



Maintaining Children's Mental Health: Revealing Teacher Strategies During Offline Learning for Early Childhood

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Abstract

Purpose – School preparation in response to the new government policy for face-to-face learning requires the active roles of teachers and students, particularly concerning children's mental health. The importance of addressing children's mental health during the transition from online to face-to-face learning needs more attention. The purpose of this research is to identify and describe the strategies employed by teachers in maintaining children's mental health during face-to-face learning at Playgroup Jaya Lestari in Kalinyamat Wetan Village, Tegal City.

Design/methods/approach – This research adopts a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Data collection techniques used include observation, interviews, and documentation. The subjects of this research are educators, including principals and teachers. The data analysis techniques applied are data reduction, data display, and verification. To test the validity of the data, source triangulation was used, involving teachers and students at Playgroup Jaya Lestari.

Findings – The results indicate that strategies employed by teachers to maintain children's mental health during face-to-face learning include using both individual and group approaches. These strategies emphasize the roles and functions of teachers as inspirers, mentors, and more. Teachers can maintain children's mental health by organizing learning activities that involve play, ensuring children remain happy, cheerful, and free from stress or laziness. These strategies are reinforced through their direct application in teaching and learning activities.

Research implications/limitations – The findings highlight the importance of increased awareness of children's mental health, which impacts developmental psychology and the learning process. This research underscores the necessity for educators to focus on mental health early in the educational environment.

Practical implications – The research demonstrates the need for effective strategies for teachers to maintain children's mental health during the learning process. It also emphasizes the importance of institutional readiness to address future challenges and the necessity for collaboration with professionals in psychology to tackle early childhood mental health issues.

Originality/value – This study provides a new perspective by examining the mental health of children in relation to Early Childhood Development psychology and the role of teachers in this developmental process.

Keywords Teacher strategy, Mental health, Offline learning

Paper type Research Paper

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1. Introduction

Education is one of the basic necessities of human life (Fihris, 2015). The Indonesian education system comprises three main categories: Formal Education, Non-Formal Education, and Informal Education (Nasional, 2003). Formal education in Indonesia includes various levels such as Early Childhood Education, Elementary School, Junior High School, Senior High School, and Higher Education. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an educational effort aimed at children from birth to six years of age. This stage focuses on providing educational stimuli to support physical and spiritual growth and development, preparing children for further education in Formal, Non-Formal, and Informal settings (Kementerian Pendidikan Nasional, 2014).

In education, there are several key factors, one of which is the children or students. Education cannot occur without students. As a means of education, students undergo various stages of physical and spiritual growth and development. Early childhood, defined as ages 0-6 years, is a period of remarkable growth and development, often referred to as the "Golden Age." This development includes both the physical and psychological aspects of children (Masganti, 2017). Childhood is a crucial period influenced by various factors, particularly the reception of stimulation and treatment from the environment. The development process for children includes physical motor skills, cognitive abilities, religious and moral understanding, social and emotional skills, language, and art. However, the child's psychological or psychiatric development is equally important. Early stimulation from parents is critical for the child's overall development. A lack of stimulation can hinder a child's growth and development, affecting their long-term well-being and potential.

Humans who cannot experience happiness in their lives are often those suffering from mental disorders and diseases. Health is a lifelong necessity, and mental health, in particular, is crucial. Mental health refers to a person's condition that allows for the optimal and harmonious development of all aspects—physical, intellectual, and emotional—enabling them to interact effectively with their environment (Diana Vidya Fakhriyan, 2019). Maintaining the mental health of young children is essential to ensure their development progresses appropriately for their age, without lagging behind their peers. Mental health is critically important, as more than 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental disorders, with Indonesia having the highest number in Southeast Asia, according to the Global Health Exchange Survey.

