

***Sharing Professional Viewpoint:
Online Learning for Young Learners
during the Covid-19 Lockdown in Bangkok, Thailand***

Pannarat Kadish
Independent Scholar
Packaging Enterprise, Bangkok, Thailand
Email: pannarat.kadish@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The third wave of Covid-19 in Thailand started from the Thonglor entertainment area of several bars and pubs in the heart of Bangkok at the end of March 2021. Since then, most of the Covid-19 virus-infected cases have been linked to the Thonglor cluster, which rapidly spread around Bangkok, its suburbs, and to other provinces in Thailand (The Bangkok Post, (2021). Consequently, the government announced that all schools/ universities and activities, such as gyms, playgrounds, restaurants, and all gathering places be shut down for a few months to curb down the daily infected figures. As a result, schools have turned to online learning systems and applications to support the teachers, students, and parents.

2. Online Learning for Young Learners

Under the Covid-19 conditions, some factors of online learning have impact on young learners particularly at the primary level, regarding the environment and readiness of students in each family. Students do not get to see friends physically, and there is no playground to run around playing tag or catch with friends. The learning time is pretty much on the screen, even though many students might have been used to online classes from the previous lockdowns, which occurred 7-8 months ago. It should be noted that students still need support from parents and the right environment to go on with the virtual teaching mode for quality learning time.

Questions arise:

- What about children who have both parents that work full time or children with a single parent?
- What about children who do not have a proper device, iPad, or computer?
- When the Internet is down, most of the students have no clue about how to deal with IT problems, and what if the student does not have parents who know enough about IT or know how to prepare the student for how to fix the common problems that might arise during their online learning?

Parents are undoubtedly a crucial factor for primary students to deal with online classes. At a young age of 6-11 years old, they tend to be under stress out of not being able to go out as usual, just like us adults. The students might exhibit some anxiety, emotional difficulties, or behaviors out of the ways that they have been, and some parents' responses might not be right or best at the learning time. When this happens, then it could lead to a higher degree of stress or a cycle of more and repeated negative behaviors. An important point to consider is that the Covid-19 “new normal” is a challenge to everyone in the world, no one likes it, but we all have to manage to go through it (Australian Explorer, 2021).

3. Positive support from Parents to Lower Primary Students

According to Dr. Damour (2020), to connect the support from parents to students, the first thing that parents can do is to normalize the fact that young learners are feeling anxious. Some parents misunderstand that anxiety is negative and potentially a sign of mental disorder. Psychologists have long recognized that anxiety is a normal and healthy function that alerts us to threats and helps us take measures to protect ourselves. So, it is beneficial for children if parents say, "You have the right reaction. Some anxiety right now makes sense. You are supposed to feel that way. And that anxiety is going to help you make the decisions that you need to be making right now." For example, practicing physical distancing, washing your hands often, and not touching your face are beneficial reactions to the anxiety in coping with Covid-19. These points are related to the author's viewpoint in that if parents are calm and can positively communicate with their children while looking at their children's new emotions or new actions as challenges for them to grow and learn. Then it becomes an opportunity for the children to move in the right direction together during this difficult time for both parents and children all alike, and it could be a win-win situation. In other words, much of turning the challenge into an opportunity is all about the mindset of the parents.

Other than that, researchers have found that finding positive distractions can help us deal with the lockdown. We can watch our favorite movies. We get in bed with a good novel. That is a very appropriate strategy. There's probably a lot of *talking about* coronavirus and anxiety as a way to seek relief, as well as about *not talking about* it as a way to seek relief. Helping children find that right balance will make a big difference (UNICEF, 2020; Peñarrubia-Lozano et al., 2021).

4. Right Teachers

All teachers should be well trained for online learning, particularly for very young students. There are factors that teachers need to be well aware of and know well on how to communicate with students during teaching via the screen. Some parents prefer to sit right next to students, and some teachers might feel uncomfortable about it. Hence, teachers need to perform professionally. Some students' parents are even listening, watching, and checking if the teachers are doing a good job. Some little actions from the teachers might make big misunderstandings between the students and the teachers; and the latter in their teaching role have to deal with many students or some parents during the session. It is important for teachers to pay extra attention to their verbal communication and facial expressions. They can mean a lot to the students as they are still young, need attention, and are very sensitive to negative feedback, if any, during these difficult times. Teachers should be especially mindful to keep a positive and patient voice with a kind face when interacting with students. This is certainly difficult when the teachers may be parents themselves, and face the same challenges as the parents of their children in similar online learning conditions.

5. Final Viewpoint

It is undeniable that most schools try to keep their curriculum content the same--be it in the face-to-face or online classes. However, teachers need to adjust the way they deliver the full content by taking learners' attention span into careful consideration. The planned activities in each lesson require a breakdown into a series of shorter or smaller learning tasks. Teachers have to alternate between the intensity of explanation and interaction with students to reduce hypnotic effects of looking on the screen for long. Especially for Arts and Crafts and PE (Physical Education), students need to do assigned work while recording videos for submission at the end of or after class. Young learners will need a third party to help with recording and subsequent submission. Or teachers may skip the process or the recording to allow students to focus more on the activity outcomes and knowledge to be gained.

If possible, teachers could try out their designed lesson plans in the time limit specified to students to check practicality of the task to be completed in class or after class. The number of after class assignments or the amount of homework could be less for students to work with assistance from parents, as needed. As known, schools in Thailand tend to pour down homework over both students' and parents' effort and time. These points are for teachers to consider when planning lessons, in-class activities and relevant homework. Furthermore, the school should adjust its assessment system for online learning during the Covid-19 outbreak. It seems unrealistic to use numerous written tests like they once did in the face-to-face classes. Authentic assessment of the target learning outcome per lesson could serve as a more practical and relevant solution for learning achievements via the online teaching and learning mode. What is also vitally important has its focus on teachers' efforts in providing sufficient interaction and securing feedback from students regarding how they feel and react to the online teaching methods used by individual teachers. All these considerations will enable teachers to adjust their teaching and planned learning activities in the timeframe of scheduled online classes.

6. The Author

Pannarat Kadish, Ed.D., works as an independent scholar in education and a part-time lecturer in educational management and corporate communication. She has currently held a managerial position at a private company. Her academic and research interest lies in the areas of educational administration, professional practicum coaching, corporate communication issues, remedial language skills, and digital skills development.

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