

## The Role of Teachers in Motivating Middle School Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Yuliani<sup>1</sup>, Narastri Insan Utami<sup>2</sup>

Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta, Indonesia

[narastri@mercubuana-yogya.ac.id](mailto:narastri@mercubuana-yogya.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of teachers in motivating junior high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, a country heavily impacted by the virus, with cases surpassing 1,000 per day. The pandemic led to significant educational disruptions globally, including the closure of 646 schools in Indonesia, affecting approximately 68.8 million students who shifted to home-based learning, while 4.2 million teachers and lecturers adapted to remote teaching. This research aims to explore how teachers adjusted their roles to sustain and enhance student motivation amidst these challenges. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through interviews and observations with three junior high school students meeting specific criteria. Findings reveal that teachers' efforts to motivate students in Palopo, South Sulawesi, were less effective than needed during the pandemic, as online learning weakened students' motivation, underscoring the essential role of teacher support in fostering students' potential.

**Keywords:** Teacher's role, student learning motivation, COVID-19 pandemic

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### Introduction

Indonesia ranks among the Southeast Asian countries most severely impacted by COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2021). Following the highest pandemic burden recorded in 2020, the spread of the Delta variant in July and August 2021 led to a significant increase in cases and fatalities (UNICEF, 2021). Wiku Adisasmito reported that in August, the mortality rate remained higher than in July, with COVID-19-related deaths increasing from 34,394 cases in July to 37,330 cases in August (Alika, 2021). Consequently, 646 schools across all educational levels—from early childhood to university—were closed, affecting approximately 68.8 million students who had to adapt to home-based learning, and 4.2 million teachers and lecturers who had to transition to remote teaching.

According to a survey conducted by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in April 2020, 97.6% of schools had shifted to home-based learning, leaving only 2.4% of institutions maintaining face-to-face education (Liputan6.com, 2020).

Online learning, a form of distance education that relies on digital technology and telecommunications, allows students to interpret learning materials more independently (Abdo & Semela, 2010; Molenda, 2005). Teachers frequently utilized online learning media, including instructional videos sourced from YouTube or created independently, to support the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, teachers must continually establish a comfortable and structured online learning environment, as this setting significantly influences students' motivation (Hasfira & Marelda, 2021). In this context, teacher innovation becomes crucial, involving the development and application of new methods to enhance educational quality through creativity and openness to change.

Motivation plays a vital role in student learning, influencing performance-oriented activities in various contexts, such as classrooms, laboratories, and even field training. According to Desy et al. (2014), learning motivation is the tendency of students to engage in academic activities with the intent of achieving optimal outcomes. Gunawan (2018) further posits that motivation impacts students' efforts toward achieving desired academic results. Although motivation often originates internally, Zantho (2016) explains that it can also be stimulated by external factors.

Motivation can stem from both intrinsic and extrinsic sources. According to Uno (2017), extrinsic motivation is driven by factors such as rewards, a conducive learning environment, and engaging educational activities provided by teachers or others. In contrast, intrinsic motivation includes personal aspirations, ambitions for success, and the drive to fulfill learning needs and goals. Both aspects are essential and interconnected in fostering student motivation. Each instance of intrinsic motivation within a student promotes learning activities and supports commitment to personal and academic goals. Thus, the role of teachers in motivating students is critical. Students with high motivation are characterized by perseverance, resilience, problem-solving skills, and the ability to assert and defend their ideas (Sardiman, 2001).

Nonetheless, many students continue to struggle with ineffective learning experiences, lack of engagement, declining grades, and unmet personal goals—all of which indicate a lack of motivation. Teachers who understand the importance of motivation strive to cultivate, enhance, and sustain it within their students. They must be able to foster students' motivation to learn, enrich the learning experience, and actively elevate students' motivational levels to ensure effective learning outcomes. According to Iskandar Agung (in Sudarma, 2013), teachers are the cornerstone of the learning process.

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2015), phenomenology aims not solely to explore individual life experiences but to understand the lived experiences of multiple individuals around a specific phenomenon, such as how individuals describe their educational experiences. Hasfira and Marelda (2021) further describe phenomenology as an approach that seeks to understand participants' experiences, behaviors, motivations, perceptions, and daily actions in their entirety.

Data collection was conducted directly in the field through interviews and observations. Sugiyono (2016) defines interviews as purposeful conversations between two parties, where the interviewer poses questions and the interviewee responds. This study utilized semi-structured interviews, which, according to Sugiyono (2016), are designed to identify issues in a more open and flexible manner, allowing interviewees to express their opinions and ideas freely. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol developed by the researcher, with questions aligned with the study's objectives.

Observation was also used as a data collection technique. Riyanto (2010) describes observation as a method that involves either direct or indirect observation of a specific subject. In this study, observation was conducted during interviews using non-participant observation. Santori and Komariah (2017) explain that non-participant observation entails observing behaviors from a distance, without interaction with the participants. This approach ensures that the researcher does not emotionally engage with the participants, allowing for objective data collection.

To enhance data credibility, the researcher employed triangulation techniques, as suggested by Moeloeng (2013). Triangulation is a method of data validation that utilizes multiple sources or methods for verification. Specifically, source triangulation was used in this study, which requires the researcher to seek data from more than one source to ensure information accuracy.

