

## Teacher creativity in early grade reading learning process in online system in the ERA of COVID-19 pandemic: Analysis based on total quality management theory of education

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**Abstract:** The spread of Covid-19 has changed human life, including the world of education, especially in the learning process. The learning process, which originally used an offline system, was changed to an online system. These two systems have different fundamental differences. Therefore, it requires teacher creativity related to reading lessons in the online system, so that the learning process takes place effectively, efficiently, and safely. This study discusses teacher creativity in the learning process in three elementary schools in the early grades in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, namely Mutiara Persada International Elementary School, SDN Nogopuro, and SDN 1 Suryodiningratan. Through qualitative research and Edward Sallis' Total Quality Management of Education (TQME), the results of this study show that the most important aspect in the learning process during the Covid-19 pandemic is the teacher's more humane attitude towards students. This attitude is part of creativity, in addition to other forms of creativity that are technical in nature. In the context of learning, Covid-19 can be "defeated" by the human attitude itself.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Elementary school, Instructional strategy, Online education, Teacher innovation.

### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted educational systems worldwide, triggering a sudden and large-scale shift from face-to-face instruction to online learning modalities. This disruption has disproportionately impacted foundational literacy development among early grade students. Recent assessments have revealed alarming trends in student performance, with reading scores in countries such as the United States reaching a historic low not seen in over three decades [1]. These global literacy challenges underscore the urgency of rethinking educational delivery mechanisms in times of crisis.

Multiple factors have contributed to the decline in reading proficiency during the pandemic, most notably limited access to digital devices, inadequate internet infrastructure, and the absence of direct pedagogical interaction between teachers and students. Compounding these barriers is the lack of parental capacity to provide consistent academic support at home, particularly among families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds [2]. These systemic inequities have amplified existing educational gaps, especially in early literacy acquisition.

The consequences of these challenges are multifaceted. Beyond declining academic achievement, students have experienced setbacks in social and emotional development due to reduced peer interaction and teacher engagement [3]. The inability to master reading skills at an early age significantly jeopardizes students' long-term academic trajectories, as literacy serves as a foundational competency for all subsequent learning domains, including mathematics, science, and language arts [4].

Given these challenges, teacher creativity emerges as a crucial determinant of effective instruction in remote learning environments. Teachers are required to implement innovative, engaging strategies

to sustain student motivation and foster literacy skills. This may involve the integration of multimedia tools, gamified learning activities, and asynchronous learning models tailored to the needs of young learners [5]. These pedagogical innovations must also consider the sociocultural context of learners and the varying levels of parental involvement.

While previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding the challenges of primary literacy instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, they primarily focus on identifying the barriers and limitations of emergency distance education from the perspective of early-grade teachers. Özdemir and Önderöz [6] emphasize the technical and pedagogical challenges such as poor student writing performance, lack of classroom discipline, and limited parental involvement, concluding that distance education is generally unsuitable for foundational literacy instruction. Similarly, Uzun, et al. [7] identify learning loss, screen fatigue, inequitable access to digital tools, and diminished student-teacher interaction as core issues, underlining the deep educational and emotional toll of the pandemic on both students and teachers. However, these studies stop short of exploring systematic strategies for improving instructional quality under crisis conditions. The present research advances the field by integrating the Total Quality Management in Education (TQME) framework to examine not only how teacher creativity emerges under emergency teaching conditions, but also how it can be effectively managed, assessed, and sustained to ensure quality literacy outcomes. This research's novelty lies in its conceptual approach that links teacher innovation to a structured management system, offering both theoretical and practical insights into how early-grade literacy teaching can remain resilient and adaptive in the face of systemic disruptions. This research introduces a novel approach by applying Edward Sallis' Total Quality Management in Education (TQME) as a conceptual framework to evaluate teacher creativity in early reading instruction. TQME emphasizes systematic quality assurance across all dimensions of the educational process, including planning, implementation, assessment, and continuous improvement [8]. Through this framework, the research aims to offer a structured analysis of how teacher-led innovations can be aligned with quality education standards in times of systemic disruption.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to develop adaptable and high-quality literacy instruction models that are resilient in crisis contexts. As schools continue to navigate uncertainties in the post-pandemic landscape, understanding how creativity and quality management intersect in digital learning is essential for sustaining educational continuity and equity [9]. The primary objective of this research is to analyze the role of teacher creativity in facilitating early reading skills during online learning, while concurrently assessing how TQME principles can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of such practices in elementary education.

