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## Teachers' psychological well-being and readiness during Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic that hit the whole world including Malaysia had a huge impact on the country's political, economic, social, health, and service system. It also affects the education sector in Malaysia. This pandemic also caused major psychological impacts such as stress, fear, anxiousness, and depression. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' psychological well-being levels and their readiness to handle mental health issues among students. Through these findings, the causative factors of psychological well-being disorders and affected groups can be identified which in turn, can be overcome through appropriate interventions. This study uses an online survey from January 20 to February 13, 2021. To see the level of teachers' psychological well-being, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) instrument was used. A total of 80 teachers (13 males and 67 females) completed this questionnaire. The findings showed that teachers' psychological well-being is a concern due to many teachers suffering from stress, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, proactive and comprehensive measures need to be carried out by responsible parties such as the Ministry of Education Malaysia so that interventions can be implemented to provide psychological support to educators.



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## Introduction

The spread of Covid-19 virus that originated from Wuhan, China has resulted in pandemics around the world including Malaysia. It started in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. For each country, the impact of this pandemic differed. Developing countries with limited health facilities faced difficulty to ensure their citizens' health to face the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Consequently, every sector including education experienced disarray, uncertainty, confusion, and panic (Wong et al. 2021). It is also stated that civil servants, especially frontline health workers, are vulnerable to the mental effects and Covid-19 infection.

Teachers are one of the professions that serve as the front liners to provide services to people, especially students and parents. Teachers' distress in dealing with the public affects their psychological well-being and teaching and learning effectiveness. A study in March 2020 found teachers are worried, anxious, and fearful (Auger & Formentin 2021). This situation is due to teachers as frontline workers need to have the emotional and mental stability to carry out the task of educating children and adolescents who need special

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attention during the pandemic situation. The teachers' psychological well-being is important to ensure they are mentally and emotionally prepared to deal with these difficult and challenging situations (Wright & Cropanzano 2000). Students are also affected from a psychological point of view, whereby it is reported three-quarters of students experienced increasing anxiety, depression, and stress. Changes in teaching and learning methods, class schedules, and device conditions are also factors that disrupt the psychological stability of students, and this situation worsens mental health problems, especially the at-risk groups due to the public health crisis, limited social relationships, and school disruption (Saddik et al. 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic also resulted in the abrupt implementation of online learning. The Movement Control Order that was enforced caused the Ministry of Education to introduce Home-based Teaching and Learning (PdPR). The PdPR implementation also has the psychology implications for the teachers and students. Teachers face sudden changes in their pedagogical routines. For example, students may not be prepared to provide immediate feedback and teacher instruction may not be immediately accessible to students. Consequently, teachers need to devote more time and energy to modifying pedagogical strategies, which ultimately puts them under pressure (Wong et al. 2021).

In Malaysia, the country has announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to stop the spreading of the deadly virus. MCO creates a new norm followed by several standard operating procedures (SOPs) that need to be followed. During the initial MCO phase, almost all public places such as schools and business premises except supermarkets, public markets, grocery stores, and convenience stores that sell daily necessities were ordered to close. The closure does not mean that their operations have also stopped. For example, in schools and universities, online learning or e-learning continues to ensure the syllabus can be completed. The achievement of learning goals is highly dependent on the teachers' readiness, especially to conduct home-based teaching and learning.

The teaching profession is an important field of social services to develop human capital. Teachers and education managers should be aware of the latest developments in leadership, management, resource management, and educational goals achievement. In the fast-paced global era, new strategies implementation is demanded in line with the country's progress, especially among educators.

This requires teachers to be empowered with knowledge and skills not only in teaching and learning but also in psychological well-being management. Quality teachers have been proven to produce a huge impact on students' well-being. Quality teachers are individuals who master and apply all forms of skills and knowledge. Knowledge mastery, teaching methods, personality, teachers, motivation, and environment are the quality practices that catalyzed excellent and quality education. No matter how well the education system is developed, it will not have any impact if teachers' commitment and competency are not developed first (Anjakan No. 5/2015 PPPM 2013-2025). Teachers are the most important element in pedagogy to produce quality education. However, the teaching quality today or in the future, compared to the past is not the same and is difficult to be standardized (Yusof, Hashim & Ariffin 2015). Teachers' well-being in the workplace and factors that affect them influence the teaching quality and in turn, affect teachers' productivity, performance, and efficiency.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity". This definition explains that health is the condition of an individual who is not only disease-free but also physically, mentally, and socially well. Health, according to WHO, is not only measured through physical functioning but also includes emotional, behavioral, and cognitive well-being. Well-being refers to as a person's ability to achieve optimal levels of personal health and wellness encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual for quality life in society. This concept can also be referred to as a psychological happiness, that is the result of psychological well-being and is the highest goal that every human being wants to achieve. (Yahya et al. 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO) affect the norms of life and disrupt mental health. Aziz et al. (2020) stated that the WHO also estimates increasing mental health cases for the world's population due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the outbreak, the Malaysian government announced the MCO starting March 18, 2020, to break the epidemic chain by controlling the virus spread. Among them are the closure of all educational institutions including kindergartens, schools, tahfiz centers, and colleges. It is also stated that the Covid-19 pandemic that hit Malaysia had a huge impact on the country's political, economic, social, health service system, and education sector (Hussin, Rahman & Yusuff 2020).

