

## Parents' perceptions of distance learning during COVID-19 in rural Indonesia

Delipiter Lase<sup>1</sup>, Trisa Genia Chrisantiana Zega<sup>2</sup>, Dorkas Orienti Daeli<sup>1</sup>, Sonny Eli Zaluchu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Christian Education, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Banua Niha Keriso Protestan Sundermann, Gunungsitoli, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Bandung, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Department of Theology, Indonesia Baptist Theological Seminary, Semarang, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study was developed to investigate parents' perceptions and attitudes towards distance learning in response to many schools' closures due to the COVID-19. This research employed a qualitative approach. The research subjects consisted of parents of elementary school students in the City of Gunungsitoli, Indonesia determined by purposive sampling technique, totaling twenty-four people. The data were collected using semi-structured interview techniques and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. This study shows that distance learning or learning from home in a research context takes the form of online and offline learning. The learning approach implemented during the COVID-19 emergency must be lived and supported without other options for parents. Although parents do not have negative perceptions, distance learning has increased the economic, psychological, and social burden on parents or families. The lack of parental involvement and support in children's learning process at home is generally due to the lack of time and parents' inability to become teachers for their children. Actions to accompany and support children's learning process at home are carried out to provide internet packages, help children master the material, and participate in completing assignments or tests given by the teacher. The surprising finding from this study is the decline in children's learning motivation and cognitive abilities. Parents hope that distance learning is not extended.

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### Corresponding Author:

Delipiter Lase

Department of Christian Education, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Banua Niha Keriso Protestan Sundermann

Pendidikan Street, No. 19 Gunungsitoli, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Email: piterlase@sttsundermann.ac.id

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 has caused changes in patterns of interaction and activity in almost all aspects of human life, including the education sector. The COVID-19 has disrupted students' lives in various ways, a challenge for students. They will not complete their school curriculum and assessments in the usual way, and they have also been separated from their social group. Agree or disagree, schools must adjust learning management and switch from conventional classes to online and offline distance learning both online and offline.

As of August 20, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) recorded 673,114,704 students affected, 38.4% of the total students registered, and 30 countries closed all schools in their countries [1]. Most governments worldwide have temporarily closed educational institutions to contain the spread of the COVID-19. This national closure affects more than 60% of the

world's student population. Several other countries have implemented local closures affecting millions of additional students.

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education and Culture stated that as many as 68 million students ranging from early childhood education to high school levels in Indonesia were also affected by the COVID-19 [2]. They were forced to learn from home due to the COVID-19. Of this number, only about 34.5% can access online education services [3].

Responding to the closure of most schools in Indonesia, the Indonesian Government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, issued Circular No. 4 of 2020 dated 24 March, concerning the National Education Policy during the COVID-19 emergency period. This circular explains that the teaching and learning process is carried out at home through distance learning (*pembelajaran jarak jauh/PJJ*). In the aftermath of this national policy, there are 425,451 schools closed from early childhood to tertiary education levels. As a result, 60.1 million students study at home, and 2.25 million teachers and lecturers teach from home [2]. Concerning this policy, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture in April, 2020 showed 97.6% of schools had carried out learning activities from home, leaving 2.4% of other schools in educational institutions.

Following up on Circular No. 4/2020, the Ministry of Education issued Circular No. 15/2020 on Guidelines for The Implementation of Study from Home (*belajar dari rumah/BDR*) Emergency Period of the Spread of COVID-19. The study from home is another term for distance learning models developed in Indonesia and implemented through two approaches, namely (*pembelajaran jarak jauh/PJJ daring*) (online) and *PJJ luring* (Kemendikbud, 2020). Especially for offline (*luring*) learning, it is interpreted more broadly than just represents teaching in the pre-internet era, where the teaching and learning process must be done at the same time and place [4]. Students learn through physical learning resources such as student books, teacher guidelines, modules, and student worksheets (*lembar kerja peserta didik/LKPD*). In this model, students can also access lessons through particular TV channels (TVRI) and Radio broadcasts (RRI).