Preserving mental health from an early age involves the combined efforts of teachers, parents, and families. The family is the first environment to influence a child's development, while teachers assume this role at school. Teacher professionalism is crucial in achieving educational goals by creating engaging learning experiences that consider children's learning situations and conditions. Effective emotion management is key to maintaining children's mental health, and this largely depends on the strategies teachers use to care for their students' mental well-being (Djayadin & Munastiwi, 2020).

Maintaining the mental health of young children, especially in school, is crucial during their emotional and social development. Mentally healthy children are better equipped to face challenges, form positive relationships with peers, and perform well academically. In today's digital age, children are more vulnerable to stress and anxiety due to social media exposure and academic pressure. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased psychological burdens with significant changes in learning routines and social interactions.

The impact of the COVID-19 virus on the education sector is evident from the government policies implemented (Gersons et al., 2020). In 2022, as the government began to manage the COVID-19 pandemic more effectively, a new policy was introduced in the education sector to implement limited offline learning. This policy requires the continuation of strict health protocols and the equitable provision of vaccinations to both educators and students.

During the pandemic, educational institutions across Indonesia were forced to switch to online learning (Fitri & Abdul Latif, 2021; Formen & Waluyo, 2023; Milla et al., 2021; Shreenidhi et al., 2020). Although the situation is improving, the government has introduced limited offline learning in green zone areas. The Joint Ministerial Decree mandates that schools with fully vaccinated staff can conduct limited face-to-face learning, while still maintaining health and

distance learning protocols. Despite widespread support for this move, some parents remain hesitant to send their children back to school (Kemendikbud, 2021). Therefore, it is essential for schools to create an environment that supports children's mental health. This can be achieved through programs that teach emotion management skills, provide counseling, and promote a culture of inclusion and empathy. These measures aim to help children develop into mentally healthy individuals who are ready to face various challenges in the future.

Children's development is highly dependent on how they understand the subject matter. Difficulties in comprehension can affect children's mental health, especially during the pandemic when home learning posed significant challenges. Even with limited face-to-face learning, parents continue to play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning at home. Maintaining children's mental health during the return to face-to-face learning is essential for their overall development.

Teachers need to understand the characteristics of early childhood and their responsibilities in humanitarian, professional, and societal aspects. Their nurturing strategies at school are critical to helping children understand and adapt to offline learning. Additionally, teachers must be aware of children's mental health issues, such as stress or trauma resulting from the pandemic.

Parents, teachers, and families play a major role in addressing children's mental health issues, as they are the primary environment that profoundly affects children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Djayadin & Munastiwi, 2020). Creating a fair and developmentally appropriate environment for early childhood requires teachers' commitment, skills, and opportunities for reflection and growth. Without adequate support, early childhood educators face many challenges in responding appropriately to children's behavior (Spielberger et al., 2024). Given the challenges in early childhood education, researchers have conducted studies on teachers' strategies for maintaining children's mental health during the transition from online to offline learning in early childhood education institutions.

2. Methods

This study was conducted to determine the strategies employed by teachers in maintaining the mental health of children aged 3-4 years at Playgroup Jaya Lestari in Tegal City. The subjects of this study included educators such as principals and teachers, totaling five individuals. A qualitative approach was used in this research. Qualitative research aims to describe and analyze phenomena, events, social activities, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts of individuals or groups (Sukmadinata, 2016). Data was obtained through direct observation of the teacher's strategies in designing classroom learning and their approach to interacting with students. Additionally, the data was reinforced by conducting interviews with teachers and documenting their activities.

The data collected was qualitative, expressed in the form of words, sentences, and images, gathered through interviews, observation, and documentation at Playgroup Jaya Lestari, Tegal City. In qualitative research, data is obtained from various sources using triangulated data collection techniques and is collected continuously until saturation is reached (Sugiyono, 2012). The data analysis process includes activities such as reviewing, categorizing, systematizing, interpreting, and verifying, with the aim of giving the phenomenon social, academic, and scientific value.

