Are schools in Malaysia ready to open?

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ABSTRACT

The decision on school reopening has evoked mixed reactions from parents as they become nervous regarding this action and are uncertain to send their children to school. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the teachers’ perspectives on the readiness and challenges of school reopening in Malaysia. A study was conducted through online interview sessions amongst 20 teachers for primary and secondary schools at Seremban district, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia from October 2020 until February 2021. Data were coded into themes and sub-themes based on the similarities of the data. The respondents in this study agreed that they are ready for school reopening and fully follow the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Education Malaysia such as checking body temperature, physical distancing inside and outside the classroom, enforcement of wearing mask and sanitize the area regularly. Undeniably, the teachers faced some challenges regarding new norms during school sessions. Therefore, to ensure that the students receive proper education, at the same time the measures to contain the transmission of COVID-19 are followed properly, a few suggestions have been made. The cooperation from the teachers, parents and students are also needed to ensure and achieve the smoothness of school sessions.

Keywords: Challenges, COVID-19, Readiness, School reopening, Teachers

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is giving a major impact on society, whereby frequently increasing the social and economic inequality. In an effort to contain its spread, the suspension of face-to-face learning in schools was implemented. However, the prolonged closure of schools due to COVID-19 pandemic had greatly impacted the education system. To date, the closure of schools still applies in order to counter and prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus amongst children. School closures is recognized as a common tool in the battle against COVID-19 virus. Children are affected by the virus in the same way as other age groups and they may serve as carriers in spreading it [1]. It is found that younger children with mild to moderate COVID-19 virus infection have high amount of SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA in their nasopharynx as compared to older children and adults [2]. This may make them become the medium for spreading the virus. Besides, their behavioral habits when meeting friends at schools are of concern. Therefore, closing schools is the only option to control the children and COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely acknowledged as one of the most effective actions for preventing the pandemic [3], [4].

However, the effect from the prolonged school closure had caused loss in educational physical activity, mental health, and increased exposure to violence on students at home, reduce student’s performance and lack of learning motivation [5]–[7]. Besides, children and teenagers are at a significant risk
of being victimized under the exceptional situation brought on by the COVID-19 issue [8]. Concurrent
effects on the economy due to the pandemic also makes the parents unable to provide necessary learning
equipment for their children. This gave huge impact on the students’ financial constraint due to poor family
background, whereby the students experienced a more significant learning loss during this period [5]. The
expensive cost for internet packages and laptop are the stresses faced by poor families as they feel that the
daily basis is more prioritized than the learning equipment [9]. The concern is that compared to the children
from higher socio-economic background, the children in lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely
to participate in online classes [10]. Furthermore, in reaching the equality and balancing the students’ needs
were difficulties faced by the schools [11]. Therefore, the continuity of school closure may lead to more
impacts on the students and teachers. Data on learning loss during the school closure have shown that it is a
struggle to adopt online learning and the students made little progress while learning from home [12], [13].

School reopening is the way to overcome this. Careful planning can help in addressing the concerns
of school reopening. Standard guidelines were suggested for a few countries on the school reopening. In
Denmark, the government has decided to allow the children aged of up to 11 years old to return to school on
April 15th, 2020, with the adoption, such as: small groups of children for lessons and playtime, frequent hand
washing, and spacing between desks of about six feet apart. These measures were found to be effective [14].
Similarly in Japan, the measures on daily temperature checking, physical distancing and wearing face masks
to control the infection were implemented [14]. This is not an exception for Malaysia with the announcement
made by the Education Senior Minister on school reopening started on July 15th, 2020 with the stringent
standard operation procedure (SOP) rules that were enforced, such as social distancing, suspected sick
students were not allowed to attend school, no physical education class, no school assembly, one-meter
distance apart between tables and mandatory to wear face masks throughout the school sessions [15].

