lombok Timur), most students said that this did not happen as there was no thermometer at school (Palu, Aceh Selatan).

**Families and teachers who made arrangements for groups to study at homes did not consistently take hygiene precautions.** Some people made sure a bucket was available to wash hands (Minahasa Utara) but, in four locations, parents and children said that teachers did not consistently wear masks and it was not generally expected that younger children would do so. When parents met with teachers at the school, both said they always wore masks.

## HOW CHILDREN SPEND FREE TIME

**Shortened contact hours with teachers meant that children had more free time.** Learning generally took place in the morning, with play for the rest of the day. Some parents took steps to establish routines - such as waking children up at the same time and designating certain times for home study - but others allowed children to manage their time themselves (Palu, Timor Tengah Utara, Seram Bagian Barat). Although students doing face-to-face learning had more structure than those studying remotely, both now had much more free time. One teacher explained that the biggest challenge of distance learning was trying to get parents and students to treat their time at home as a time to study, rather than taking a 'holiday' (Manggarai Timur). Many acknowledged that this was difficult.

**Children - boys in particular - made their own choices as to how to fill this unstructured time.** For younger children, this largely meant more time to play outside with friends and siblings



Palangkaraya. This university student sells accessories online to help cover the extra cost of internet.

as well as watch TV and play games on the Internet. Families more commonly expected girls to take on additional chores in the house or care for younger siblings. This was particularly true for adolescent girls, who also often helped younger siblings with their schoolwork. One girl in junior secondary school reflected that the extra chores and assignments from school were more burdensome than before the pandemic and that she would prefer to have more time for recreation (Garut).



"He's been stuck to the electrical outlet."

- Sister in Lombok Timur commenting how her younger brother spends time playing online games.

**Adolescents commonly spoke about being bored and missed the social aspects of school more than younger children.**

While this was most acute for children learning remotely, children attending some school also missed playing sports and having organized activities (Manggarai Timur). Once Internet quotas ran out, adolescents were bored, watched TV and socialized together.

**A few older adolescents had taken up some form of work to fill their time.** This includes an internship on a farm in Lombok Tengah, working in a motorbike workshop in Manggarai Timur, helping the family food stall in Minahasa Utara, and helping with the father's scavenging business in Jakarta Timur. Adolescents said that they enjoyed this work and preferred it to spending time idly. All realized that with the short school hours they had extra time to start working, and considered this to be a good opportunity for them. Most kept what they earned as pocket money, although those who took part in family businesses also contributed to their family's income. Some families shared stories of adolescents in their community who worked primarily to contribute earnings to their families but this was

## CHANGING ROUTINES FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN

**Jakarta Timur.** The son (senior secondary student) said that now he usually wakes up between 7-9 AM. 'My eyes usually open around 5, but I continue sleeping because I don't have anything to do anyway.' Between 9 - 12, he usually spends time at his father's garbage scavenging station, mostly just hanging out but sometimes helping. In the late afternoon to early evening he plays with friends, including football sometimes. At night, he hangs out with friends outside or is just busy with his smartphone. The daughter (junior secondary student), usually wakes up at 6-7 AM. On some days, she spends around 1 hour helping her mother with chores around the house before starting to study. She typically stays inside the house until the afternoon when she likes to hang out around her mother's small drink and snack stall. In the early evening, she is usually back inside the house watching TV, on the internet, or doing light chores. Sometimes she also joins Quran recital classes, either online or in-person. At night, she watches TV and does any remaining homework.

**Pasaman.** The family's fifth daughter (primary school grade 5) starts her day helping her older sister sweep the house and yard and release chickens from their cages. She does not have to do assignments online like her older sister in junior secondary school, so after breakfast she usually plays outside the house with her brother and their friends. In the evening, she joins Quran recital class like normal, watches some TV, and completes her school tasks with help from her older sisters. She also likes to play Tetris at night on one of the family's cell phones.

**Minahasa Utara.** The family's daughter in junior secondary school is going to school a few days a week now but only for 1-2 hours at a time. She likes helping her family's food stall business (since before COVID), and after school around 11-12 she goes around selling snacks and small meals. Then she takes a break for lunch before going back out to sell fried bananas from around 2-4 PM. After this, she finds some time to play with friends. When she gets home she eats dinner and then relaxes and does homework in the evening. Before COVID when she was busier with school, she typically only helped to sell fried bananas in the afternoon.