The findings are expected to contribute to the development of strategic pedagogical interventions and institutional policies that support teacher innovation, improve literacy outcomes, and strengthen educational resilience. This research may also serve as a reference for educators, school leaders, and policymakers in designing inclusive and high-quality learning environments.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the manifestation of teacher creativity in early-grade reading instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within the context of online learning. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate as it enables the researchers to gain in-depth understanding of complex phenomena by interpreting the meanings individuals assign to their experiences [10].

### 2.1. Research Design

A case research method was employed, focusing on three elementary schools located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Mutiara Persada International Elementary School, SDN Nogopuro, and SDN 1 Suryodiningratan. The case research design allowed for a contextualized and detailed

exploration of teacher strategies and their creative adaptations in delivering reading instruction in early grades under online learning constraints.

## 2.2. Participants

Participants consisted of selected early-grade teachers from the aforementioned schools. They were purposefully sampled based on their direct involvement in delivering online literacy instruction during the pandemic. The selection also considered variation in school characteristics ranging from public to private institutions—to capture diverse experiences.

## 2.3. Data Collection

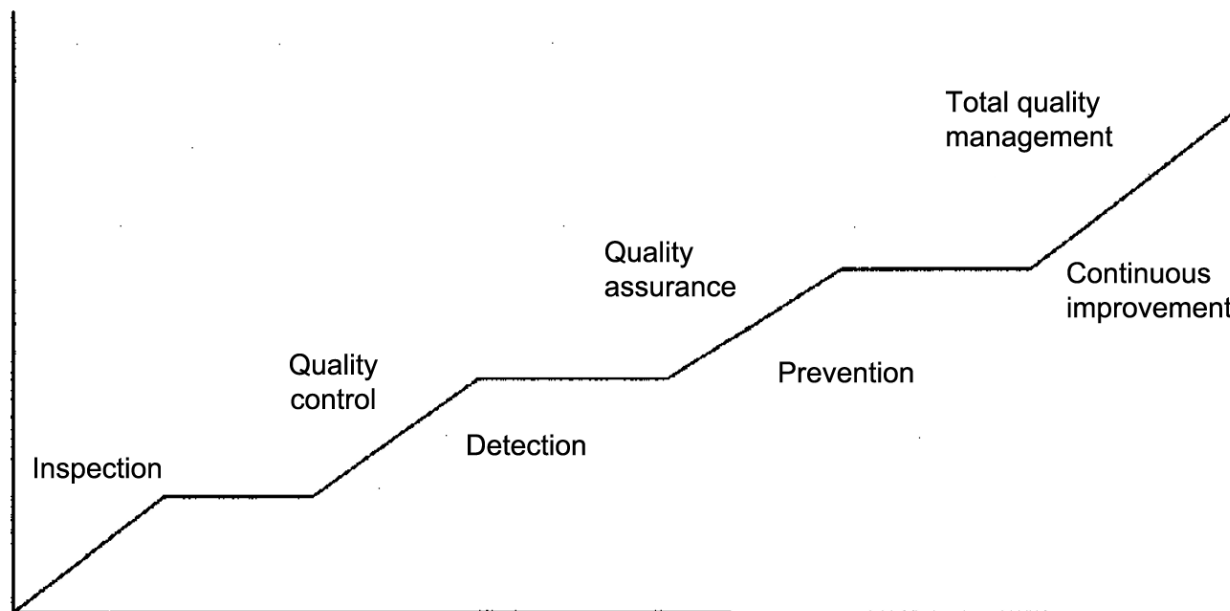
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations. Interviews were conducted with early-grade teachers and school principals, using a flexible protocol that allowed for follow-up questions based on participant responses. Supplementary data were gathered from school documents, online learning materials, and communication records with students and parents to triangulate the findings.

## 2.4. Analytical Framework

The data were analyzed thematically using Edward Sallis' Total Quality Management in Education (TQME) framework. This model served as an analytical lens to categorize teacher practices into key quality management dimensions such as quality control, assurance, detection, prevention, and continuous improvement. This theoretical integration enabled a more structured understanding of how teacher creativity contributes to sustained educational quality in online settings.