Implementing distance learning to ensure education continues and inhibits the spread of the COVID-19 does not mean that it does not face challenges and obstacles. Some obstacles are also encountered in addition to positive benefits such as accelerating technology integration, information, and communication in learning activities. Teachers and students are not used to using an entirely online learning system; therefore, additional support and mentoring are needed to adapt to the new learning model.

Previous research findings indicate that students generally prefer face-to-face learning in class rather than home learning with online learning because it is easier to understand the material when the teacher explains it directly (face to face). In the classroom, they can interact and learn together [5]. Studying at home is constrained due to the limited internet quota [6]. Only 56% expressed satisfaction with the application of e-learning [7]. There were 78.6% of respondents felt that conventional classes are more effective than online learning [8]. Although disliked, research respondents agreed that online learning is the right solution to this crisis in previous research results.

Besides, teachers experienced increased spending on quota purchases, tired of staying at home, and going back to school to interact with students immediately. It takes much time, even working late into the night, to prepare learning materials and give feedback; unable to monitor student's learning progress [9]. Teachers work late into nights and weekends to develop learning materials and support their online students [10].

How about the parents? Parents have limited abilities in providing online learning facilities for children [11]. "The decline in economic productivity because parents have to take care of children while working" [12]. As households are confined to their homes due to COVID-19, parents and guardians may be very anxious about their economic future, so studying at home is not easy, especially for children with low motivation [13]. Online learning requires an internet connection, which has, therefore, increased parental expenses [14].

Based on the explanation, this study is intended to investigate how education institutions, mainly elementary school education levels, apply distance learning (studying from home) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, this study also aims to obtain an overview of parents' perceptions and attitudes towards distance learning and their actions in supporting their children's studies.

This problem becomes the object of research for several reasons. Research generally focuses on investigating teachers' readiness in conducting distance learning and aims to obtain an overview of teacher perception, students, and the effectiveness of distance learning. However, until this work began in early August, 2020, research on how parents' perceptions are tapped into distance learning implementation, especially in rural Indonesia, has not touched many researchers.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research took place in the City of Gunungsitoli, Indonesia. The City of Gunungsitoli is one of 514 Regencies/Cities in Indonesia. Geographically, it is located in an archipelago, namely Nias Island, and is part of 34 regencies/cities in North Sumatra. Although this area is categorized as a city administratively, around 65.5% of students cannot access online education services due to its geographical location in an archipelago.

This city has 186 education institutions consisting of 115 elementary schools or equivalent, 40 junior high schools or equivalent, 17 high school equivalent, and 14 vocational high schools or equivalent. This study took the subject of Elementary School, where at this level of education, the City of Gunungsitoli has a total of 18,213 students spread across elementary schools or equivalent. Until August, 2020, based on the spread rate of the COVID-19, the City of Gunungsitoli is in the Green Zone. The zone in which the school can be allowed to conduct face-to-face learning with certain restrictions.

This research uses descriptive qualitative research. According to Moleong, qualitative research intends to understand what is experienced by the research subject [15]. Considerations for choosing qualitative approaches include research to dive into the depths of complexity and processes; the associated variables have not been identified [16], [17]. Data sources and informants (participants) consisted of students' parents in grades 4-6 of elementary schools in the Gunungsitoli area. In addition to geographical area considerations, as shown in Table 1, there are 24 people determined using purposive sampling techniques based on competence and not representation [18].

