

“It is Not Easy to be a Housewife, Student and Teacher at the Same Time”: Stories of Struggles Among Malaysian Female Teachers as Postgraduate Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This narrative describes my experience teaching an offshore postgraduate course and managing adult learners during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. While I was puzzled by the sudden shift to online learning, I was unaware of the genuine struggles of my students, most of whom were primary school teachers. This led me to rethink my course assessment, which through my reflexivity allowed me to seriously reconsider how adult learners cope with finding a balance while juggling multiple roles in life. During the first Movement Control Order (MCO), I redesigned one of the course assignments, refining the questions for the student learning reflection assignment. In a sense, my main aim was to understand my students' current situation by focusing on their personal reflections. The two questions formulated to elicit responses that became personal reflections of my students' lived experiences were: (1) What are the challenges of lockdown? and (2) How do you manage your life while working and studying? My narrative inquiry included all thirty-six (36) students who attended my course. The research informed consent was explained to students as part of the refined reflection assignment. All 36 submitted written reflections were considered narratives, thus plot-driven texts. I then chose three texts that best represented the overall narrative from the 36 texts. The three teachers whose texts were included in the study were then requested to sign individual consent letters guaranteeing their anonymity and the confidentiality of the qualitative data. As data consisting of actions, events, and occurrences, narrative analysis was performed on the three texts. The analysis yielded three stories. Helen, Susan, and Linda (not their real names) shared their experiences of juggling multiple roles during the lockdown. Life in isolation posed similar challenges in all three stories, both personal and professional. Their main issue was balancing their obligations to their family with their commitments to conduct online teaching activities from home. Nonetheless, each narration highlighted the teachers' unique coping strategies. Intrapersonal ability, effective communication with family members, and mindfulness were identified to be the mechanisms by which these female teachers navigated the challenges they encountered. The insight gained from this inquiry has prompted me to re-evaluate my own personal challenges in teaching. I recognised that rather than making naive assumptions about my adult learners, I should attempt to understand their struggles and provide relevant support that could help them complete their academic programmes during times of uncertainty.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, reflexivity, reflection, online learning, stress, coping, COVID-19 pandemic, scholarship of teaching and learning, higher education.