The education management theory developed by Edward Sallis is quality management in education (TQME) [8]. This TQME theory is used in this research to clarify and analyze teacher creativity in teaching online in a structured and planned manner. Teacher creativity in learning is used in a specific context (at a specific time and circumstance). Therefore, this creativity must be managed. This is the management of creativity in teaching. Creativity in the context of online learning must remain as quality-oriented as its origin. Thus, creativity is the transformation of perfect knowledge. Quality means in accordance with what is desired by the customer (in this case students) or achieved based on the desired standard [8]. To achieve the desired quality, this quality must be controlled in the process. There are three types of control, namely quality control (supervision so that the product/student continues to process based on benchmarks based on standards), quality assurance (control of the running of the system and control if something goes wrong), and quality management (performance control in each unit).

In TQME, the main focus is learning: "It is important for them to focus on learning their main activity." Thus, what should be underlined in this process is the learning experience of students as learners because "learners are the main customers". In order for the learning process to take place perfectly, competent teachers are needed in the sense that they have a vision and are full of inspiration and leadership, as shown in the diagram below.



**Figure 1.**  
Total Quality Management Diagram.

According to Sallis [8] cited in Arribath and Suradika [11] the characteristics of teachers who have leadership are as follows: (1) understand the vision of the institution well, (2) have a clear commitment to the quality improvement process, (3) are able to communicate a picture of the quality that will be produced, (4) consider the aspirations of students/parents important, (5) be able to lead staff in developing the institution, (6) understand the cultural problems that exist within the institution, (7) be at the forefront of the concept of innovation, (8) ensure the organization runs as should be and be able to take responsibility for the entire process, (9) have a commitment to solving problems, both organizational and cultural problems, (10) be able to build a solid team, (11) always support the success of monitoring and evaluation.

In the learning process, teachers as leaders do not work alone. For this reason, teamwork is needed as an important component. Teamwork is not only limited to curriculum matters or management functions, but must be expanded as problem solving. Team members must trust each other and continue to build good relationships. The team must continue to grow and maintain good relationships (maturity). By quoting B.W. Tuckman has four stages in developing relationship maturity, namely forming, norming, performing, and transforming. In essence, leadership is closely related to participation, collaboration, and democracy [12]. In the context of this research, teamwork can be interpreted as cooperation consisting of principals, teachers, parents, staff, and students.

### 2.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by using multiple data sources. Member checking was also conducted by presenting summarized interpretations to participants for validation. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, with informed consent obtained from all participants and data anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1. Challenges of Online Reading Instruction in Early Grades

In handling the spread of Covid-19, the Government of Indonesia took various policy steps, namely first keeping a distance from others, washing hands with soap, wearing masks, and working or learning

from home (learning from home). This last policy changes the learning model, from offline to online. Each learning model or strategy has its own advantages and disadvantages. The main one is that if in the offline system there is a direct relationship (face-to-face), in the online system the relationship is mediated by technological devices. Frequent signal disruptions and procurement of technological devices are the main obstacles of online systems, but this system is seen as more efficient in terms of time. After all, in the context of learning, this system allows parents to be involved in accompanying their children.

In the context of online learning, the role of parents in their children's education is clear and unequivocal: they are the first and foremost educators [13]. First, because they are the first to provide teaching, education, whatever it is. Mainly, because they are the ones who have the responsibility, obligation, and power to shape what kind of children they are. Parents must pay attention to their children's education because the role of parents is very important in the education process for them. Educate and guide children to a better path, such as instilling values and norms in children who have begun to fae. Always keep an eye on children who are friends with children. Seeing this, parental education affects student assistance. However, in the formal learning process, the role of the teacher cannot be ruled out either. After all, teachers are the masters who control the curriculum and lesson plans for their students. It is the teacher who actively observes attitudes, assesses knowledge and life skills, as well as learning experiences and a variety of activities. Parents do have a significant role, but the judgment of the student remains with the teacher. Because of its considerable role, in the context of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and finding new breakthroughs in the learning process.