Tabel 1. Characteristics of participants

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Job	Address [subdistrict]
R <sub>1</sub>	42	Male	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli Idanoi
R <sub>2</sub>	40	Male	Junior High School	Farmer/Fisherman	Gunungsitoli Idanoi
R <sub>3</sub>	38	Female	High School	Entrepreneur	Gunungsitoli Idanoi
R <sub>4</sub>	39	Male	Elementary School	Daily labor	Gunungsitoli Idanoi
R <sub>5</sub>	40	Female	High School	Private employees	Gunungsitoli Idanoi
R <sub>6</sub>	43	Male	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli Alo'oa
R <sub>7</sub>	40	Female	Elementary School	Farmer	Gunungsitoli Alo'oa
R <sub>8</sub>	40	Male	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>9</sub>	47	Female	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>10</sub>	38	Male	Junior High School	Farmer/Fisherman	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>11</sub>	38	Male	Elementary School	Farmer/Fisherman	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>12</sub>	40	Male	Elementary School	Daily labor	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>13</sub>	39	Male	Junior High School	Daily labor	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>14</sub>	43	Female	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>15</sub>	39	Female	Baccalaureate	Private employees	Gunungsitoli
R <sub>16</sub>	41	Male	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli [South]
R <sub>17</sub>	39	Male	Junior High School	Farmer/Fisherman	Gunungsitoli [South]
R <sub>18</sub>	42	Female	Baccalaureate	Entrepreneur	Gunungsitoli [South]
R <sub>19</sub>	41	Male	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli [Western]
R <sub>20</sub>	40	Male	Junior High School	Farmer	Gunungsitoli [Western]
R <sub>21</sub>	38	Female	Bachelor	Gov. employees	Gunungsitoli [North]
R <sub>22</sub>	40	Male	Junior High School	Farmer/Fisherman	Gunungsitoli [North]
R <sub>23</sub>	39	Female	High School	Entrepreneur	Gunungsitoli [North]
R <sub>24</sub>	40	Male	Junior High School	Daily labor	Gunungsitoli [North]

Data was collected using semi-structured interview techniques. Interviews are conducted face-to-face and telephone conversations [18]. Face-to-face interviews and telephone conversations lasted for three weeks, from August 3-22, 2020, with duration of 10-15 minutes per participant. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is one way to analyze the data to identify patterns or find themes through the data collected [19], [20].

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Theme 1: Implementation of distance learning in the City of Gunungsitoli

Of the 24 parents interviewed, nine respondents (37.5%) stated that their children study from home in online learning. Parents prefer this approach because they are worried that children are exposed to COVID-19.

*"We are worried that children will become victims of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though offline learning is implemented, we prefer the online approach."*

*All lesson content or LKPD, including assignments and daily tests, are sent to children via social media (WhatsApp). Then, materials and assignments completed by the children are returned to the homeroom teacher or subject teacher, whether in the form of documents, videos, and podcasts. The children do not understand the material is usually discussed through the class WA group or directly to the subject teacher." (R8 and R9)*

In contrast to the nine respondents, 15 (62.5%) of the total respondents said children learn from home in offline learning. The consideration of this election, among others, is related to the problem of the unstable network and the absence of devices or equipment to support children's learning activities at home.

*"Due to various limitations, including unstable networks, lack of technical learning equipment for children - such as laptops, tablets or cellphones, printers and others, including the absence of internet package fees and the ability to operate the required software," he said. In the end, we prefer children to study at home in offline learning. At the beginning of every week, parents pick up the LKPD and take them back to school according to the homeroom teacher's schedule or the subject teacher." (R7, R13, and R22)*

Government officials from the Elementary Education Department of the City of Gunungsitoli Education Office confirmed the research findings. Said that distance learning is conducted using online and offline approaches at the elementary school level. The City of Gunungsitoli Education Office has not implemented total online distance learning due to the school's geographical location - mostly in sub-districts and villages. It is not easy to find adequate telecommunication infrastructure with a stable network in this area.

### **3.2. Theme 2: Parents' perceptions of distance learning**

Parents' perceptions of distance learning at this time of crisis were mixed. It was challenging to find a strong statement between agreeing or disagree, like and dislike. Parents generally do not have negative views or resistance to distance learning, but this is unexpected, new, burdensome, and forces them to adjust quickly.