The interactive analysis model used in this study consists of three stages: data reduction (Morissan, 2017), data presentation (Sugiyono, 2017) and drawing conclusions. After analysis, the researcher can conclude whether the results align with the problem formulation created at the beginning, as the problem formulation is temporary and can be further developed in the field. The data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation are combined and analyzed to describe the results (Miles et al., 2014).

3. Result

Maintaining the mental health of young children, especially in school, is very important as this is a crucial period in their emotional and social development. Mentally healthy children are better able to face challenges, form positive relationships with peers, and perform well academically. Research indicates that maintaining mental health in early childhood is crucial as children's mental states can change at any time depending on the care provided by parents at home and teachers at school.

During the learning process, some children may experience learning difficulties. For instance, some children may struggle with reading fluency compared to their peers, and they might appear lethargic and easily tired. When offline learning was permitted by the government, one significant factor affecting the learning process was mental health. In a school setting, children regularly interact with their teachers, making teacher interaction closely tied to mental health.

Based on interviews with researchers, teachers strive to provide interaction, communication, and positive responses to children to ensure they do not feel bored or stressed during offline learning. The concept of learning in Early Childhood Education institutions emphasizes learning through play. This approach allows children to experience positive emotions, fostering joy and happiness while learning.

Student interaction with peers greatly influences children's mental health. Such interaction is crucial as it can enhance children's social and emotional development. Through interacting with peers, children learn important social skills such as sharing, cooperation, and empathy. These interactions help children build self-esteem and develop a sense of belonging and community.

Teachers need to pay special attention to children who struggle to interact with their peers to identify and address any underlying issues. Children who have difficulties in peer interaction may be experiencing social anxiety, lack of confidence, or other emotional problems. Early identification of these issues allows for timely intervention, which can include counseling, social skills training, or creating opportunities for positive peer interaction.

Moreover, teachers can facilitate structured group activities that promote inclusivity and cooperation among all students, ensuring that no child feels isolated. Such activities can include team-building exercises, group discussions, and collaborative art projects. These activities encourage children to work together towards a common goal, helping them develop essential communication and problem-solving skills.

Encouraging group work, play, and collaborative projects can help children who struggle socially to gradually build their confidence and improve their interaction skills. For instance, teachers can create small groups for specific tasks where children can take on roles that suit their strengths, thereby boosting their self-esteem and encouraging positive interactions. Activities like role-playing or cooperative games can also provide safe spaces for children to practice social skills and learn from their peers.

By fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, teachers play a pivotal role in promoting the mental health and well-being of all children. This environment helps children feel valued and respected, which is crucial for their emotional security. Teachers can also implement strategies such as peer mentoring, where more socially adept children support those who are less confident. Additionally, regular classroom meetings to discuss feelings and resolve conflicts can create a culture of openness and trust. Overall, these efforts ensure that children not only succeed academically but also develop the social and emotional competencies needed for lifelong mental health and well-being.

As highlighted by a playgroup teacher, some children find it very difficult to interact with their peers, which may indicate mental health disorders where their development is not age-appropriate. Children's perception of their environment significantly affects their mental health. Environmental factors, such as limited opportunities for social play, unsupportive teaching approaches, and a lack of positive social interaction examples from adults, can contribute to mental health issues.

Children with good mental health can adjust well to the school environment. Conversely, children with mental health problems may struggle to adapt. Teachers must provide gradual and

appropriate stimuli tailored to each child's needs. The role of teachers includes creating a safe and supportive school environment through strategies and methods that promote good mental health.

Teachers can implement various strategies to maintain children's mental health using general teaching approaches applicable to different subjects and learning objectives. These strategies include individualized, group, and educational approaches. One effective strategy is implementing child-friendly learning, where children learn through play. Direct learning through lectures can also be effective, provided the content is suitable for young children.

At Playgroup Jaya Lestari, child-friendly learning is already in practice, where children learn through play. This approach aligns with early childhood education principles, which emphasize the importance of play in cognitive, social, and emotional development. Play-based learning helps children explore and understand the world around them in a natural and enjoyable way, fostering creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions.