Despite the suggested strategies to counter the infection, the confidence level of parents to send their
children back to school has become relatively low. Decision on reopening schools has raised the concerns
among the parents in the aspects of health and safety, despite the Ministry’s strict enforcement on SOP [15],
[16]. The concern is also raised in other countries, whereby school reopening after the lockdown is lifted is
likely to cause an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases [17]. About 30% of parents in the United States
responded that they would probably or definitely keep their child at home if school opened in fall season.
They worried that their children would catch the virus or that the health care system would not be able to
protect their loved ones, and cause multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children [18].

However, it is reported that severe COVID-19 disease is less likely to happen amongst infants,
children and young adults as compared to older adults. Large epidemiological studies suggest that children
make up only 1% to 2% of all COVID-19 cases [19]. Therefore, it is relatively safe for school reopening
according to the medical evidence [20]. Currently, there is a limited study on the school reopening in
Malaysia. According to the previous study, the SOP implementation in schools did not go as intended due to
facility and workforce issues [21]. Consequently, this study was conducted amongst teachers to assess their
perspectives on the readiness and challenges of school reopening in Malaysia. This would consider on the
preparations of school reopening for children. The findings on this study may raise confidence amongst
parents to send their children back to school and also for the institutions to improve the infection control
measures. It is important for school authorities to address these concerns amongst parents to increase their
confidence level [22]. This may also improve the teaching and learning approach amongst teachers and
schools, besides, ensuring the compliance on COVID-19 SOP. Therefore, the students can receive their rights
in education with more effective learning in any conditions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD
2.1. Study design and population

This qualitative study was conducted amongst teachers in primary and secondary schools in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. A total of 20 teachers were selected by using the purposive sampling method
[23]. The results of this study are important because they can provide an insight into clear preparations for
the teachers and school authorities for school reopening. Permission was obtained from the Institutional
Review Board of KPJ Healthcare University College with a registration number (KPJUC/RMC/SOH/EC/2020/314), Ministry of Education Malaysia and Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Sembilan. Respondents had verbally consented to participate prior to any data collection.

The study began with a discussion with the headmasters and principals of respective schools for the
study approval. Respondents were approached through emails or phone calls with the date for an interview
was set. The interview was conducted through Google Meet to abide with the SOP of COVID-19. Prior to the
interview, respondents were given clear explanations about the study and informed of their rights. Respondents were assured that all information would remain confidential.
2.2. Construction of interview script

The literature and guidelines were firstly reviewed to provide a questionnaire framework. Then, a self-developed and structured questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The self-developed interview questions were established in Malay language, and then translated into English before being presented to the experts for evaluation and to check whether they were clear and understandable for the respondents.

2.3. Data analysis

The data obtained were independently examined to form the theme and sub-themes. The inductive content analysis began with data familiarization by repeatedly listening to audio recordings, transcriptions, and reading the transcripts [24]. The agreed themes were used while the disagreed themes were discussed and rearranged. The content analysis process involved coding and categorizing of data, finding themes, organizing and defining the data based on the codes and themes. Then, the findings were interpreted based on direct quotations from the opinions of interviewed teachers. The discussion had agreed on themes which reflected the readiness for school reopening. Table 1 summarizes five main themes highlighted by the respondents as key of school reopening measures done in selected schools in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
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<td>Change in school schedule</td>
<td>Staffs briefing conducted before school reopening</td>
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<td>New academic calendar</td>
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<td>Alternative activities</td>
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<td>Minimizing contact</td>
<td>No curricular activities, gathering and assemblies</td>
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<td>Discouraged canteen usage</td>
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<td>Physical distancing in classroom</td>
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<td>Separated tables</td>
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<td>Hygiene and cleaning</td>
<td>Canteen cleanliness and food preparation</td>
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<td>Disinfect and cleaning classroom</td>
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<td>Hand sanitizer provided</td>
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<td>Student emotional and health screening</td>
<td>Liaising with school counsellor</td>
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<td>Body temperature monitoring screen</td>
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<td>Isolation room</td>
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<td>Sent home if students not well</td>
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<td>Dissemination of information</td>
<td>Awareness on COVID-19 posters</td>
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<td>Simulation of SOP to parents and students</td>
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<td>Reminder to students and parents</td>
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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The school closure had wreaked havoc on the education system, disrupting familiar patterns of the education system and impacting the teachers and students. After a series of school closure, on June 24th, 2020, the Malaysian Government has allowed more than 500,000 students from about 2,500 schools to return to their schools as they were sitting for the public examination shortly [25]. The longer time the children remain out of school, the greater loss and harm will be faced by them [26]. This school reopening came along with the guidelines on SOP, which included daily temperature checks, children and teachers to wear face masks at all times and social distancing practice, including no outdoor activities and sports [15]. The parents gave negative feedbacks regarding their worries on COVID-19 infection amongst the children.