*"... this is complicated; children and including us, parents have no experience with the current distance learning management. Yes, the children also have no other choice - like it or not, the children have to do this new learning model. Even though the school is closed, the learning process cannot be stopped continuously in an unpredictable time." (R3, R10, and R20)*

The spread of the COVID-19 is an unprecedented situation. It has made most parents worry about the pandemic's negative impact on children's education. It is concerning; there are still parents (22%) who do not care about the effects of COVID-19 on their children's education.

### **3.3. Theme 3: Parental involvement in children's learning at home**

The mother as the primary caregiver (in most cases) shows her role in supporting children's education and learning. The interview results showed that 13 parents (54.17%) gave time even though they were limited to children's learning at home. As many as 7 or 29.17% of parents conclusively claimed to have much free time to accompany children's learning activities at home. The rest are very busy parents, so they rarely monitor children's learning activities at home and hand over assistance for children's learning activities to other family members, as shown in Figure 1.

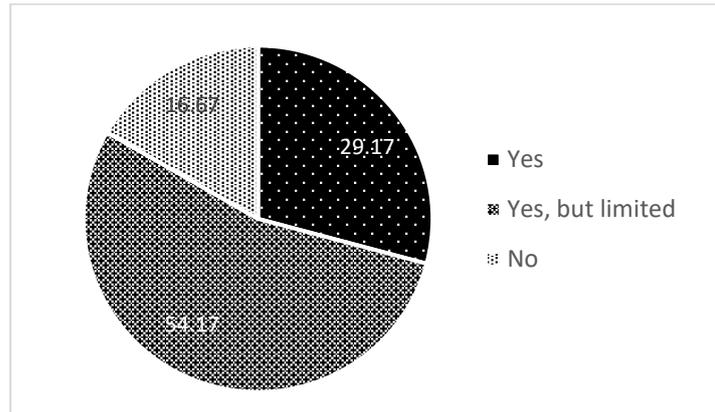


Figure 1. Availability of time for parents to accompany children's learning activities at home

*"The best time for us to accompany the children to study is at night because we have to work from morning to evening, and this is a relatively short time because children are used to sleeping early at night." (R5 and R15)*

*"Incidentally, my wife and I work as government employees so that other family members mostly accompany children's learning activities at home. Except at night, we check the study materials and assignments that the children must complete." (R8, and R16).*

*"I am more involved in the children's learning at home in the morning. So that, in the afternoon or evening, the children rest or play more." (R14)*

When asked if they can or are capable of supporting children at home in learning, 37.5% feel they can and have the ability to support their child's studies at home. Another 62.5% appear to be hesitant and try with limited abilities, as shown in Figure 2.

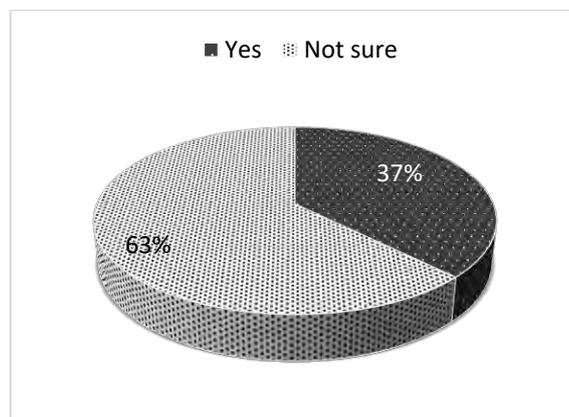


Figure 2. Ability/competence to support children's study from home

*"My child goes to the Christian elementary school BNKP Gunungsitoli and is in grade 5. Every week the children receive 5-7 learner worksheets (LKPD). So far, there have been no obstacles, materials, and questions that the children cannot understand; we explain it well; sometimes, it has to be repeated to understand better. However, of course, the methods we use are not as good as teacher's teaching methods in schools." (R15 and R16)*