For children experiencing mental health problems, strategies such as encouraging children to speak with new vocabulary in front of their peers are used. This practice not only enhances language skills but also boosts confidence and social competence. By giving children opportunities to express themselves and be heard, teachers help them overcome shyness and anxiety, contributing to their overall mental well-being.

However, the implementation of health protocols during face-to-face learning is not yet optimal. While the use of masks and hand sanitizers is enforced, some measures, such as providing hand-washing stations, are still lacking. Hand-washing is a critical health practice that helps prevent the spread of infections and illnesses. Without adequate facilities, it becomes challenging to maintain the necessary hygiene standards, especially in a setting with young children who are still learning proper hygiene practices.

To address this gap, the school should prioritize setting up hand-washing stations with soap and water at accessible locations throughout the premises. Additionally, educating children on the importance of regular hand-washing and proper hygiene practices can further enhance the effectiveness of these measures. Regular monitoring and maintenance of these stations are also essential to ensure they are always functional and stocked with necessary supplies.

By improving the implementation of health protocols, Playgroup Jaya Lestari can provide a safer and more supportive learning environment. This not only protects the physical health of the children but also reduces anxiety and stress related to health concerns, thereby supporting their mental well-being. Combining robust health measures with child-friendly learning strategies ensures a holistic approach to education that addresses both the physical and psychological needs of the children.

Maintaining children's mental health during face-to-face learning is crucial to prevent mental health-related disorders. Teachers play a vital role as inspirers and motivators. Their teaching strategies, methods, and approaches should be tailored to meet children's needs. Combining learning with play should be made as engaging as possible to support good mental health. Additionally, direct teaching through lectures helps build emotional closeness between children and teachers, ensuring children feel safe and comfortable.

Maintaining children's mental health during offline learning is vital to avoid potential disturbances or difficulties related to mental health. Teachers must fulfill their roles and functions effectively, using tailored strategies and methods to ensure a supportive learning environment. This approach helps children maintain good mental health, fostering their overall development and well-being.

4. Discussion

Based on the research conducted at Playgroup Jaya Lestari in Tegal City, examining teacher strategies for maintaining the mental health of children aged 3-4 years during offline learning, it is evident that these strategies are crucial for the continuity of the learning process. Maintaining the mental health of children at school is essential during face-to-face learning. It is undeniable that children may experience various mental health problems such as learning disorders, hyperactivity, and concentration issues, which can negatively affect them during offline learning.

These impacts manifest as stress, sleepiness, and laziness in children while studying. Such issues also hinder the development of children, preventing them from progressing according to their age-appropriate milestones. According to the theory of teacher strategy, a teacher's strategy is a general approach to teaching that applies across various subjects and is used to achieve different learning objectives (Paul Eggan, 2012). One problem studied by two people with different approaches can lead to different conclusions. Examples of approaches include individual, group, and educational approaches. To foster motivation, meet children's learning needs, and maintain their emotional well-being, a motivational humanistic approach can be effective. This approach gives learners the freedom to determine their own destiny, both in terms of learning success and personality development.

According to the research conducted, the strategies that teachers can employ to maintain children's mental health during learning include using appropriate approaches, both individually and in groups. These strategies can positively impact several aspects related to children's mental health at school, such as physical and spiritual health, interactions with teachers and peers, parent interactions in the home environment, and children's perceptions of the school environment (Anthony & McLean, 2015; Anttila et al., 2021; DiGirolamo et al., 2020).

To maintain children's mental health during face-to-face learning, teachers must fulfill their roles and functions as inspirers, guides, motivators, and more. This alignment between teachers and families is crucial because a lack of family involvement in school mental health programs can result in services that do not align with family values and perpetuate disparities (Garbacz et al., 2024; Lam & O'Driscoll, 2024).

