

Weighing Risks and Opportunities

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Guiding students is a teacher's mission, and seeing the students grow is a teacher's achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic became such a high hurdle to the students, as much as to the teachers.

The students have different learning styles thus, they require different approaches so that they can absorb what is taught to them. Figuring out which style suits the students is one of the keys to ensuring that they would learn as much as they can in a school year. Having not able to meet the students face-to-face because of the pandemic: talking to them without the discomfort of being in front of a camera, seeing their reactions in real-time, and letting them take tests to check their level of understanding are the things that make it harder, in fact almost impossible, to actually determine how they would best learn while making sure that no one is left behind.

The available modalities are indeed well-framed based on the resources and needs of the learners. It may not work the same way for the other students, like those who like to hear the explanation and see the process. There are also topics that are tough to understand, even after reading several times because there is certainly a limit to how much written words can explain a concept. For example, in Mathematics. Students may feel overwhelmed by formulas with many variables they have not encountered before, especially with the very common thought that the said subject is hard. Even with materials being able to discuss what each variable stands for and being able to enumerate the step-by-step way of solving the problem, they cannot answer all the questions that may come to the mind of the students. There are available videos online with explanations but it can also be a source of further confusion with videos probably using a different approach to the problem or different variables. Although students have the choice to ask their teachers, not all of them can easily access the platforms for virtual communication. Factors like shyness and social/virtual awkwardness are also to be considered, now more than ever. To address the problem of such, the teacher can bridge the gap by providing technical assistance like "online kumustahan", small-group facilitation, and one-on-one consultation which can be done in person or by phone (text messaging and phone call), Facebook messenger, or e-mail.

The environment is also another factor affecting how effective teaching is. It is something that schools and classrooms can provide for the students. In the present set-up of the education system in our country though, that is not something the students can easily have. Considering that their houses have become their school as well, it is harder for them to balance their time and attention. House generally feels like a sanctuary or a place for family and household chores. But now, they have to fight the desire to relax in the comfort of their homes because they have modules to answer. They were advised to have a specific area in their house dedicated to their homeschooling. Despite this helping with making them feel like they are studying, this does not help with blocking distractions that are all around them like people's voices, the noises from animals around and passing vehicles, their phone notifications going off (and them having the free choice to open it even in front of their school works), and for some, even stress from the problems inside their own homes.

For many students, being with their friends is a way to release stress. That is something that they probably like in school, they get to see their friends or talk to people of the same age as them. And now that they cannot do that freely anymore (or at least not as free as before the pandemic), it may feel rather taxing for them. They can feel suffocated emotionally and feel like they have nowhere to run. That may not be the same for all students, but some things are the same for the majority like wanting to have people around them going through the same thing as them. That is something that the modalities now cannot provide for them enough.

With all these building up to their stress, adding the anxiety of the pandemic, and the possible toxicity they may be exposed to, the mental health of the students is at high risk. It is true that it may be

addressed by allowing face-to-face classes again, especially with the rolling out of vaccines which are now already available for even 5 to 11 years old.

But still, with all the uncertainty and the new variant of the virus, the Omicron Variant, this may expose the students not just to the hazard to their physical health but also to more severe fear of getting the virus and transmitting it to their loved ones. Their fear for their family's health may lead to students being unable to focus on learning even more.

Physical health is still to be prioritized, but should not be to an extent that would undermine our opportunity to take a step forward. The reopening of face-to-face classes is best be done slowly, carefully, and surely. First, in places with the least number of transmissions, with limited students per classroom. Having the freedom to choose whether or not to attend the face-to-face classes will also prove its important in making the students and their families feel that they are not being forced because at the end of the day, they are who knows their situation best. This can be effectively achieved with clear and justifiable guidelines and rules, paired with the maximum effort to disseminate and regulate it accurately.