*"If it is said to be capable, indeed, it is not. Because if it is capable of doing what the parenting stresses, then love to get angry. The children at the house do not want to learn when not reminded and monitored. The trouble is, the kids are more respectful (of fear) to their teacher than the parent at home. Relatively less comprehensive, what is the parent's weakness in general – there is a view among the parent that educational affairs are school affairs." (R11 & R19)*

The results of interviews with other parents showed that distance learning could incite violence against children at home. Parents are claiming that:

*"Children at home do not want to learn if not told, already so - the materials and tasks given from the school are also difficult for the child to understand; thus, parents are angry and tend to behave violently until hit." (R17)*

### 3.4. Theme 4: Parental actions and support for children's learning activities at home

Switching from actual perception to parental action, it was informed that 70.83% of them always check or monitor the student worksheet (LKPD) from the school. Over 65% of parents support children's learning activities at home by providing internet packages; help explain and complete the learner worksheet (LKPD). 16.67% support children's education and learning to provide equipment (such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops), and less than 10% in the form of private study and or courses, as shown in Figure 3.

*"..... not much is done; besides providing internet packages, we help children explain poorly understood material and participate in completing assignments or exam questions given from school. All – we monitor their interactions with people other than their families to keep them likely to contract COVID-19" (R5).*

The COVID-19 has forced the closure of almost all schools in Indonesia. To ensure the education process continues, the Ministry of Education pursued a policy to reopen the education institutions in the new school year of July, 2020. This policy only applies to regions where the spread of COVID-19 is relatively low (green and yellow zones). While in the red and orange zone, the school remains closed. The following image shows parents' obstacles and challenges over implementing distance learning.

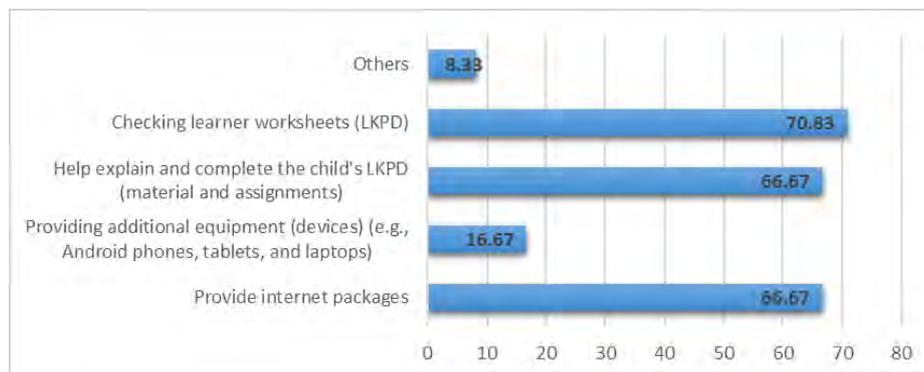


Figure 3. Parental actions and support for children's learning activities at home

### 3.5. Theme 5: Barriers and challenges faced by parents towards implementation of distance learning

Organizing education with distance learning approaches online and offline does not mean there are no barriers or challenges. Over 54.4% of parents complained of increased children's education costs, 41.9% felt depressed, stressed, and frustrated by the increasing burden of their thoughts and work. There are 58.7% of parents have difficulty managing the time between accompanying their children to study with daily work. The concern is that 48.45% of parents admitted that their child's learning motivation decreases and 29.4% of parents feel their cognitive abilities also decrease, as shown in Figure 4.

*"The cost of children's education increases, the expenditure becomes greater. We had to buy internet packages so that children could access online learning resources. We are*

also forced to buy new mobile phones so that children can follow online learning" (R4 and R9).