In the process of learning to read, the problem becomes more complex. Early grade elementary school students have unique characteristics. Their minds are more focused on themselves and tend to be self-centered. In this early elementary school period, student behavior tends to be difficult to deal with, even though reading lessons are the initial level of students knowing and understanding language symbols, punctuation marks, knowledge of expressions and so on which in the long run greatly affects the lesson of understanding other lessons. According to Deacon [14] childhood lasts from infancy until around the age of 12 to 13 years, which is the period before puberty. Deacon divides childhood into two phases, namely the early childhood phase and the late childhood phase. Physically, there is little difference between the two phases in terms of growth and development. This phase is made possible by the cultural and legal requirement for a child to attend formal education by the age of six.

This difficult and challenging goal is further complicated by the online learning process. Students' behavior is often out of control, especially if their parents are busy working and do not have time to accompany them. Another obstacle, for children, communication tools such as cellphones, are so tempting to open other applications. This condition certainly makes it difficult for teachers to control and evaluate their students. It takes reasonable cooperation from parents and teachers for educational success, but it is not easy. Another obstacle is that parents often do not master existing communication technology.

### 3.2. Parental Involvement and Home Environment Limitations

Therefore, creativity in online learning is needed and this is closely related to teacher creativity. Teachers are expected to be able to create forms of creativity that are inclined to their students. The form of creativity is also very dependent on social and environmental conditions at SD Negeri 1 Suryodiningratan is very different from that at SD Mutiara Persada. From the aspect of parents' occupational background alone, for example, most parents of students at SD Negeri 1 Suryodiningratan come from the lower middle class with a relatively low income compared to parents of students at SD Mutiara Persada, most of whom come from the upper middle class.

This was concretely experienced by a teacher at SDN Nogopuro:

*"During this online learning I experienced many difficulties in reading lessons. Most of them did not have cell phone facilities. If there is a cell phone, it belongs to their parents, so they have to take turns, sometimes fighting over using the cell phone. In addition, it is very difficult for Grade 1 students to research together at the same time*

*according to the schedule. Most of them are at home alone or with their siblings who often use cellphones to research. So if one house says there are three children, then the parents actually have to provide three cellphones. Of course this is very burdensome. Faced with such a situation, one way is for me to make video calls to research, even if it only lasts a few minutes. Through video calls, I show them some of the learning materials they need to learn. Although not very effective, at least they already know the learning material, and I hope that the material is responded to by their parents.” (NW, the participant)*

NW, a participant and parent of a student at Mutiara Persada Elementary School, acknowledged the difficulty of managing time to support the child's learning due to work obligations. NW's husband also has a demanding work schedule, which limits involvement in the child's educational supervision. Consequently, the responsibility for guiding the child during the learning process was delegated to the grandparents. NW considered this situation relatively fortunate, as the grandparents possess a higher level of education, enabling them to provide meaningful academic support. However, their assistance is limited to periods when they are available, making the arrangement suboptimal. Although the grandparents' involvement offers some support, the absence of direct parental engagement is less effective, especially given that parental involvement typically fosters a stronger emotional bond that enhances a child's learning experience.

The biggest challenge is when the teacher is faced with a condition where the student can't write at all, let alone write, with busy parents, as well as not knowing much about the application used for their child's learning. The child does not know how to learn and does not know who to ask. Some of the students interviewed by the researcher learned from their friends. Even though their homes are not far away. Some teachers finally formed groups at school, of course, taking into account the health program and facilities that students have.

In the atmosphere and conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic like this, the form of teacher creativity is not only important, but also determines the success of students in the learning process. Teachers must have creativity so that students minimize the obstacles faced by students. Experience in the field proves that the online method is far from ideal. The problem is that reading lessons are lessons that determine the success of students in understanding further lessons that are increasingly diverse. Therefore, initial obstacles must be overcome as early as possible. In other words, reading lessons become the benchmark for students' success in understanding other more complex subjects. DF, a teacher at SDN Nogopuro, Sleman Regency, realizes the importance of reading success as a basic competency that students must have.