According to Viner et al. [27], there was preliminary evidence that children younger than 10 to 14 years had lower susceptibility to COVID-19 infection than adults. However, there was weak evidence that children and adolescents play a limited role in the COVID-19 transmission. Furthermore, a preliminary result by Li et al. [28] suggested that children may be less likely to be infected or infect others. However, the evidence was limited. This uncertain impact of school reopening on COVID-19 transmission is unclear and there is no evidence that children are more likely to transmit as compared to adults, unlike with other respiratory viruses [7]. Moreover, there is no clear evidence that children with COVID-19 would have severe illness or die [29]. Together, these data suggest that children are likely to be amongst the safer groups [7]. However, they still need to practice and follow the SOP in order to prevent the COVID-19 transmission. Therefore, the readiness and preparation of schools and teachers are important to gain the trust from the parents in sending the children to school. In this study, the respondents agreed that they were ready for the school reopening and will follow the rules and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education.
3.1. School reopening measures

3.1.1. Change in school schedule

After the school reopening, many amendments and changes were needed to keep the children on track with their education. During online classes, they might not be able to follow some modules hence, respondents have to make a new timetable and revise the modules to focus on important ones. This also was emphasized on the guideline by Ministry for teachers to conduct their teaching and learning sessions according to the children’s preparation and current situation [15]. Teachers must respond to the changing needs of children throughout a lesson, adapt to manage unexpected situations relating to children’s behavior, and make adjustments to teaching plans when the timetable changes [30].

“Before the school starting, we, the teachers have our meeting to discuss on the students, the classroom, and the school session. In this, we discuss on the way of managing and handling the necessary procedure and duties” (Respondent 7)

“We prepared the new timetable for the class to ensure the subjects can be covered. We are guiding the students so that they are able to catch up easily” (Respondent 10)

“The subject was arranged accordingly, the hard subject such as Arabic period become shorter to lessen the burden of students. We also pick the most important topic to be covered. Teacher that is not major in the subject learn from other teacher to help covering many classes, too” (Respondent 18)

In this study, most respondents stated that their schools followed the guidelines and most activities were not allowed. Instead of having co-curricular or sport activities, some were changed to interactive games or competition, either in class or online. These were able to help the students to have fun after study. In agreement to this, Fawkner et al. [31] stated that even though there was limited evidence on benefits of home-based activities, activities that need some movements are beneficial, such as playing traditional games indoors, dancing to music and other creative courses.

“In my school, the assemblies are completely banned. Sports and co-curricular activities were also banned” (Respondent 3)

“Other activities were done during co-curricular sessions such as poster competitions” (Respondent 5)

“During COVID-19 we still undergo this activity, but in groups where the students won’t be moving around in class. After the school sessions end, we had a lot of programs such as healthy lifestyle program where the parents have to upload videos on their activities every Wednesday. On sports, they had to upload like a routine, they had to record and play the video in Google Meet” (Respondent 14)

3.1.2. Minimizing contact

According to the Guidelines of School Management and Operation in New Norm 2.0 by Ministry of Education Malaysia, assemblies or activities that require students or staff gathering are not allowed. Besides, the co-curricular activities were allowed in minimal ways with strict SOP, depending on the current instruction by the Ministry [15]. Physical distancing was the most widely used policy to control the spread of COVID-19 [32]. This is also suggested by Viner et al. [33] for schools to close the playground and stop all communal activities, such as dining, assemblies and sports.