The unit of analysis in this study was individual, involving three participants and three informants, resulting in a total of six participants and informants. The details are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Total Number of Research Participants and Informants

No	Participants	Research participants and informants	Total
a.	Participants	Junior High Scholl Students	3
b.	Informants	Family Members	3
	Total		6

## Results and Discussion

This study focused on junior high school students engaged in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were continuing with online education at the time of the study. The following discussion presents the results from data analysis. Based on interviews and observations of three junior high school students residing in Palopo, South Sulawesi, findings indicate that the role of teachers in motivating students during the pandemic has not been effectively implemented, and online learning has diminished students' motivation. This finding was also validated by informants for each participant, whose statements corroborated the students' descriptions of their experiences.

According to Inah, Ghazali, and Santoso (2017), independent learning is characterized by students engaging in learning activities autonomously without relying on others. In this study, all three participants displayed individual initiative to study independently at home to keep up with their lessons. Participant PK practiced self-directed learning by reminding themselves of their goals and future aspirations. Participant MR similarly committed to self-study, motivated by the desire to fulfill their responsibilities as a student and achieve high grades. Likewise, participant AS engaged in self-directed learning through various media, including YouTube and private tutoring, using their goals as motivation. This aligns with Uno's (2017) assertion that students with aspirations for academic success are more likely to engage diligently in learning and complete tasks assigned by their teachers.

The transition to online learning during the pandemic posed significant changes, especially for students relying solely on WhatsApp groups for instruction. Teachers primarily focused on delivering content and assignments, which negatively impacted student motivation, underscoring the need for teachers to enhance their role in fostering students' learning motivation. According to Adnyana and Suyanto (2013), student motivation involves more than just maintaining consistency in the learning process; it also includes encouraging students to fully engage in learning

persistently. This study's findings highlight the following aspects relevant to student motivation and teacher engagement:

a. Conducive Learning Environment

Participants PK, MR, and AS were found to have conducive learning environments, characterized by clean, quiet, and well-maintained school facilities, which, as Epenius, Genjik, and Khosmas (2020) suggest, contribute positively to both academic and moral development. During online learning, the school provided internet quotas and loaned devices to students in need, which participants acknowledged as helpful, alleviating concerns about completing assignments and submitting work on time. Werdayaniti (2008) notes that such facilities ease the learning process and enhance students' motivation.

b. Recognition and Rewards

Rewards from teachers have been shown to increase student engagement and motivation (Rizkita & Saputra, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, participants PK, MR, and AS received rewards from their teachers, fostering confidence and commitment to learning. However, during the pandemic, the scarcity of rewards led to a decrease in motivation. Wartulas (2021) suggests that recognizing students' abilities, even in remote learning, is essential for sustaining motivation. Nevertheless, English and arts teachers continued to provide encouragement, resulting in heightened motivation among the participants for these subjects (Arianti, 2019).

c. Engaging Learning Activities

Engaging and interactive instruction has been shown to enhance student motivation, particularly during the pandemic. However, participants PK, MR, and AS expressed that the online learning process became monotonous, as teachers only shared materials and assignments via WhatsApp. Initially, some teachers introduced engaging activities, such as guessing games in English class, which helped students understand the material better, yet this approach was not sustained.

d. Collaborative Activities to Alleviate Online Learning Fatigue

Teachers occasionally encouraged students to share personal stories and engage in light-hearted interactions to alleviate online learning fatigue. However, PK noted that teachers often did not respond to questions in WhatsApp groups, leaving students feeling unsupported, particularly in subjects like mathematics, where guidance in problem-solving is crucial.

e. Goals and Academic Achievement

Participants PK, MR, and AS each had unique strategies to achieve their academic goals, such as consistent task completion, independent study, and participation in school competitions. AS, in particular, viewed academic competitions as an opportunity to gain knowledge and prepare for university admission. All participants demonstrated a drive to meet their academic objectives.

f. Aspiration and Future Orientation

Aspirations and future goals significantly motivated participants, as they viewed their studies as integral to achieving personal aspirations. Participant PK aimed to become a heavy equipment contractor, MR aspired to a career in maritime services, and AS hoped to become a doctor. According to Dimiyati and Mujiono (2002), aspirations foster intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to engage in learning and pursue their goals.

g. Drive and Need for Learning

All participants expressed a strong internal drive for learning, acknowledging the necessity of acquiring knowledge to meet their educational responsibilities.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was conducted using various media platforms, including WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet, as implemented in the participants' schools. In such a context, students frequently lacked direct instruction and tangible support from their teachers. The pandemic negatively impacted students' interest and motivation to learn, necessitating that teachers take proactive steps to rebuild student motivation, both extrinsic and intrinsic.

Teachers should implement innovative and engaging instructional techniques that are accessible and easily understood to stimulate student enthusiasm and foster a more dedicated approach to learning. Additionally, teachers must maintain a high level of professionalism and consistency in providing support, creating a structured and enjoyable learning process for students. In the online learning environment, teachers should continue to offer assessments and recognition to encourage students to participate actively and develop a stronger motivation to learn, helping them feel appreciated and valued.

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