Lombok Tengah. University student doing an internship at a farm.

not the case for the study families. In most cases, those adolescents were working prior to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

When schools reopened, adolescents were able to spend more time with friends. **Parents in some urban areas were more concerned about the possibility of children contracting the virus and limited their children's contact with friends outside their immediate area.** They favoured continued distance learning

(Jakarta Timur, Sorong). In rural and some periurban areas, parents had allowed children to move freely within the village and play with their friends without taking any specific COVID-19 precautions. As a result, younger children saw many of their friends regularly even while learning remotely. However, adolescents have school friends outside the village and were generally not allowed to meet them until schools reopened.

**Many parents were concerned that their children had too much free time.** They were particularly worried about adolescents spending too much time inside watching TV or playing video games. Others worried that they were not able to keep track of their out of school children as they spent time "just hanging out" and roaming around the local area (Timor Tengah Utara, Lombok Tengah).

<sup>8</sup> This issue is further discussed in the brief, UNICEF and Empatika, 'People's Experience of COVID-19 in Indonesia: Livelihoods and Social Assistance', Jakarta, 2021.

## IMPACT ON LEARNING OUTCOMES

**Most students learning remotely struggled to understand new concepts** because they lacked individual attention and could not ask questions. A few used WhatsApp to ask questions and found delays in the teacher's response challenging. Some students struggled to complete assignments on their own and had not completed many assignments. University students also struggled to complete their work.

**Teachers felt that students were not learning as much and found it harder to assess student progress.** Most attributed this to limited contact time (Sorong, Manggarai Timur). One teacher shared that it was impossible to know whether children were not submitting their work due to challenges with connectivity or because they did not understand the material (Sorong).

**Children learning to read struggled to make progress.** A number of parents said that their children had been learning to read when schools closed in March 2020 and had made little progress since. Some parents worried that when they enter primary school at Grade 2 they will not know how to read or write well. They knew many children in this situation (Palu, Sintang, Lombok Timur). The inability to read affected other subjects as increasingly their assignments involved reading and writing. Mothers said that



although teachers know the children lack literacy skills, they continue to send assignments as per the curriculum, which assumes that children can read.

"I don't know how to do this [teach my child to read]"

- Mother in Palu

**Teachers had not received instructions allowing them to adjust or cut material from the curriculum, even if students fall behind.** Parents say teachers encourage them to help their children with reading, but do not explain how or provide materials (Sintang). In Lombok Timur, one mother (and also a preschool teacher) explained that even though her daughter's teacher only assigns 15 questions for homework, it will take her daughter "six months to do this because she can't read." Worrying that her child will enter primary school at Grade 2 without knowing how to read, she completes her daughter's assignments as her daughter is unable to do it on her own.

**Students in transition to more senior schools struggled with new curriculums.** Primary school

## CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD DISTANCE LEARNING

A junior secondary school student in Jakarta Timur shared that she and her friends had enthusiastically participated in the online study group in the early months, but that the group has been idle since October. She explained that teachers and the school did not actually give support, or oversee their progress: 'I just felt demotivated, and so did my friends'.



Sorong. One teacher gave a group assignment to 7th grade students (first year of junior secondary school). Many of these new students had not met each other yet, so the teacher encouraged them to make a fabric design in groups.

students transitioning to junior high school and junior high school students transitioning to senior secondary school were expected to manage the new curriculum even though they had missed so much school. This proved challenging for many students who found themselves in classes with new teachers and classmates, making them less confident to seek out personalized help (Manggarai Timur). One girl in Sorong referred to her classmates as a 'ghost class' having only seen their chat profile images on screen. Despite these challenges, families did not share examples of students opting to leave school early. Where families' financial situations had become increasingly tight, some children delayed university enrolment by at least a year.<sup>9</sup>

**University students felt they were missing out on important social aspects of university life.**

Students who started university in 2020 had never met many of their classmates, which made it hard to support each other. Some university students said they felt isolated, either because they were living in a city in a rented room and did not often go out to meet people, or because they had moved back home and had a sense of being far away from school and friends. One student in Palangkaraya explained, "it's difficult to be friends with people through screens."