“No curriculum activities were done in school but we changed them to activities in class such as BINGO during co-curriculum time. This an example of entertainment for them” (Respondent 1)

“No sports or co-curricular activities allowed; thus, we conduct online competitions. During class, we conducted group assignments in a form of rows” (Respondent 2)

Practicing physical distancing by separating the desks by one meter apart is also another step implemented by the schools in this study. Previous study emphasized that this measure was to reduce the incidence of COVID-19, which is mainly transmitted by viral particles whenever people talk, breathe, cough, or sneeze [34]. Keen preparations were made by school authorities to ensure there was physical distancing between the children not only in class, but also outside the classroom. Avoiding group works and no gathering in school canteen were also implemented to ensure that the students did not have direct contact with each other. This was suggested in previous study [33]. According to the study, it was practiced in Taiwan, whereby the children were separated by newly built plastic partitions between their desks in the classroom. In Denmark, they even limited the school reopening to ensure that there was sufficient physical
classroom space to accommodate small size of classes, which required them to have morning and afternoon school sessions [35]. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention also emphasized that physical distancing should be maximized to the greatest extent possible and revised physical distancing to at least three feet between students [36]. A systematic review study provided the evidence that current policies implemented on at least 1-meter physical distancing are related with a significant reduction in infection and distances of two meters may be even more effective [37]. Most respondents also stated that the children were not allowed to eat at the canteen, so food will be served to the students in the classroom at their own tables to limit movement.

“We have arranged the table according to the guideline. The tiles and pathways were painted or taped to ensure they followed physical distancing and the correct pathways” (Respondent 9)
“We rearranged all the school items in class and we would always remove all the irrelevant items that have nothing to do with the class, so the students won’t touch all those items” (Respondent 11)
“The table is well prepared and disinfected every day” (Respondent 2)
“In my school, the teacher will take the food and students will eat in the classroom. So, the movement of students will be lesser” (Respondent 10)

3.1.3. Hygiene and cleaning

The infrastructure and facilities management were important and needed detailed attention. In this study, the respondents stated that their schools have planned and prepared the facilities and equipment in class according to the guideline by the Ministry. Most respondents stated that their schools also made an effort to provide hand sanitizers in school, so that the children can use them. Face masks wearing in schools were strongly enforced. These measures were also recommended by previous studies [38], [39]. It is also suggested for hygiene practices and infection control implemented [33]. This was also implemented in Denmark and Switzerland, whereby hand washing and sanitizing were practiced when the school reopened [35], [40]. Wearing face masks during school sessions was also an additional component for school reopening in Belgium, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan [40]. Wearing face masks has been considered as the first step to prevent and contain the spread of disease, while the hand sanitizer acts as an antiseptic, and thus these need to be worn correctly [41], [42]. This will develop a new good habit for the children and also reduce the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission. It is agreed by majority that wearing face masks in public places is important to prevent COVID-19 infection [43]. The evidence on face masks effectiveness could be seen from the data, schools that required teachers and staff to wear face masks had 37% fewer cases and 21% fewer cases in schools that mandated children to wear face masks [44].

“We also provide the students with face masks and hand sanitizer in every classroom. Even NGOs have actually delivered face shields for all students” (Respondent 14)
“The school authorities ensure the safety of school by placing hand sanitizers in the area which easier for students to reach” (Respondent 16)

Besides, the canteen staff were given explanations on cooking and food preparation. Based on the literature review, some measures were taken with regard to school canteens where schools should ensure optimal hygiene during food preparation, offer the chance to eat in classroom, organize separate meal time and clean after every utilization [45].