"..... not only that, in this remote learning - children's learning motivation decreases; if not supervised, they instead spend time and packages to play games. It is not uncommon for us to become stressed and frustrated to see children do not want to learn and their thinking ability decreases – they find it difficult to understand the material provided by teachers through learner worksheet (LKPD)." (R2, R12, and R23)

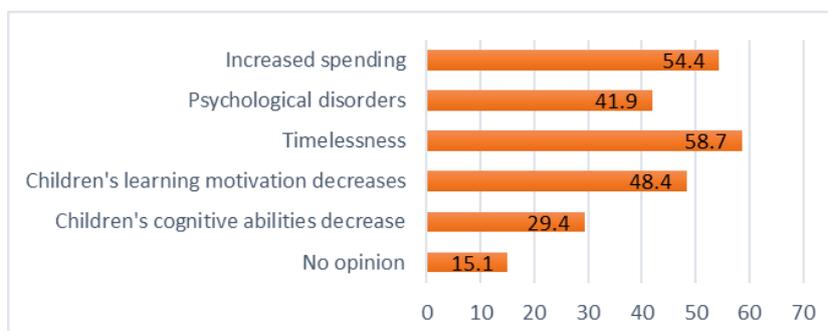


Figure 4. Barriers and challenges parents face with distance learning

### 3.6. Theme 6: Parental preference for learning for the rest of the 2020/2021 school year

Despite their concern over the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's education, most parents (78.21%) do not want this distance learning extended and expect the government to reopen schools for the rest of the 2020/2021 school year.

*"It is undeniable that distance learning is very burdensome; psychosocial disorders are increasing, especially for children. Children's learning motivation and cognitive abilities tend to decrease. We worry that violence against children at home can grow, not infrequently parents get angry and even hit because children are lazy to learn and can not complete the school's tasks. Therefore, we expect this distance learning to end soon. For the rest of the 2020/2021 academic year, the Government can reopen educational institutions so that the learning process can occur, as usual, face-to-face learning in the classroom."* (R1, R6, R18, and R24)

Furthermore, they hope that if distance learning is still going on for some time to come, there needs to be attention and support from the school to: i) Reduce the cost of education (especially private schools); ii) Provide books and teaching materials that students or parents/guardians can take home; and iii) That teachers are more creative than just distributing (*Lembar Kinerja Peserta Didik/LKPD*) to students, but still maintain contact and communication with students and parents, so that children's learning motivation is maintained.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Almost all parents are worried about the negative impact of the COVID-19 on their children's education. It concerns student academic achievement, knowledge acquisition, and several skills (competencies) that are significantly difficult to achieve. "The current challenge is how to achieve distance learning competencies and objectives that are not significantly different from face-to-face learning, even better" [21]. This crisis is likely to have significant long-term effects on education, including curriculum and learning. Therefore, this crisis should be an opportunity to rethink learners' curriculum, teaching-learning process-assessment, and competency development to strengthen their learning skills and maintain their motivation [22].

Inadequate parents' and families' involvement in supporting children's distance learning activities at home is predominantly due to parents' limited time and ability to accompany children in learning. Economic and social factors are not uncommon to be a severe obstacle and challenge to the implementation of education. Parents are busy working in various professions and types of work to earn income to cover the cost of meeting the family's needs, so they do not have enough time to accompany the children in learning.

On the other hand, parental education also impacts the frequency of children's involvement in academic activities. Children in highly educated families are more often involved in structured academic activities such as worksheets, online school resources, and other educational resources during pandemics [23].

The findings are in line with previous studies that "a lack of parental awareness and interest in students' school activities are the main causes of their poor academic achievement in secondary school" [24]. "Parental involvement and investment have a significant effect on students' self-concept and academic achievement in elementary school" [25]. Parental involvement in a child's education is consistently positively related to a child's academic performance [26].

It switches from actual perception to parental action in favor of learning from home. There is not much that parents do to support their child's activities at home. Except those parents are ultimately obliged to provide internet needs, check the learner's worksheet and help children clarify the subject matter obtained from the school. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of communication between teachers, parents, and learners, decreasing learning motivation. Although this situation is a time of crisis, it is not very good for developing education and achieving children's academic achievement in the long term. Some research results have provided evidence that parents' and families' involvement in children's learning positively impacts children's accomplishments [27].

