

## Impact of VUCA world on children's emotional development during online learning

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### ABSTRACT

Living in a world of unstable and fluctuating economy has put children's development at risk particularly children from low-income families. Hence their development should be on alert. The concern regarding online learning is crucial towards children's emotional development as it can positively or negatively affect them. In the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), no other performance is relevant due to high-speed change. Children as young generations today have more disruptive behaviours causing adults to be fearful in dealing with their unruly behaviour. This study discovered the impact of the current environmental situation of uncertainty and parent-child relationship on children's emotional development. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and preventive measures, the study was conducted with parents' consent using an online survey tool administered using Google Form. The quantitative survey comprised general population-CORE (GP-CORE) and perceived stress scale (PSS) questionnaires from 108 respondents studying in primary schools around urban areas in Selangor, Malaysia. The findings were analysed and described descriptively. Findings showed that children are greatly affected by parents' job loss and low-income households' instability, causing emotional stress when learning from home. Therefore, the study can be the mechanism to aid the educational system in emphasising emotional learning in school.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, emotional development is the acknowledgment and acceptance of an individual towards the growth of self-competence, intellectual achievement, and self-understanding. Additionally, emotional development is the root of mental health or psychopathology due to the importance of emotion towards the organisation and regulating one's behaviour [1]. Concentrating on children's emotional development, the definition is closely relatable to individuals as the ability of a child to acknowledge, express, and cope with their feelings at different stages of life and empathise with their closest individuals or surroundings [2].

Furthermore, children's emotional development is crucial at an early age, and it is greatly influencing their future lives. Thus, providing and maintaining children's healthy environments and social

relationships are important as their development is shaped by their experience and significant relationships with their closest individuals. According to Mohamed *et al.* [3] every experience matters to children as they engage with everything around them without filtering the positive and negative influences. Therefore, emotional development is emphasised by implementing and exposing children to emotional development learning.

However, nowadays, the uncertain living environment no longer gives people access to comfortable surroundings due to many changes, including the vital sector for children's optimal development. The profound effects of the volatile environment on education globally have disrupted 1.58 billion students from all levels of education [4] in terms of the teaching and learning environment. Even though the changes from physical or face-to-face classes to distance learning and the wide usage of technology are a measure implemented to curb the spread of the disease, it also resulted in several problems towards children pertaining to their emotional development.

Addressing the changes in teaching and learning environment, the current implication of online learning did not affect children in Malaysia equally as it added on additional weight towards the children from B40 households. Due to limited technological infrastructure, most of the B40 cannot afford adequate devices and connections to continue joining the home-based teaching and learning (PdPR). According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), 37%, which equals 900,000 students, do not own personal devices, including computers or tablets. These circumstances occurred within the households that majorly experience financial problems. Even worse, households with limited devices have to share with family members either for work or study purposes [5].

The concern regarding online learning negatively affects students generally, including the children. According to Student Voice Matter 2021 survey conducted by Project ID [6], two out of five students experience a worsening condition in emotional health since online learning has become the primary method in continuing teaching and learning. The survey findings also highlighted that the students have to brace themselves with the stress they experience during online learning. It is also stated that living in unstable households, technical and financial issues, and not having own's space are a few causes of stress.

Concerning B40 children, the environment, readiness, and condition to adapt to the changes during the volatile era hold the key to their positive development. The consequences of the adverse situations that they experience are detrimental towards their emotional development. Hence, it is important to highlight the issues rises during the vulnerable environment of online learning as positive development can influence the children's lives in many ways. Damirchi [7] mentioned that children can succeed academically and socially only if their development is not neglected. Consequently, this study is carried out to discover the impact of parental socio-economic during the pandemic on children's emotional development and learning abilities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being is one of the essential factors that should be considered as it is related to one's success in life, focused amongst children for their academic performance. A brief explanation states that schools should focus on academic outcomes per se and on producing learners as a whole [8]. Tnay *et al.* [9] also stated that promoting teachers to engage in children's social and emotional guidance during this pandemic affects their well-being. In another aspect, maintaining strong and positive interpersonal relationships along the way of virtual class between the teacher and children plays a massive role in mental health and well-being [10]. Therefore, as this study addresses, it is important to emphasise children's emotional well-being to mitigate emotional stress [11].