“For recess, the students are not allowed to go out, students need to eat in their respective classroom and are always advised to wash their hands after eating and sanitize the table after eating” (Respondent 13)
“In the canteen we always remind and explain the canteen’s staff that they need to prepare food that is sealed and ensure the cleanliness such as wearing face masks, and practices hand hygiene” (Respondent 15)

3.1.4. Students’ emotional and health screening

Children may face increased social, emotional, and mental health challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore the presence of a coordinated health program, which is led by school nurses or teachers, would contribute to identify illness and management of COVID-19 in the classrooms [46]. The respondents in this study said that they even gave attention to children, and helped them if they were having problems in studies or mentally disturbed during the pandemic. Besides, the body temperature checking frequently done to ensure the conditions of the students.
“We change the session to motivational programs through online” (Respondent 3)
“For students that we see likely to have difficulties, we will try to talk to them or counsellor will talk to them. So, if they have any problems, we will try to help them to ease their burden to ensure the good mental health of the students” (Respondent 8)
“The challenge for this school reopening is new responsibility such as taking temperatures” (Respondent 1)
“We have prepared an isolation room but usually we call the parents to come fetch them if they are sick. In the room we provide the face masks, hand sanitizers and necessary equipment for COVID-19” (Respondent 3)

3.1.5. Dissemination of information

To ensure that the children were aware about the SOP and guidelines that they should follow, the school management decided to print out posters and hang them in the school areas. By doing this, children have an easy access to read the guidelines. The parents were also updated regarding SOP, whereby they were not allowed in the school area. The respondents also stated that they always reminded the children to keep them aware and abide the SOP. According to guidelines provided by the Ministry, school authorities should exhibit printed materials regarding hygiene and safety measures which can be downloaded from the Ministry of Health website [15].

“The SOP guidelines were put up everywhere around the school. We also always remind them about the SOP and ensure they follows the rules” (Respondent 1)
“We also did a lot of simulation for student regarding the direction and school plan for COVID-19” (Respondent 9)
“We held meetings between teachers and parents and we also explained all regarding SOP and we always remind the parents to always remind these new rules to the children” (Respondent 13)
“We have a SOP simulation and also provide a video for parents to show what to do in an event that may happen and what to follow” (Respondent 20)

3.2. Impact of school reopening on teachers

3.2.1. New duties

Despite the preparations and readiness of schools and teachers regarding the school reopening, some challenges were faced. The new school norm has a huge difference as compared to previous school sessions. With the guidelines by the Ministry, there are some new tasks and responsibilities for the teachers. The respondents shared they had new tasks in schools, whereby they needed to check the students’ body temperature, keep alert about the condition of students, ensure cleanliness of the surroundings, monitor the students and extra preparations for classroom and schools. In a study conducted in Spain at the beginning of the pandemic, teachers also reported that they had workloads, psychosomatic problems, and exhaustion [47]. The development of pandemic fatigue may lead to greater violations of SOP [48].

“We got new tasks such as we have to check the body temperatures of students so we need to arrive earlier than usual and stand by to monitoring the students’ entrance in schools” (Respondent 7)
“The workload is getting twice as much as before. We have to move around the school just to take care of students and advising them to follow SOP” (Respondent 8)
“We got extra work where we need to know the background of students such as medical history because they are not encouraged to come to school” (Respondent 15)

3.2.2. Students’ attitudes

From this study, the respondents were stressful due to the new SOP and guidelines in ensuring the children obey the rules correctly. The pandemic has not only affected the mental state of children [49], but also the teachers. This is similar to a study in Spain, whereby a high percentage of teachers suffered from symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression when the schools and universities reopened [50]. The factors caused high level of stress amongst school-aged children, having to deal with a heavy workload, combined with the stress of carrying out family care duties [50]. Furthermore, with a large number of children in schools, it has become a challenge for them to keep and monitor the student movements. To ensure that the students follow the guidelines and SOP is also a challenge for the respondents.
“Handling children is quite hard as they move around” (Respondent 2)
“As my school is the biggest with many students, taking care and monitoring of the students is very hard for us. Some of them did not obey the new rules and SOP especially when teachers are not around” (Respondent 6)
“We need to always remind the students on SOP but the students do not accept this new normal and always moving around and gather with friends, not wearing face masks. We also need to arrange tables following social distancing guideline” (Respondent 9)
“A quite difficult to handle the students as they are excited when seeing their friends” (Respondent 13)

