

Barriers to Parent-Teacher Engagement in Malaysian Primary Schools: An Online Qualitative Study

Halangan Terhadap Penglibatan Ibu Bapa dan Guru di Sekolah Rendah Malaysia: Satu Kajian Kualitatif Dalam Talian

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the barriers to parent-teacher engagement in Malaysian primary schools using an online qualitative approach. A total of 60 informants (28 parents and 32 teachers) from urban and rural schools participated in semi-structured interviews via Google Forms, followed by WhatsApp-based focus group discussions (FGDs). The findings reveal six primary barriers: time constraints, poor communication, lack of awareness, limited activities and resources, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, with time constraints identified as the most dominant factor. The WhatsApp FGDs validated these findings with strong consensus among participants. Methodologically, the results demonstrate that Google Forms facilitates efficient data collection, while WhatsApp supports flexible, context-rich discussions. Integrating these qualitative methods offers a practical, cost-effective research approach that mitigates stakeholder time constraints and informs the development of the Collaborative Online Learning (COLAB) model to enhance parent-teacher engagement.

Keywords: parent-teacher engagement, data collection, online qualitative research, focus group discussion, Malaysian primary schools

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka halangan terhadap penglibatan ibu bapa dan guru di sekolah rendah Malaysia menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dalam talian. Seramai 60 informan (28 ibu bapa dan 32 guru) dari sekolah bandar dan luar bandar telah mengambil bahagian dalam temu bual separa berstruktur melalui Google Forms, diikuti dengan perbincangan kumpulan fokus (FGD) berasaskan WhatsApp. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan enam halangan utama: kekangan masa, komunikasi yang lemah, kurang kesedaran, keterbatasan aktiviti dan sumber, status sosioekonomi, serta latar belakang budaya, dengan kekangan masa dikenal pasti sebagai faktor yang paling dominan. FGD melalui WhatsApp telah mengesahkan dapatan ini dengan persetujuan yang kukuh dalam kalangan peserta. Dari segi metodologi, hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa Google Forms membolehkan pengumpulan data dijalankan dengan cekap, manakala WhatsApp menyokong perbincangan yang fleksibel dan kaya dengan konteks. Pengintegrasian kaedah kualitatif ini menawarkan pendekatan penyelidikan yang praktikal dan kos efektif, yang dapat mengurangkan kekangan masa pihak berkepentingan serta menyokong pembangunan model Pembelajaran Kolaboratif Dalam Talian (COLAB) bagi meningkatkan penglibatan ibu bapa dan guru.

Kata kunci: penglibatan ibu bapa dan guru, pengumpulan data, penyelidikan kualitatif dalam talian, perbincangan kumpulan fokus, sekolah rendah Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Online communication technologies have transformed school and parents' interactions, yet communication in Malaysia remains fragmented across platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as IDMe and DELIMa, which offer limited interactive access (Bordalba & Bochaca 2019; Hamzah & Seman 2022; Selwyn et al. 2011). Countries such as Finland utilize integrated platforms, such as Wilma, that centralize communication and collaboration between parents and teachers (Levinthal, Kuusisto & Tirri 2021; Kuusimäki, Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Tirri 2019). Although most communication occurs on this online platform, teachers' written feedback may not always be perceived as supportive by parents, potentially hindering effective collaboration and engagement. To enhance engagement, the conceptual Collaborative Online Learning (COLAB) model was introduced, emphasizing mutual understanding, trust, and parents' cultural backgrounds (Xuan & Mohamad Nasri 2024; Muthiah & Annamalai 2025; Muhmad Asri et al. 2024).

Despite the adoption of online communication technologies, parent-teacher engagement is limited by structural, social, and cultural barriers (Yang et al. 2023; Erdem & Kaya 2020). This is because traditional face-to-face qualitative methods are constrained by time and logistics; this study adapts a technology-mediated online qualitative approach using Google Forms and WhatsApp-based FGDs (Johari, Noordin & Mahamad 2022; Neo et al. 2022). This paper explores perspectives on barriers to parent-teacher engagement in Malaysian primary schools and demonstrates the feasibility of online qualitative data collection in educational research.

RELATED WORK

WhatsApp's widespread adoption in Malaysia (projected 30.7 million users by 2025) makes it highly practical for everyday and research communication (Johari, Noordin & Mahamad 2022). In qualitative research, web-based tools like Google Forms enable asynchronous, structured written responses, aiding systematic thematic coding (Bhamani et al. 2020; Braun & Clarke 2024). Similarly, WhatsApp supports remote, text-based socio-cultural expressions, providing a flexible alternative to face-to-face FGDs (Wasserman & Zwebner 2017; Zainuddin et al. 2022). Within the COLAB model context, these platforms reflect real-world interaction practices.

While LMSs (Moodle, Google Classroom, etc.) support educational collaboration, maintaining engagement is challenging. Divergent expectations between parents and teachers cause misunderstandings, and excessive messaging can disrupt teachers' workloads and parents' routines, hindering sustainability (Muhmad Asri et al. 2024; Akramin & Drus 2017; Hirval & Zaim 2021). Understanding these barriers is critical to formulating effective engagement strategies. For example, differences in perceptions, expectations, and communication practices between parents and teachers often result in misunderstandings, limited responsiveness, and ineffective communication through online communication tools such as WhatsApp.