According to research conducted on early childhood (aged 3-4 years) at Playgroup Jaya Lestari, children's mental health can be identified and observed through various methods. These observations align with the characteristics of mental health as described by Remschmidt. Mental health in children involves their capacity to develop in various areas such as biological, cognitive, and social-emotional domains (Elly Yuliantri, 2019). Persistent mental health difficulties in children are associated with poorer outcomes later in life, including reduced vocational productivity, unemployment, poor educational attainment, social isolation, and premature death (Connolly et al., 2024). Thus, early identification and intervention are crucial for improving long-term outcomes for children's mental health and overall development.

Children's mental health enables them to establish healthy relationships with others and overcome various challenges in their lives. This is reflected in attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate happiness and productivity. It is crucial to consider children's developmental stages when assessing their mental health. At Playgroup Jaya Lestari, researchers identified several factors during observations that affect mental health: Physical condition or health. The overall physical well-being of the child. Intense communication with teachers. Regular and meaningful interactions between children and their teachers. Communication with peers. How children interact and form relationships with their classmates. Adjustment to the school environment. The child's ability to adapt to the school setting and routines. These factors are in line with the understanding that the most important out-of-home contexts for children are their residential and school environments, given children's limited mobility. Ensuring these environments are supportive and nurturing is essential for promoting children's mental health and overall development (Bronson et al., 2023).

This research aligns with the findings of child psychologist Devi Sani, who identified several factors that can impact children's mental health: a) Body Health and Physical Activity: The overall physical well-being and activity levels of the child; b) Interaction with Teachers: The quality and frequency of interactions between children and their teachers; c) Interaction with Peers: The child's ability to form and maintain relationships with friends; d) Children's Perceptions of Their Environment: How children view and interpret their surroundings; e) Other Indirect Changes: Various external factors that may indirectly affect the child.

Devi Sani further explained that signs of stress or disturbed mental health in children can manifest in two ways: a) Internalized Problems: Children may become more withdrawn, anxious, less cheerful, and may experience a loss of appetite; b) Externalized Problems: Children may appear more aggressive, easily upset, uncooperative, and may exhibit violent behavior towards

others or objects. Such issues are less likely to occur if parents can stabilize or maximize children's emotional capabilities (Djayadin & Munastiwi, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to actively participate in maintaining children's mental health during offline learning. Teachers play a vital role in: a) Providing Emotional Support: Offering a supportive and understanding environment to help children express and manage their emotions; b) Promoting Positive Interactions: Encouraging healthy communication and relationships among children and with teachers; c) Creating a Safe Learning Environment: Ensuring the school environment is welcoming and conducive to learning. By addressing these areas, teachers can help maintain and improve the mental health of children, contributing to their overall well-being and development.

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, the final findings regarding teacher strategies for maintaining the mental health of children aged 3-4 years during offline learning at Playgroup Jaya Lestari in Kalinyamat Wetan, Tegal City, show that the teachers' strategy involves conceptualizing children's learning through play. This is crucial for Early Childhood Education institutions to ensure children remain happy, cheerful, and free from stress, laziness, and lack of enthusiasm.

An important function of this approach is its role as a key component of mental health. Quality of Life (QOL) refers to life satisfaction, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and school well-being (Yang et al., 2023). This approach is especially beneficial for hyperactive children who find it difficult to calm down during learning and for children with speech delays or other developmental disorders.

The application of direct learning is typically done by teachers using the lecture method. This method is very effective for young children because it allows them to receive information and knowledge directly, facilitating immediate comprehension. Teachers can narrate stories in an engaging manner, sparking enthusiasm and eagerness in children to listen. For children with speech delays, teachers can stimulate their language development by introducing new vocabulary or foreign words in a gradual manner. This helps children learn without feeling overwhelmed or stressed by the memorization process. Regular practice and gradual introduction of new words can significantly aid in improving their speech and overall development.