*“Our heaviest burden is how to bring students to adequate reading competence. In the later grades students should already be familiar with other areas such as math, science, language and so on. If this competency is not achieved, it is certain that students will not understand well the more complex subjects. Mastery of these more complex areas presupposes that students are able to read because the teacher responsible for that area will also give assignments. This is our moral burden as teachers who teach reading in the early grades.” (DF, the participant)*

Therefore, in this research it is necessary to first discuss what is meant by “reading”. Reading is thus a process of imagination, interpretation, association, and meaning. Reading is closely related to words. According to Pierce, a word involves three main aspects, namely object, sign, and meaning. Harahap [15] for example argues that reading is essentially a process of absorbing meaning.

Reading is a process that is done and used by the reader to get the message that the sender of the message wants to convey. This process requires that the group of words that make up the whole will be seen at a glance and the meaning of the individual word will be known, if this is not fulfilled then the implied message will not be clearly understood, the reading process will not be done properly.

de Bruin [12] adds that reading is a complex that since the turn of the century has been studied extensively in a variety of different disciplines. Reading is private. It is a mental, or cognitive, process that involves the reader trying to follow and respond to a message from an author who is distant in time and space. Forms of teacher creativity are closely related to social media. Some forms of creativity are the use of games, playing puzzles, “lego” games, role playing, connecting words, some animated movies and so on. These games are widely available on the Youtube application. Games if managed properly

will actually bring out student creativity and become an inspiration for students in developing talents. In addition, humans are essentially homo ludens (creatures who play).

### *3.3. Forms of Teacher Creativity in the Online Learning Context*

Based on Sallis [8] theory, descriptively it can be explained that teachers always inspect the materials used in the learning process. The materials that will be delivered to students, one by one, item by item, are examined, supervised, or clarified and ensured that the material is in accordance with what is stated in the curriculum. This supervision also includes teaching aids. The last thing is often forgotten, even though to maintain and further improve the quality of learning, the presence and proper use of learning media is very necessary. Learning media is useful to complement, maintain and even improve the quality and sustainable learning process [16, 17]. Thus, the monitoring process is very important, because this process is the “upstream” of the learning process. Learning in general will not run effectively and efficiently if it encounters significant obstacles in this first process. Therefore, all obstacles must be resolved immediately or at least minimized before entering the next process.

The second process or step is quality control. In the Covid-19 pandemic situation that requires all students to do online learning, quality control becomes an equally important aspect. Often due to the condition of teachers who find it difficult to control the development of students, especially by staying at home, the success of learning cannot be fully monitored by teachers, and often only rely on the role of parents. In addition, the number of students that is not conducive, for example too many in one class, is also an obstacle for teachers in carrying out quality control, especially in reading lessons.

In the learning process, the detection (indication) step is also an aspect that cannot be ignored. In this aspect, what is needed is the teacher's foresight in seeing obstacles or problems in the learning process. What is often a problem is that each student has their own strengths and weaknesses with a variety of unique contextual backgrounds. Thus the way or method to detect or show difficulties between one student and another is different. This is where teachers are required to have more creativity so that learning objectives can run well. Thoroughness in detecting student learning difficulties must also be elaborated with each student's parents. There are several indicators that indicate learning difficulties that should be of concern to teachers in the detection step, including: students show inappropriate (social) attitudes. The student's academic (academic) achievement is low. Difficulty making new understandings (metacognition). Students are slow in processing things (processing speed). Students find, hear, and see (perception). Students are less attentive and less focused in learning (attention). There are too many useless activities that students do so it is difficult to memorize.

### *3.4. Application of Total Quality Management in Education (TQME)*

According to Junaidi, et al. [18] the factors that cause students to experience learning difficulties are internal factors and external factors. Internal factors that influence it are lack of attention in learning (concentration), lack of student participation and response when participating in teaching and learning activities (reaction), slow student understanding of the material (understanding), and incomplete test scores (repetition). While the external factors that influence it are the influence of friends in society (social environment).

The next step is quality assurance. In this process, there is one important activity, namely evaluation. In other words, quality assurance must involve an evaluation process. This evaluation helps teachers to see the extent to which the material they deliver is well received by students. In this context, a teacher must create innovations to update the learning system that he will apply in the classroom, starting from the material, methods, media, learning resources, environment and assessment system. In designing learning evaluations, educators must also pay attention to the basic principles of evaluation and the requirements that must be considered. The implementation of learning in the classroom has consequences for a teacher to improve his role and competence, because a competent teacher will be better able to manage the class and carry out evaluations for students both individually and in class.

