香港教育大學
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Research Brief
EPL IMPACT

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Online Learning in Primary Schools during COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 has greatly impacted how children are taught in schools. Online lessons have become the norm, with educators, students, and parents needing to adjust the ways in which they teach, learn, and support. Past policy and research conducted on online learning has generally focused on access to digital resources, digital competencies, and associated technological and technical problems. There has been less attention regarding the social side of online learning, and (dis-)connections existing between online and offline activities across home and school contexts, teacher-/parent- role expectations, family dynamics, social and emotional support, etc. The pandemic has exposed inequality in education, and due to prolonged class suspensions, the digital divide which has existed between primary school students and their schools has potentially widened. Pre-pandemic, students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as lower-income and immigrant families would have struggled academically but frequent school closures during the pandemic have disproportionality affected them due to their inadequate home resources, unsuitable learning environment, and ever increasing pressures on struggling families. This study was implemented in two phases between February and November 2021. In the first phase, a questionnaire survey was sent to all Hong Kong government and aided primary schools. In the second phase, eight schools were purposely selected for case study. Over 2,600 questionnaires were received from principals, teachers, lower primary and upper primary students, and parents ascertaining their opinions and experiences regarding online learning and the challenges encountered at home and in school during the pandemic. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with the eight principals and other stakeholders. The study recommends that schools be provided with additional funding and have more flexibility to strategically use resources in different school circumstances. The resources could include additional staff employment, upgrading digital resources and technologies, supporting students who are from lower-income families, streamlining curriculum and teaching strategies, and strengthening home-school partnerships. It is hoped that, ultimately, this research could benefit socio-economically disadvantaged children and their families by drawing public attention to their diverse needs.

Key Issues and Significant Findings

School Principals

■ The school principals commented authorities should take the lead in conducting a comprehensive review of the challenges and experiences of teaching and learning during the pandemic so that a long-term policy for the future development of education can be formulated.

Lower School Primary Students

■ For lower primary school students, their young age will ultimately mean they have encountered challenges to work independently whilst attending online classes.

Upper School Primary Students

■ Surveyed upper primary students have encountered various challenges during their online learning. The four main challenges were difficulty in focusing, falling behind on their work, insufficient time to rest, and being unable to communicate with their classmates.

■ A comfortable environment is essential for learning. Only half of the students receiving subsidies under School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS) felt they were able to study in a quiet environment, therefore, making online classes at home problematic. Some of them had no access to a study desk and the resources required to adequately facilitate their work.

Parents and Families

- Over 80% of STAS and non-STAS families felt stressed when supporting their child's online learning. Issues included balancing their own personal work whilst helping their child with revision, simultaneously balancing daily family commitments, solving online technical problems, taking care of the online classes' tight schedules and new arrangements, handling their child's emotional behaviour and stress, and monitoring their child's discipline during classes.

- 77% of STAS families found managing online learning expenses difficult compared to 56% of non-STAS families.

- Only 32% of STAS families felt confident in providing technical support compared to 45% of non-STAS families.

- Lower-income families also faced challenges with digital resources and digital literacy, hence, resulting in less engagement in their child's learning. Resources included lacking computer software, digital pens, microphones, personal computers, and headsets, therefore, a hindrance to their child's efficiency learning online.

Teachers

- Teachers needed to put additional efforts "offline" (after online classes), for example, by collecting homework and providing supplementary learning materials for their students.

- Significantly, over 50% of teachers revealed that during class suspension, on average, four or more times per month, they have kept close contact with parents by telephone, via video conference, or in-person. Pre-class suspension, parental contact was around 20% and after class suspension, dropped to approximately 30% but still more frequently than before. Such contact has significantly added to their stress and workload.

Main Stakeholders and Engagement with Them

- The stakeholders are school leaders, teachers, parents, and the general public.

- The project aims to enhance their awareness of the inequality issues related to school closures by writing newspaper articles and providing media interviews, especially in the Chinese language.

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Implications
and Recommendations:

- It is hoped that, ultimately, this research could benefit socio-economically disadvantaged children and their families by drawing public attention to their diverse needs.

- The study recommends schools should be provided with additional funding and more flexibility to strategically use their resources in different school circumstances, including additional staff employment, upgrading digital resources and technologies, supporting students from lower-income families, streamlining curriculum and teaching strategies, and strengthening home-school partnerships.

- The findings will assist in outlining and advancing digital inclusion policies and practices as a sustainable response to the challenges of widening digital inequality which have evolved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more Information:

1 EdUHK Press Release. (2021, December 15). Lower-income families lack resources to support children's online learning. The Education University of Hong Kong. https://www.eduhk.hk/en/press-releases/lower-income-famlies-lack-resources-to-support-children-s-online-learning

2 Lee, T. L. T. (Ongoing research project, February 9, 2021-May 8, 2022). *Home-school collaboration as online learning support system: A case study of primary schools amid class suspension in Hong Kong*. The Education University of Hong Kong. https://repository.eduhk.hk/en/projects/home-school-collaboration-as-online-learning-support-system-a-cas

3 Ng, C. (2022, January 11). Online learning reveals gaps. The Standard. Hong Kong. https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/15/237851/Online-learning-reveals-gaps

4 **For any inquiries, please contact Dr Trevor LEE at ttllee@eduhk.hk.**

▶ **Video Interview**