This research aligns with Mashitoh's opinion regarding teacher strategies, as observed and interviewed. The strategies that teachers can apply to maintain children's mental health include enabling children to learn while playing. At its core, play is a voluntary, spontaneous activity focused on the process, intrinsically rewarding, fun, active, and flexible. In early childhood, play has symbolic characteristics, meaning it is active, fun, voluntary, episodic, and governed by set rules.

A hands-on teaching strategy is used to help children become familiar with terms, strategies, factual information, and habits. Direct teaching involves more than just telling or showing something simple to a child; it combines modeling, task analysis, effective rewards, informing, do-it signals, and challenges. This aligns with the assertion that early education provision in high-income countries helps improve life chances and reduce disparities, including those related to mental health. Analysis in Scotland shows that services by single professionals can reduce risks for the poor, while group-based care can increase risk when applied to children under three years old. The quality of childcare providers is critical and must be considered, especially for children from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds (Robertson et al., 2024). Implementing these strategies ensures a supportive learning environment where children can thrive emotionally and socially, ultimately fostering better mental health and overall development.

Reflection of Words Strategy. A paraphrase reflection involves the teacher restating something the children have said. Comments that do not judge children can improve speech and listening skills, help children discover key concepts, develop language vocabulary, and encourage them to initiate conversations with both peers and adults (Masitoh, 2012).

At Jaya Lestari Playgroup, the strategies implemented by teachers are not fully effective for all children. Despite teachers providing the best methods to keep children engaged in offline learning, some children remain lazy and unenthusiastic. A major factor influencing this is that children have not been able to adjust to the school environment, as they are still influenced by the

atmosphere of online learning at home. Offline learning at Jaya Lestari Playgroup is not fully ready to be implemented due to several unmet factors, such as inadequate facilities, unprepared budgets, and children's habits of not adhering to health protocols, like wearing masks effectively.

Limited offline learning is carried out in two phases: the transition period and the new habit period. The transition period lasts two months from the start of limited offline learning in schools. After this period, the new habit phase begins, where offline learning continues with established new norms. Schools must adhere to government provisions related to class conditions, behavior of educators, medical conditions, and canteen operations, as outlined in guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

Research on teachers' strategies for maintaining children's mental health during offline learning has several important implications: a) early identification and response. Teachers can play a crucial role in identifying and responding to signs of stress and anxiety in students, which is increasingly relevant amid the challenges of face-to-face learning post-pandemic. With the right strategies, such as compassion-based approaches, inclusive classroom management, and integration of activities that support mental health, teachers can help create a safer and more supportive learning environment for children; b) Ongoing training and support. There is a need for ongoing training and support for teachers to enhance their competence in addressing students' mental health issues. Professional development opportunities and access to resources are essential for equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge; c) Collaboration. Collaboration between schools, parents, and mental health professionals is essential to ensure that children's mental health needs are met holistically. A coordinated approach can provide comprehensive support and interventions tailored to each child's needs; d) Proactive education policies. The findings highlight the importance of proactive education policies that prioritize children's mental well-being as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Policies should focus on creating supportive school environments, providing mental health resources, and ensuring the overall well-being of students.

By implementing these strategies and fostering a collaborative and supportive environment, teachers and schools can effectively address and maintain children's mental health, promoting their overall development and academic success.

5. Conclusion

Maintaining children's mental health during the learning process is crucial as it significantly impacts their emotional, social, and academic development. Teachers play a key role in creating a supportive learning environment through positive interactions, child-friendly learning approaches, and appropriate strategies for dealing with children who have mental health disorders. Implementing both individual and group approaches, as well as using informative lecture methods, can help children feel happy and engaged in learning. A safe and supportive school environment, backed by adequate health protocols, also contributes to maintaining children's mental health. Therefore, the role of teachers as inspirers and motivators is vital in supporting children's mental health and well-being during the learning process.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Izdihar Syifa Cahyani conceived the idea, conducted data collection, and performed the analysis. Agus Khunaifi developed the theory of teacher strategies, mental health, and early childhood education. All authors engaged in discussions regarding the findings and made contributions to the final manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the research is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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