**Students felt less motivated to complete their schoolwork. Most said schoolwork had increased since the pandemic.** One junior high school teacher had given more assignments to cover the curriculum, reminding students not to view their time at home as "a holiday" (Manggarai Timur). Students found managing

<sup>9</sup> This issue is further discussed in the brief, UNICEF and Empatika, 'People's Experience of COVID-19 in Indonesia: Livelihoods and Social Assistance', Jakarta, 2021.



**Lombok Timur.** A preschool teacher recorded a video of herself asking math questions to some young children in the community. Some had trouble answering basic arithmetic and she said that this was because of the lack of in-school learning.

their schoolwork overwhelming. Some primary school students felt unable to complete their assignments (Bandung Barat). Often assignments were not submitted as students had noticed over time that many of their teachers were not grading their assignments or marking them for not submitting (Lombok Tengah).

Lack of motivation affected children's participation, particularly for adolescents. For example, a junior high school student was attending only three out of 14 online groups each week as she felt her grade is guaranteed regardless of her participation (Sorong), although others eagerly attended each session to see their friends. Students at all levels hoped that school could soon go back to 'normal'. No students in the study had considered dropping out of school due to lack of motivation, although some did question the value of continuing to higher education.<sup>10</sup>

## SOURCES OF HELP FOR LEARNING

**Students in primary school and preschool depended on their parents and older siblings, although parents struggled to help.** Parents felt they mostly managed their children's work rather than assisted, trying to keep track of assignments, giving reminders and, in some cases, speaking with the teachers, if needed (Palu). Parents, particularly those who had completed high school, sometimes helped their

children. However, most did not understand the assignments and asked their other children to help or suggested 'googling' the answers (Bandung Barat, Sorong, Pasaman, Manggarai Timur). In Sorong, one mother said she asks the teacher for help but the response is delayed and often confusing. Mothers with young children were concerned that their children were not learning and that they did not know how to help them. A few parents said that while they could help their children, many neighbouring parents were illiterate and unable to help. This puts their neighbours' children at a disadvantage (Pasaman, Seram Bagian Barat).

**Parents' support was limited by their other commitments.** Some parents said they would receive messages from teachers if their children did not submit assignments (Jakarta Timur, Sintang) but many others did not and described themselves as "on their own" in supporting their children. Parents often have to work in the mornings when their children are meant to be doing schoolwork. In many cases, the burden of making time to help or manage their children's studies falls on mothers. This required reading and reviewing homework, and was tiring even for primary school students.

*"It's just a label, she still won't be able to read"*

- Mother in Lombok Timur talking about her daughter advancing to Grade 3 in primary school

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Some parents objected to distance learning not only because they felt that their children were not “learning anything” (Timor Tengah Utara) but that it also diverted parents from work or other tasks, especially when required to drop off/pick up children’s assignments. Some parents criticized teachers saying, “it is nice for them to sit at home and get paid while the parents do the work” (Pasaman), or that they “are the ones cheating” because they don’t check the homework (Lombok Tengah). One father said that he had been trying to find the phone number of the head of the district education office to complain.

**Many parents’ priority was for children to complete their assignments. Some parents completed the assignments themselves.** This was motivated by an interest in wanting to make sure their children do well and justified by the fact that they assumed other parents were doing the same (Pasaman, Sintang, Palu). While some parents made an effort to fill in the correct answers, some parents of younger children, in particular, said they fill in the assignments randomly “to make sure they get done” (Pasaman, Bandung Barat). A Sorong mother said that she googles the answers for her children. In most cases, parents said teachers never ask if children are completing the assignments themselves. One father in Jakarta Timur said that teachers knew this was happening, and understood it as a “compromise” between teachers and parents to make sure their children can pass this year.

Adolescents primarily relied on classmates for help with assignments. Parents rarely said that they monitor their children’s work once they reach junior high school and usually left them to complete their assignments on time. In many locations, junior and senior high school students stayed in touch on WhatsApp and other platforms to discuss assignments and share answers (Lombok Timur, Garut). One girl in Grade 1 (junior high school) who is usually in the top of her class said that sometimes her friends come to her house to study together, particularly those who normally struggle with schoolwork (Minahasa Utara). A girl in university explained that this year students are focused on how to get through the next few months and make sure they pass, so all readily share answers to support each other (Pasaman).