Evaluation is an effort to obtain information about student learning gains as a whole, both knowledge, concepts, attitudes, values, and process skills [19]. This can be used by the teacher as feedback or an indispensable decision in determining teaching and learning strategies. For this reason, teachers need to conduct an assessment, both of the process and the results of student learning.

In addition, there are further steps that are quite significant, namely prevention. Preventive action is often taken because in reality there are many deviations in the learning process. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this preventive measure is very important because it concerns the mental health or safety of students who are still quite vulnerable. The creative process, although important, must consider the safety of students' lives which is realized from the implementation regulations in health procedures. This is where teachers' innovative thinking is needed, namely being and idealism (achievement of learning objectives and real conditions of public health).

Excellence as a result of the teacher's creative process must, in turn, be continuous. This step is a continuous improvement step: continuous improvement efforts. Continuous improvement efforts are made by looking at the development of each aspect and it is assumed that these efforts are made if there are no serious problems in the previous steps. Continuous improvement also presupposes new innovation or creativity. However, this new creativity should not cause counter-productivity in the learning process that has been carried out so far. Therefore, a more in-depth research is needed that involves the participation of all parties, including parents. But what is no less important is that teachers need 'improvement' which is closely related to change, teachers must have the drive to make changes for the better and more productive in the learning process.

The estuary of TQME is Total Quality Management, which is a quality-oriented management system that is carried out as a whole. What is meant by "comprehensive" here is that all elements, from inspection; quality control; detection; quality insurance; prevention and continuous improvement, work together, move synergistically, to achieve total quality. In the context of learning to read in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, the quality obtained by students occurs from the synergy of the actions of parents, teachers, and principals. In other words, TQME in student reading learning is more ideological.

### 3.5. Humanistic Approaches and Moral Responsibilities

The steps or procedures described above have been carried out by the three elementary schools in Yogyakarta. Teachers are active, creative and innovative; principals also make new breakthroughs. Although the facilities are mostly minimal, parents also take part in accompanying their children during learning. Teachers have also explored the use of online learning media. But far more important is the initiative of teachers who come to students' homes to specifically provide reading activities. This was expressed by RB, the Head of SDN Suryodiningratan 1 as follows.

*"We come to students' homes, of course, with attention to health procedures. What we do is sit together, discuss and dialogue about the learning process with parents and students themselves. If there are difficulties, we usually find solutions together. If there are shortcomings we support each other, complement each other. This situation must be accepted and realized, even though many teachers feel awkward."* (RB, the participant)

Therefore, the most important thing is not technical matters that are usually related to learning facilities, including media or internet quotas or technical matters, but the attitude of teachers who approach their students humanely. In this human approach, the teacher does not act as a 'boss' or 'above' the students, but as a friend. With this 'equality' students feel closer and more comfortable so that they can absorb the reading subject matter well.

Thus, creativity becomes the 'key word' when the reading learning situation in the early grades experiences shocks, especially coupled with the rapid development of social media. Teacher creativity along with the development of social media technology will also develop according to the respective challenges that are present due to the ferocity of Covid-19. Studies show that teacher creativity in one school can be different from teacher creativity in another place, depending on the social context of the school. Creativity is also created from the passion of each teacher. In the context of social media,



creativity is assumed to occur as long as teachers can operationally master the various applications contained in social media itself, and this also requires teachers' good intentions. Thus, passion, creativity and goodwill are three inseparable aspects of the distance learning system, especially the implementation of distance learning for reading subjects in the early grades.

#### 4. Conclusion

The reality on the ground suggests that after all, social media is ultimately just a tool; only a tool used to assist learning. The most important aspect is the desire to interact with students by teachers so that learning materials can be captured, understood and applied by students. This kind of social relationship is very important because it creates a human relationship between teachers and students. Facts on the ground show that Covid-19 can only be fought with the spirit of humanity (spiritualism of mankind) itself. Humans with their intellect can ultimately defeat various challenges, obstacles, and natural enemies through their humanity, and this power must be believed as a gift from the Lord of the Universe itself. "Spirituality" in this context becomes an important word, because without spirituality humans will never be able to face all obstacles, including disease.

#### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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