The global crisis due to the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic has not only delayed conventional learning and teaching but also made the tasks of teachers and students more challenging as they have to adapt to the new norms that require online teaching and learning to be implemented. Consequently, questions are raised about the teachers' well-being during the pandemic and MCO due to their role to provide the best services

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through online teaching and learning activities, as well as handling mental health issues and crises experienced by the students. Therefore, through this study, appropriate and effective planning and interventions can be carried out to address issues and challenges that occur.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify teachers' psychological well-being levels to make appropriate and immediate preparation and intervention for the targeted teachers. Through this study, the teachers' psychological well-being will be identified using the DASS Instrument. Data will be analyzed to determine the psychological well-being level whether normal, mild, moderate, severe, or very severe. The target group of teachers in need of intervention will be identified through the demographic's findings. It is hoped that a specific intervention can be implemented for the target group by the stakeholders. The main objectives of this study are to: identify the level of teachers' well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic and new norms and identify the level of teachers' readiness to handle mental health issues and student crises.

## Method

### Research Design

This study was quantitative in nature. It was conducted to see the pandemic effect on the teachers' psychological well-being and their readiness to handle students' mental health issues. A quantitative research is a process of converting data to a numerical format that involves the social science data conversion into a form that can be read and manipulated by computers. The researcher has chosen a quantitative design using the survey method. This survey used a questionnaire instrument to answer the research questions. The survey was an appropriate method because it intended to study the respondents' behavior to the research question posed.

### Respondents

The study was conducted on secondary and primary school teachers in the Hulu Langat district, Selangor, during the MCO from 20 January to 13 February 2021 when new school sessions were resumed after the MCO. The researcher has chosen non-probability sampling because it can make generalizations that are representative of the population. The procedure used was purposive sampling. The population of teachers in Hulu Langat district was 10,326. There were 131 schools, of which 36 were secondary and 91 were primary schools. The researcher selected 4 schools as the study sample consisting of 3 secondary schools and one primary school. The number of teachers in the 4 schools was 478. Out of that number, a total of 80 teachers (13 males and 67 females) completed the questionnaire online and recruited as research's respondents.

### Instrument

The instrument was developed and distributed online (via Google Form). This instrument was reviewed by Malay language editors and experts in counseling psychology. The online method makes it easy for the sample to answer the questions and distributed them to the next sample. Data analysis can also be carried out easily. A pilot study was conducted on 32 teachers from a school that was not involved with the sample. The instrument was divided into three parts as follow:

1. Part A – Demographic information of respondents on type of school, race, gender, religion, age, marital status and number of children, length of service (years), and whether teaching form 5 or 6.
2. Part B – Information on practice, the knowledge gained, and the teachers' readiness to handle mental health issues among students. There are four questions in this section. The choice of answer is 'Yes' or 'No'.
3. Part C – Assessment of the teachers' well-being. There are 21 items in this section, adapted from the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21). DASS-21 is a good instrument with Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.930. The answer scale of 1 indicates never, 2 indicates sometimes, 3 indicates often and 4 almost always.