“My kids now are not honest about problems with school.”

– Parent, Jakarta Timur, admitting that they don’t know how to help

**Older students also rely on the Internet to look up answers for assignments and exams,** often because they felt assignments were not related to their lessons, or because they did not understand their assignments (Lombok Timur). Most students said they generally googled the answers, while some used sites such as Brainly to look up answers to specific exercises (Pulang Pisau). They felt that looking up answers was justified because they knew that others were doing the same. Although some students enjoyed being able to look up the answers during exams (Jakarta Timur, Lombok Tengah), they were aware that they were not learning as much. One university student described the process of doing assignments as “completing but not understanding” (Palangkaraya). While most students did not object to this practice, some were upset, saying that they are “trying to do it



Garut. A junior secondary student shared her feelings about the current learning situation in this drawing. Among other things, she said that she often felt confused with the school materials now and overwhelmed with the amount of homework.

right" but others were "cheating" (Palangkaraya, Sorong, Pulang Pisau). One student said it was better to rely on friends and the Internet for help with assignments, as this year "teachers are not reliable."

**Some parents and students agreed that there were also no consequences for children looking up the answers.** Although some parents worried that their children were falling behind because of this practice, they felt it was necessary for high marks (Lombok Tengah). One teacher in Palu said they had a meeting about the challenge of giving assignment scores during this period and eventually decided that the safest thing to do was to just give all children a full score (100). Teachers worried that it might be hard to resume typical grading once school returned to normal, as most students' scores will likely drop. With parents already feeling disappointed in schools, teachers felt it was best to be lenient on students to maintain good relationships with parents (Sorong). One teacher said she was confused as to why students were doing so well on exams, not considering that they might be copying the answers (Lombok Timur).

## LEARNING WORRIES AND ASPIRATIONS OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS

**Many parents and older siblings worry that children are falling behind learning expectations.** This worry was often based on the fact that children had replaced much of their learning time with playing, and "do not learn anything at home" (Garut, Buton, Aceh Selatan, Pasaman, Timor Tengah Utara). This concern applied to children of all ages but was often focused on younger children's reading ability or those moving to secondary schools (Minahasa Utara, Sintang, Palu, Lombok Timur). Others worried that because their children were behind, they would not be able to qualify for a scholarship to senior secondary school or university.

Other parents felt that all children are in a similar position and that it was understandable that children are "lagging this year" (Buton). Some parents felt that their children were being diligent about their studies and "had plenty of time to catch up" (Manggarai Timur, Minahasa Utara, Seram Bagian Barat).

**Many children worried about lagging behind their peers.** Many children said they missed how school used to be because then "the teacher actually taught" (Palangkaraya). Older students studying technical subjects also felt they were not learning as much without practical laboratory assignments (Kalimantan Tengah). One university student in Pasaman shared that she is worried that her grades would be compared to other students who studied in previous years. Other university students tried to do extra work to prepare for exams next year. Students of all ages took comfort in knowing most classmates face the same struggles, even though they realized they were not learning as much as students in previous years (Aceh Selatan).

"Why aren't schools open when the *posyandu*, *puskesmas*, banks are all open?"

- Father in Pasaman

Everyone wants school to go back to 'normal'. Parents in rural areas argued that it was safe for children to return to school, particularly villages in remote locations. Teachers agreed, given rural schools are often an integral part of villages where people interact freely. As local COVID-19 cases were rare, other public services (such as *puskesmas* and *posyandu*) were open and people had started socializing again, making the continued closure of schools feel unnecessary.<sup>11</sup> Parents in urban locations were more concerned about the virus and more willing to accept further distance learning but said they would prefer their children to resume school when safe to do so.

<sup>11</sup> *Puskesmas* are subdistrict public health clinics. *Posyandu* are monthly village health sessions for immunization and care of young children and pregnant women



# Implications

Children's learning and formal education have been significantly disrupted by the pandemic. Distance learning was a partial solution for adolescents in some areas but most children struggled to learn and remain engaged with limited interaction with teachers and peers. Some students returned to face-to-face learning but often with very reduced contact time with teachers and continued reliance on some distance learning. Students and many parents continue to worry about the impact on their grades, learning and continuing education. These findings suggest a number of implications for those seeking to understand the pandemic's impact on education and how to provide more support for children, teachers and parents.