Previous studies had considered many perspectives to develop factors that affect children's emotional well-being during online learning. To discover the in-depth, the research had discussed that the first six months when COVID-19 attacked the whole nation were concluded as a life-changing phase where it tremendously affects well-being, especially for the children, shifting from physical to online class [12]. In research, Daniel *et al.* [12] administered the questionnaires to the students through a survey to discover how online learning affected their emotional well-being back then. One of the items was "the distractions from this pandemic has made it harder to focus". The result showed that students' significant problems in online classes are staying focused and keeping up with the mood to finish the remainder semester.

### 2.2. B40 households

In Malaysia, the household incomes were assigned into three categories, and B40 represented the bottom 40% income group. The term B40 is a synonym for the low-income households living in urban areas, and it could also be defined as urban poor. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia [13], B40 has its income range, which had increased from RM 4,360 to RM 4,850 in 2019. The digit changes supported the fact that this group of B40 households could not accommodate the current cost of living in urban areas as

their monthly income is insufficient [14]. Moreover, a previous study from Hamid *et al.* [15] stated that most of the B40 group had lower educational qualifications, working in minor skill jobs with limited earning potentials. In line with the study, B40 focused not only on the parents' stress but also highlighted the consequences of the children living in the households, particularly in the volatile environment.

### **2.3. Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) on children well-being**

A criminal proceeding means a person who has attained the age of criminal responsibility as prescribed in Section 82 of the Penal Code Act 574. In Malaysia, Section 2 of the Child Act 2001 defines 'child' as under 18 years. On the other hand, Section 2 (1) The Guardianship of the Infant Act 1961 defines 'child' or 'infant' as a person who has not attained majority. Besides, Subsection 2 (a): i) further explains that for this act, every person professing the religion of Islam shall be deemed to have attained his majority when he shall have completed his age of eighteen (18) years and not before; ii) every other person shall be deemed to have attained his majority when he shall have completed his age of 21 years not before [16].

Corresponding to the pandemic issue, COVID-19 has driven economic downturn and volatile condition, specifically towards the low-income families. With the current uncertain environment, children has are also drastically being exposed to parents' job retrenchment and income instability [17]. Both low-income and instability in income are detrimental to children's well-being [18]. Findings from recent study found that COVID-19 increases stress and caused depression among the parents who had experienced job loss and loss of earning. In addition, parents condition due to both job and income loss eventually developed parents' harsh parenting behaviours towards their children [19]. This resulted in disruption of childcare and educational programmes and further challenges parents' current or future employment and children's learning and development [17].

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

Quantitative research has been chosen to present this study. The approach seemed to be an appropriate way to be applied because of its strength in addressing the research questions and objectives. He [20] stated that Quantitative research requires descriptive, proper logical reasoning, verifiable observation, and an investigation of the studies. This research method attempts to investigate the answers to the questions starting with how many, how much, to what extent Rasinger's study [21], [22] from sampling methods and sending out questionnaires. It is commonly said as a hypothesis examination process.

### **3.1. Participants**

There was a total of 108 respondents who took part voluntarily in this survey. As part of the selection criterion, all respondents aged between 10 and 12 years of age study in local primary schools around Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. Besides, the respondents from B40 income group families were selected to elicit their responses on their emotional well-being studying from home after school lockdown [23] since the first quarter of 2020.

### **3.2. Procedures**

In view of the lockdown, the study was conducted using an online survey tool to maintain social distancing due to COVID-19. Firstly, the Google Form survey was created as an online platform to administer the questionnaires to the respondents. Secondly, the links were sent to teachers and housing community representatives in the targeted area before putting the link into parents' and communities' WhatsApp groups. The survey was administered for at least two weeks, between May-June, 2021. Finally, a text describing the research purpose was written before the questions to ensure the child's voluntary participation by including the "I agree to participate in the research voluntarily" button.

### **3.3. Instruments**

The adapted general population-CORE (GP-CORE) is derived from the CORE-outcome measure (CORE-OM) which consists of 14-item measure. The items are applicable to general population including students. Conversely, GP-CORE [24] incorporates low-intensity, low-risk items and most of the items are positively keyed. These facets have a higher chance to be accepted in a non-clinical population. The Likert scale was used to analyse the emotional well-being of children studying from home; options ranging from '1-Not at all' to '5-Most or All of the time' for each question. Sample items included for the GP-CORE included 'I felt tense, anxious or nervous', 'I felt I have someone to turn to for support when needed', and 'I felt okay about myself'.