Discussing the challenges faced by parents in terms of learning, the research findings were dominated by three factors, namely increased family spending (economic aspects); parental stress due to the increasing pressure of managing restrictions (quarantine) and work (psychological disorders), as well as the relationship and communication (social aspect) of parents with children, as well as between parents and teachers.

Several previous research results show the same indications. The results of Azzahra's research indicate that disruption to the traditional education system today has harmed students who come from low-income families and who are in rural areas. Even under normal conditions, students have faced barriers to access to education, and now they face additional obstacles that arise due to inequality to access technology infrastructure. Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) research results also support the rising costs borne by parents concerning learning from home: "Among respondents with family members who do distance learning, 67% say it is very or quite expensive" [28].

The increase in parental psychological disorders occurs due to limited ability to manage the restrictions (quarantine) imposed [29]. Parents have difficulty balancing time between daily work and mentoring children's learning activities at home and complain about the complexity of teaching teachers at home. Some parents claim that there are situations where children are more submissive and respectful to teachers at school than parents at home.

A surprising finding was that 48.4% of parents admitted that their children's learning motivations had decreased. Due to the large number of tasks that must be done in a short time, less pleasant learning methods, and limited interaction with friends. An inability to learn effectively in an online format and a disruptive home environment or lack of access to appropriate study spaces.

This finding is in line with a Save the Children report that "A total of 42% of parents admitted that children's learning motivation decreases overtime during the pandemic." Virtual classes are often confusing and contain too much information to track. Deadlines are uncertain, assignments are misleading, and exams are challenging to learn [30]. The condition of the learning environment and family is not conducive, also contributes to the decrease in children's learning motivation [31], [32].

Coexisting with COVID-19 is the reality of a new life today. We can not predict when this crisis will end. This plague at all times threatens our health and safety; everything is carried out with health protocols, with restrictions, of course. However, the integration of technology into the learning process is inevitable. Classes can no longer be limited to the walls where learning takes place conventionally. Children already have a learning preference; they are born with increased technology. Educational institutions are in the age of rapid and massive technological development (industrial revolution 4.0). It agreed not to agree that educational institutions should adopt and redesign management systems "that refer to information communication and technology (ICT-based) learning, the internet of things, big data, and computers" [33].

Fisk states that there are nine trends related to education 4.0, among which are "learning at different times and places, and e-learning facilitating opportunities for distance and independent learning." It shows that the COVID-19 outbreak is a tool to quickly adapt to technological developments by integrating technology into the learning process [34]. This thinking is also in line with Dunwill that there will be many future changes. He predicts how class flexibility will look in the next 5-7 years, i.e. i) Significant changes in classroom layout; ii) Virtual and augmented reality will change the educational landscape; iii) Flexible assignments that accommodate many learning preferences; and iv) Massive open online course (MOOC) and other online learning options will have an impact on secondary education [35].

The lack of teacher skills in integrating technology in the learning process is challenging and requires serious government attention. The Driving Organization Program (*Program Organisasi*

*Penggerak/POP*) plan initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia is new hope for improving education quality. *POP* as a dynamic organization project is a massive community empowerment program through government support for improving the quality of teachers and principals based on training models that have been proven effective in improving the quality of the learning process and student learning outcomes. Considering that education issues are related to parents' involvement in children's education, this program needs to give place to campaign activities to build parents' awareness to improve their children's education process accuracy.

Furthermore, parents' paradigm shift is the main thing to prepare them to be teachers for their children at home. Therefore, the following simple guidelines may help parents support children's learning activities at home: i) Managing children's learning time, learning, and completing analytical tasks (such as math) is best done in the morning [36]; ii) Children's moods and feelings affect their learning productivity. Therefore, parents need to check the child's mood through various questions. It can be done every day, even throughout the day; iii) Before parents intervene, encourage children to solve their problems at their highest ability level and recognize or praise it; iv) Engage children in other activities such as discussion, writing, drawing, dancing, listening to excellent music to enhance their creativity, empathy, and language skills; v) Parents need to make time for children to play or exercise; vi) Parents do not need to limit the place of children's learning at home; as far as possible, they can study anywhere at home.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The research found that at least three main issues related to parents' interest in distance learning, especially in the context of research and in general, in Indonesia's rural areas: i) Parents' conservative educational paradigm is the responsibility of educational institutions; ii) Decrease in children's learning motivation in distance learning; and iii) Technology infrastructure distributed unevenly throughout Indonesia.