## Results and Discussions

A total of 80 respondents were involved in this study which included secondary and primary school teachers in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor. Out of this 80 respondents, 16% were male while 84% were female. In terms of race, 85% were Malays, 6% were Chinese, 6% were Indians and 3% were from other races. According to religion, 86% are Islam, 3% are Christians, 5% are Buddhists, and 6% are Hindus. In terms of marital status, 94% are married, 2% are single and 4% are widowed or divorced. According to the length of

service (years), respondents who worked from 1 to 8 years was 7%, 9 to 16 years was 26%, 17 to 22 years was 22% and 23 years and above was 45%. Respondents who teach Form 5 or 6 were 77%, while 23% did not teach these grades. The detail descriptions of each demographic factor of the respondents are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 &lt;Respondents' Demographic Data&gt;

<b>Demographic Factor</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b><u>Gender</u></b>		
Male	13	16
Female	67	84
<b><u>Race</u></b>		
Malay	68	85
Chinese	5	6
India	5	6
Others	2	3
<b><u>Religion</u></b>		
Islam	69	86
Christian	2	3
Buddha	4	5
Hindu	5	6
Others	0	0
<b><u>Age</u></b>		
20-30 years old	0	0
31-40 years old	18	22
41-50 years old	28	35
50 years old and above	34	43
<b><u>Marital Status</u></b>		
Married	74	94
Single	1	2
Divorced / Widowed	3	4
<b><u>Length of Service</u></b>		
1-8 years	5	7
9-16 years	21	26
17-22 years	18	22
23 years and above	36	45
<b><u>School Category</u></b>		
Urban	75	93
Rural	5	7
<b><u>Teaching Form 5 or 6</u></b>		
Yes	62	77
No	28	23

Moreover, it was found that the percentage of teachers who experienced a normal level of stress was 19%, mild level at 18%, a moderate level at 28%, a severe level at 28%, and extremely severe level of 7%. The total percentage of teachers who experienced normal and mild levels was 37% whereas, the total percentage of teachers who suffer from moderate, severe, and extremely severe levels was 63%. As for anxiety, it was found no teachers were at the normal level, 1% mild, 36% moderate, 18% severe and 45% suffers the extremely severe levels. The total percentage of teachers experiencing normal and mild levels was only 1%. In comparison to 99% of teachers suffer from moderate, severe, and extremely severe anxiety. In terms of depression, no teacher was found to be at a normal level, while 25% suffer mild depression, 36% at a moderate level, 30% at a severe level, and 9% at an extremely severe level. A total of 25% of teachers had normal and mild depression whereas 75% of teachers suffer from moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression. Table 2 sum up the findings descriptively.

Table 2 &lt;Descriptive Analyses of Respondents' Depression, Anxiety and Stress Levels&gt;

	Frequency					Percentage (%)				
	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression	0	20	29	24	7	0	25	36	30	9
Anxiety	0	1	29	14	36	0	1	36	18	45
Stress	15	14	23	23	5	19	18	28	28	7

Finally, as illustrated in Table 3, it was also found that 72% of respondents were ready to handle mental health issues and student crises, while another 28% were not ready.

Table 3 &lt;Descriptive Analyses of Respondents' Readiness to Handle Mental Health Issues and Student Crises&gt;

	Frequency		Percentage (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Readiness to handle mental health issues and student crises	58	22	72	28

This study aimed to identify teachers' psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new norms. Based on the data analysis, it was found that 63% of teachers experienced stress at moderate, severe, and extremely severe levels. Whereas, 99% of teachers experience anxiety at moderate, severe, and extremely severe levels. Meanwhile, the total percentage of teachers with moderate, severe, and very severe depression is 75%. These findings indicate that the lowest psychological disorder among teachers is stress (63%), followed by depression (75%) and the highest is anxiety (99%). This finding coincides with Wong et al. (2021), who found that the lowest mean of psychological well-being disorder during the Covid-19 pandemic was stress (2.71), followed by depression (2.75), and anxiety (2.82). Moderate, severe, and extremely severe levels are grouped because at these levels, a person faced functioning disturbance to carry out daily activities and needs to seek help from counselors and psychologists.

The study also aims to identify teachers' readiness to handle mental health issues and student crises. Based on the analysis of the data obtained, the percentage of teachers who are ready to handle mental health issues and student crises is 72%, while those who are not ready are 28%. Ball (2019) found that teachers feel more prepared to help students deal with mental health issues in the classroom after attending specialized training. Some teachers also stated that the training, which includes various information related to mental health, is crucial in dealing with mental health issues in the future. This study implied teachers' psychological well-being has been affected due to the pandemic and the subsequent MCO enforcement. The number of teachers experiencing moderate, severe, and extremely severe stress, anxiety, and depression is high. If this continues, it is feared to severely affect psychological well-being.

## Conclusions

All in all, to address this issue, a proactive and comprehensive measure needs to be carried out by relevant parties such as the Malaysian Ministry of Education has to pay attention to the educators' needs for psychological support. Further studies are proposed to identify what are other factors of teachers' well-being, such as risky situations, apart from the pandemic and MCO. This is to ensure appropriate interventions are planned and implemented according to the root cause of the problem.

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