In addition, the perceived stress scale (PSS) by Cohen *et al.* [25] is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. It is a measure of the degree to which one's

life situations are appraised as stressful. All questions used the Likert Scale; ranging from '1 - Not at all' to '5-Most or All of the time'. Hence, 10 items were designed to explore how the respondents' view their unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded lives. Sample items distributed to the respondents were 'I often feel upset because of something that happen unexpectedly', 'I often feel nervous and stressed' and 'I often found that I could not cope with all the things I had to do it'.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the GP-CORE questionnaire in measuring children's well-being. The descriptive statistics for 'I felt tense, anxious or nervous' showed a mean=3.53 (SD=1.045). The descriptive statistics for 'I felt I have someone to turn to for support when needed' scored a mean=3.46 (SD=1.256). As for 'I felt okay about myself' showed a mean=3.36 (SD=1.080). The descriptive statistics for 'I felt I am able to cope when things go wrong' revealed a mean=3.34 (SD=1.069).

Table 1. General population-CORE questionnaire

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
I felt tense, anxious or nervous.	3.53	1.045
I felt I have someone to turn to for support when needed.	3.46	1.256
I felt okay about myself.	3.36	1.080
I felt I am able to cope when things go wrong.	3.34	1.069
I have been troubled by aches, pains or other physical problems.	3.35	1.285
I have been happy with the things I have done.	3.70	.930
I have had difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep.	3.50	1.377
I felt warmth or affection for someone.	3.37	1.257
I have been able to do most things I needed to.	3.51	1.081
I felt criticised by other people.	3.54	1.164
I felt unhappy.	3.28	1.084
I have been irritable when being with other people.	3.21	1.231
I felt optimistic about my future.	3.60	1.168
I have achieved the things I wanted to.	3.03	1.054

The descriptive statistics for 'I have been troubled by aches, pains or other physical problems' indicated a mean=3.35 (SD=1.285). The item, 'I have been happy with the things I have done' showed a mean=3.70 (SD=0.930). While the descriptive statistics mean score for 'I have had difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep' revealed a mean=3.50 (SD=1.377). For 'I felt warmth or affection for someone', it showed a mean=3.37 (SD=1.257). The descriptive statistics for 'I have been able to do most things I needed to' showed a mean=3.51 (SD=1.081). The item 'I felt criticised by other people' scored a mean=3.54 (SD=1.164). The descriptive statistics for 'I felt unhappy' scored a mean=3.28 (SD=1.084). The item 'I have been irritable when being with other people' indicated a mean=3.21 (SD=1.231). The descriptive statistics for 'I felt optimistic about my future' showed a mean=3.60 (SD=1.168). The item, 'I have achieved the things I wanted to', revealed a mean=3.03 (SD=1.054).

Table 2 shows the perceived stress scale of how children felt during the pandemic of COVID-19. The descriptive statistics for 'I often felt upset because of something that happened unexpectedly' indicated a mean=3.94 (SD=0.926). The descriptive statistics for 'I often felt I was unable to control the important things in my life' revealed a mean=4.02 (SD=1.004). As for 'I often felt nervous and stressed', the descriptive statistics indicated a mean=3.71 (SD=1.094). The descriptive statistics for 'I often felt confident about my ability to handle my personal problems' revealed a mean=3.14 (SD=1.300).

The descriptive statistics for 'I often felt that things were going my way' and 'I often found that I could not cope with all the things that I had to do it', revealed a mean=3.01 (SD=1.098) and mean=3.34 (SD=1.104) respectively. In addition, the descriptive statistics for 'I often able to control irritations in my life' indicated a mean=3.05 (SD=0.880). As for 'I often felt that I was on top of things', the descriptive statistics indicated a mean=2.64 (SD=1.172). The descriptive statistics score for 'I often felt angry because of things outside of my control' showed a mean=3.66 (SD=1.043). While the item, 'I often felt difficulties were piling up so high that I could not overcome them', indicated a mean=3.73 (SD=0.992).