**Address the gaps in learning to improve learning outcomes.** Most students need additional support to catch up with their learning, including those who are attending reopened schools or who still rely on distance learning. This could include adjusting the curriculum and providing resources for students to study more effectively

at home (regular student groups and teacher visits, interactive online materials or online student groups). Specific support for reading and maths skills may be required for younger students, including Internet-based edutainment and materials for parents to help their children learn. Students transitioning to secondary schools may need additional support as they are less likely to have the supportive relationships with both teachers and students that help students cope with the demands of distance learning and hybrid learning arrangements.

Provide guidance and incentives for teachers and honorary (*guru honor*) teachers to better engage with and support students to catch up on lost contact time, manage curriculum adjustments, more effectively use distance and hybrid learning approaches, assess student needs and give fair but accurate grades. Guidance should also acknowledge and better support the expanded teaching role of parents.



Lombok Tengah. Senior secondary students back at school.



Garut. Junior secondary students excited to be back at school.





Palu. Junior secondary school student doing distance learning from home.



Manggarai Timur. A junior secondary student heads to school with his mask.



Timur Tengah Utara. A teacher here visiting a student at home before the school reopened.

**Plan for and improve distance learning approaches.**

There are opportunities to develop better digital learning approaches to ensure learning can continue in any situation where schools cannot fully open. This would include a national digital learning blueprint, curriculum materials applicable to web-based platforms and guidance for teachers.<sup>12</sup>

Where distance learning is not possible due to lack of Internet connectivity or mobile ownership, ensure the blueprint can be adapted to fit local capacity. More effective and appropriate financial support - from the private or public sector - to offset the additional costs of Internet access and data should be considered for those students who are able to access the Internet.

**Consider more contextualized learning arrangements to meet local education needs.**

Enable schools to have more flexibility on learning arrangements by taking into account local risks, resources and capacities. This includes strategies for more contextualized directives and responses from the Ministry of Education and district education offices regarding school closure, risk mitigation and options for hybrid learning arrangements.

Schools are best placed to assess risk at the community level and decide what is best for their students, provided adherence to COVID-19 safety guidelines is assured. For example, the use of existing infrastructure within communities, particularly outdoor areas, may address classroom space constraints and allow students to have more contact time with teachers, while maintaining adherence to health protocols.

**Address the risk of school dropout due to declining motivation in students.**

Many children are less motivated to learn with the disruptions in teaching. Initiatives are needed to monitor and address challenges with student retention, particularly for adolescents. Additional and improved vocational training opportunities and internship programmes that allow adolescents to work and earn income while still finishing their education can help support this.

**Help parents to help children.**

Many parents want to support their children to learn but do not know how. Some may not understand the content, while others may not feel qualified to help. Others also do not consider education as part of their role as a parent. Guidance and support to help parents better support their children can help address these issues and reinforce the message that parents are also teachers.

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, 'Digital Learning in Indonesia: Findings and Recommendations', UNICEF, 2021.

# Annex: Study locations and COVID-19 zone status

DISTRICT	ZONE STATUS IN DECEMBER 2020
Aceh Selatan	Orange
Alor	Green
Banda Aceh	Orange
Bandung Barat	Red
Buton	Orange
Cirebon	Orange
Garut	Orange
Hulu Sungai Utara	Yellow
Jakarta Timur	Orange
Jember	Red
Lombok Tengah	Yellow
Lombok Timur	Orange
Manggarai Timur	Green
Minahasa Utara	Orange
Palu	Red
Pasaman	Orange
Palangkaraya	Orange
Pulang Pisau	Orange
Seram Bagian Barat	Orange
Sintang	Yellow
Sorong City	Orange
Timor Tengah Utara	Yellow
Yogyakarta	Yellow

COVID-19 zones are determined from a combination of epidemiological (incidence rate of positive cases per 100,000 population, mortality rate of positive cases per 100,000 population, weekly increase or decrease in positive cases and hospitalizations, among others), community health surveillance (including the increase of diagnostic sample tests over the past two weeks and positivity rate), and health service provisions indicators (including the number of beds in the local referral hospital and the number of beds currently available). <https://covid19.go.id/peta-risiko>









**COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences**  
Learning and Social Lives of Children Brief

[www.empatika.org](http://www.empatika.org)  
2020