Parents and teachers may have different priorities and perspectives regarding their roles in supporting children's education, which can negatively affect collaboration and engagement (Guo, Wu & Liu 2019; Deng et al. 2018; Kartika, Dennesen & Droop 2022). As a result, maintaining meaningful parent-teacher engagement remains a challenge. Given the importance of parental involvement in supporting students' academic achievement, behavior, and overall development, it is essential to understand the factors affecting engagement and to identify strategies to sustain and enhance more effective, sustainable parent-teacher engagement in Malaysian primary schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an online qualitative approach with 60 informants (28 parents, 32 teachers) from Sekolah Kebangsaan (SK), Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJKC), and Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT) across rural and urban areas, representing Malaysia's main ethnic groups, as shown in Figure 1.

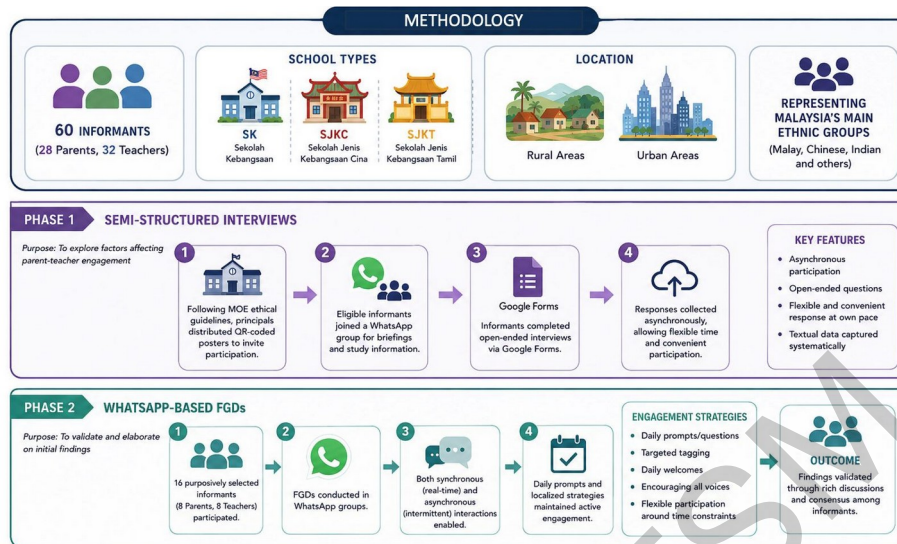


FIGURE 1. Overall Methodology.

Based on Figure 1, in Phase 1: Semi-Structured Interviews, following MOE ethical guidelines, principals distributed QR-coded posters, and eligible informants joined a WhatsApp group for briefings and completed open-ended Google Forms interviews, which allowed asynchronous and flexible responses. Phase 2: WhatsApp-based FGDs were then conducted to validate the initial findings, involving 16 purposively selected informants (8 parents and 8 teachers), where the platform enabled both synchronous and asynchronous interaction, accommodating time constraints while daily prompts and localized strategies (e.g., targeted tagging and daily welcomes) were used to maintain active engagement (Luke & Goodrich 2019; Richard et al. 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the 60 interviews reached saturation, identifying six key barriers to parent-teacher engagement, as presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Barriers to Parent-Teacher Engagement.

Barriers to Parent-Teacher Engagement	Sub-Factors associated with the barriers to parent-teacher engagement	Frequency	Total Frequency
F1: Time constraints	Work commitment	62	73
	Work scheduling conflict	8	
	Family size	3	
F2: Poor communication	Limited proper communications	13	24
	Less responsiveness	9	
	Lack of technical skills	2	
F3: Lack of awareness	Unaware of the school program and the importance of engagement	13	13
F4: Limited activities and resources	Lack of activities that involve parents and insufficient resources for teachers to carry out the activities	9	9
F5: Socioeconomic status	Financial constraints to be involved in activities at school	5	5
F6: Cultural background	Different cultures and goals	3	3

These findings highlight a clear hierarchy of barriers. During Phase 2, WhatsApp FGDs achieved a strong consensus among both parents (n=8) and teachers (n=8) across all six factors. FGD chat logs confirmed operational realities. For F1 and F2, parents noted they "miss information in the class group," while teachers observed parents "overlook information because they are busy." This indicates that information overload limits the effectiveness of digital communication. For F3, parents stated "they aren't sure what the school wants," underscoring the need for structured guidance. Socioeconomic status and cultural barriers (F4–F6) further dictate baseline interaction behaviors. Overall, by adapting an online qualitative approach, Google Forms systematically captured textual data, while WhatsApp-based FGDs successfully facilitated asynchronous cross-cultural group interactions. This approach effectively mitigated time constraints (the primary barrier) and provided empirical support for the development of the collaborative online learning model.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that WhatsApp-based FGDs are a feasible and effective method for online qualitative data collection to explore parents' and teachers' perspectives on barriers to parent-teacher engagement in Malaysian primary schools. The use of WhatsApp enabled meaningful interaction without the need for physical meetings, as informants could engage through guided instructions and structured prompts. It also encouraged informants to share experiences, respond to one another, and build on prior comments, yielding richer qualitative insights than interviews alone. The successful identification and validation of six engagement factors show that semi-structured interviews via Google Forms, combined with WhatsApp-based FGDs, provide a practical and effective approach for qualitative data collection in educational research. Ultimately, understanding these specific barriers empowers school administrators and educational policymakers to streamline communication platforms, thereby reducing information overload and fostering more sustainable parent-teacher partnerships. In future research, this approach can be extended to other research contexts and phases, and adapted across different populations and settings.

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