Most parents' misconception in understanding education is that the responsibilities of educational 'institutions' have led to their involvement in children's education, and readiness to become a home teacher is at its lowest level. The decline in children's learning motivation during this crisis is not a single problem but a contribution from the external and internal environment to the child itself. The primary role of parents is needed, and it is even better when other family members support children's learning activities from home. Building continuous communication between parents and teachers, parents and children, teachers and students, and students and their groups will significantly help children's intrinsic motivation to grow and be maintained. Even the effects of stress experienced by parents and students can be overcome through intense communication between them.

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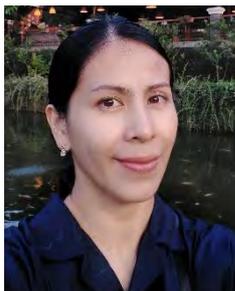
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## BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



**Delipiter Lase**     is an assistant professor in education. Obtained a master's degree in education management from the Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) Jakarta and a bachelor's degree from Universitas Ekasakti (UNES) Padang, Indonesia. In 2012 he joined the Department of Christian Religious Education at the Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Banua Nih Keriso Protestan Sundermann, Gunungsitoli, North Sumatra-Indonesia. He has written several papers in education, including education and industrial revolution 4.0, dimensions of spirituality in the personality competence of Christian religious education teachers, intergenerational learning for sustainable societies, how teachers can engage students in online learning, etc. He can be contacted at email: [piterlase@sttsundermann.ac.id](mailto:piterlase@sttsundermann.ac.id).



**Trisa Genia Chrisantiana Zega**    is a lecturer in psychology at Universitas Kristen Maranatha, West Java - Indonesia. She received a bachelor dan master's degree in psychology from the Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia. Her most interest is in education and positive psychology. She has written several papers in education and psychology, including The Effect of Growth and Fixed Mindset on the Grit of Higher Education Students, How Teachers Can Engage Students in Online Learning, The impact of Student Well-Being and School Climate on Academic Achievement in Junior High School Students, etc. She can be contacted at email: [trisa.genia@psy.maranatha.edu](mailto:trisa.genia@psy.maranatha.edu).



**Dorkas Orienti Daeli**    is a lecturer at the Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Banua Niha Keriso Protestan Sundermann since 2014. He majored in theology, particularly Systematic Theology, and also comparative religion. He has completed doctoral studies at STT Paulus Medan, Indonesia. Has written several articles, including Justice amid a pluralistic life, as a form of deepening about pluralism in Indonesia, Lowalangi and God: Eradication of the Dualism of the Entity of God in Nias Christian Religion, etc. She can be contacted at email: [dorkasdaeli1973@gmail.com](mailto:dorkasdaeli1973@gmail.com).



**Sonny Eli Zaluchu**    is a lecturer in theology who concentrates on OT studies and the sociology of religion. Completed a doctoral program in theology at Indonesia Baptist Theological Seminary Semarang and is currently continuing his studies to focus on religion, and society in the doctoral program in the sociology of religion at the UKSW, Salatiga, Indonesia. Now, he is a theology lecturer at the post-graduate program at STT Baptist Indonesia and an assistant professor in the study of OT biblical theology. He wrote articles on Theology in the journal HTS, Verbum et Ecclesia, International Journal of Religion and Spiritual in Society, Perichoresis. He was a reviewer in the Journal of Verbum et Ecclesia and the International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society. Interested in research related to the sociology of religion and OT theology. He can be contacted at email: [gloryofgodmin@gmail.com](mailto:gloryofgodmin@gmail.com).