Table 2. Perceived stress scale

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
I often felt upset because of something that happened unexpectedly.	3.94	.926
I often felt I was unable to control the important things in my life.	4.02	1.004
I often felt nervous and stressed.	3.71	1.094
I often felt confident about my ability to handle my personal problems.	3.14	1.300
I often felt that things were going my way.	3.01	1.098
I often found that I could not cope with all the things that I had to do it.	3.34	1.104
I often able to control irritations in my life.	3.05	.880
I often felt that I was on top of things.	2.64	1.172
I often felt angry because of things outside of my control.	3.66	1.043
I often felt difficulties were piling up so high that I could not overcome them.	3.73	.992

The findings proved that the current environment is one factor that strongly affects children's emotional well-being. The COVID-19 had led to a new educational era where teaching and learning were aggressively conducted online learning [26]. Pedagogical and technological tensions happened because of the rapid transitions from a face-to-face class to learning at home online. In addition, students' views in a study by Alghamdi [27] indicated negative consequences of inadequate online education, specifically for practical learning during the spread of pandemic COVID-19. Moreover, the weak internet connection and persistent interference strained to synchronise pedagogy in conducting live teaching through video conferencing [28]. The unfavourable conditions during online learning have resulted in students' loss in learning and encourage absenteeism among the students.

Apart from that, Yesilyrut [29] has stated that children face challenges adapting to the new learning environment. Liu [30] defined readiness as children preparing to adapt to meaningful activities in the new learning norm. The readiness stage identified by previous researchers is technology, human, courses, and institution, closely associated with [31]. Regardless of the challenges the children face, there are still positive outcomes from online learning as findings from Alghamdi [27] revealed that the primary impact of online education during the pandemic was that students could strengthen the students' social interaction among them. Therefore, the undetermined impact of online learning on the students, specifically young learners' emotional development, proved that the effectiveness of assessing technology is not guaranteed [31] and affected emotional development could have different causes and situations.

In correspondence with the focus on children's well-being, it is significant for parents to play an essential role in building positive children's emotional well-being development, thus not affecting their learning outcomes. This is where the children's emotional development during childhood is affected due to the proximal processes they went through within the household environment [32]. These processes include children's relationship with parents, making interaction with the environment possible as children tend to feel less socially supported during online studies [33]. In line with the focus of the study, the parents from B40 households were unfamiliar and had limited knowledge of technology. Hence, they could not supervise and encourage their children during online learning. The condition occurred within the B40 households because the parents were inexperienced and resisted familiarising themselves with online learning [34].

Besides, parents' perceptions towards online learning are varied as some of them could engage with their children's schools while others could view the need for supervision as a burden [35]. Despite that, some parents are able to spend their valuable time during online learning and act as an instructor for their children [36]. As parents' involvement is crucial in ensuring children's school achievement in traditional school settings, Borup *et al.* [37] revealed that supportive parents positively affect children's success during virtual learning.

A study conducted in Brazil were in line with the findings as it showed a higher behaviour problem within children from public elementary school that have a background of low-income family and parents with a low education level [38]. Besides the family environment, sociodemographic factors namely socio-economic status, parents' education level, and conflict between parents could also be associated with children's problematic and incompetence behaviours during childhood [38], [39]. Children with behaviour problems might throw tantrums, but it is necessary to control their tantrums. On that account, it is crucial to acknowledge and understand emotions as children could manage their emotions even under all circumstances if they have emotional understanding and regulation skills, even so, many internal or external factors may lead to negativity in emotional regulation [40].

Nevertheless, it is essential for the children to learn to handle solid reactions and find ways to express appropriate emotions. As an adult, we need to provide different levels of support to cater to individual differences among children. Some of them may be temperamentally sensitive compared to others. Depending on the circumstances, children will face difficulties to self-regulate. Therefore, children's need to be equipped with proper support aligned with their needs and relevant intervention in which could aid the

children to constructively build their skills in controlling their feelings, thought and behaviour [41] that help to minimizing stress levels. Thus, helping children from the said low socio-economic income group regulates their emotions for academic engagement.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that children are greatly affected by parents' job loss and low-income households. Their way of living is different from other people. In this scenario, environments and parent-child relationships become the main factors that bring them to face negative consequences for their emotional well-being. As a whole, socio-economic status should not be taken lightly, as it is significant to children's social and emotional development. Therefore, emotional learning is crucial for children to build themselves to greater well-being, which shows a remarkable result where emotional learning heightens their social development. A greater children's emotional development aids improve their learning ability. Thus, academic engagement and positive educational outcomes could be obtained.

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