School reopening challenges happened in ensuring the smoothness of school sessions and to minimize the transmission of COVID-19 in school. These burden faces by the teachers can be minimized if the government and school authorities able to find a way to make these guidelines more flexible, easier to understand and have clear action plans for teachers, but it can still maximize the COVID-19 preventions. An open-discussions can be done amongst teachers to hear any suggestions and feedback from their sides. Furthermore, guidelines provided by the Ministry are good measures [51]. However, there is lack in specific, clear instruction and action plans for important areas, such as the way to strengthen the SOP practices amongst teachers and students, especially regarding hygiene and face masks, mechanism on cleaning classrooms between transition of morning and afternoon school sessions, policy for toilets and staff rooms, and also provision of resources or tools such as temperature scanners and hand sanitizers.

Besides, one of the respondents suggested that “… the engagement with parents in school reopening plan may increase their confidence level in sending their children to schools.” It is suggested that parents’ concerns to be addressed quickly, and options for what will be available to them if they want to keep their child at home must be made available and it is a must to ensure that schools have sufficient resources to meet the parents’ expectations on SOP in school [18]. Each individual should play his role to ensure that the community and country can be free from COVID-19 [52], and thus parents and students also should be alert and fully obey the rules and SOP.

However, with the uncertainty of COVID-19 situation, people should be ready and prepare to face them especially on education side. In this study, most of the respondents suggested that teachers should be strengthen their ability and knowledge in handling technology, such as E-Nilam, Google Classroom, interactive learning through quizlet and livebook. The medium for interactive teaching and learning should be more varieties and applicable for all students of any backgrounds. To ensure the effectiveness of SOP implemented in schools, it is impossible if the students are cramming in one classroom. A practical and feasible alternative, a hybrid-blended learning strategy is proposed and teachers can decide on the model that is suitable for the subjects. Furthermore, hybrid and blended training combine face-to-face and online learning with scheduled and self-paced activities [53]. Thus, it is important in fostering teacher competency in ICT-related teaching and learning during teacher’s education and professional development [54].

There are more advantages of school reopening and it should be considered because the longer students remain out of school, they will be loss in education and social development. Children will miss out on essential academic and social-emotional learning, formative relations with friends and adults, opportunities for play, and other development necessities [55]. Moreover, in school, they will not be facing any difficulties to learn comfortably because there are numerous benefits and facilities in school. The study provision of school facilities improves the school building as well as the physical learning environments [56]. Moreover, these adequate provision and proper maintenance will directly improve the teaching sessions and give positive impact on academic performance [57]. Besides, in schools, children can have interactions with peers, and therefore will develop their personal and social skills. In agreement to this, it is stated that this could develop peer relation skills, prosocial behaviors, leadership skills, problem-solving skills, and personal and social responsibility skills [58]. However, the limitation of this study is that this interview was conducted before school reopening. Therefore, further study should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of these SOP on minimizing the transmissions of the COVID-19 and the study on the children’s readiness on practicing SOP in schools.

4. CONCLUSION

The actions taken by the Ministry of Education Malaysia on school reopening together with the guideline and SOP showed that the school reopening actions were not decided without proper analysis from the Ministry. Furthermore, the Ministry also keeps a close monitoring on every school during this pandemic. The findings from this study highlighted those schools and teachers were ready for school reopening and the preparations have been made well. A few challenges from the school reopening happened to ensure that the COVID-19 transmission can be minimized in schools.

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It is proven that teachers and school authorities have done their best in ensuring the SOP by ministry were fully complied, thus parents should feel more relief to send their children to school. Besides, the challenges faced by the teachers should be raised and there is a need for the discussion to find solutions between authorities involved. There is no sign of COVID-19 pandemic to end in the near future and people are afraid of this pandemic. However, society should be able to face this and adapt the new norm, especially in education. Education should be continuous because every child has his or her right for a better and effective education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was funded by Internal University Grant [KPUUC/RMC/SOHS/EC/2020/314]. Authors would like to express their heartfelt gratitude to all who have contributed to this study formally and informally. We thank all the respondents for their cooperation and support.

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