

# Navigating the Disrupted Field: Researching Education in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Research during the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated various challenges for data collection and fieldwork. In Indonesia, the pandemic has become a magnifier of long-prevalent inequalities, especially in the education sector. This paper reflects upon the authors' online and offline field research journeys. We illustrate our strategies of navigating both online and offline methods in a disrupted field. We demonstrate how we overcame dilemmas and carefully assessed the conditions and particularities of our interlocutors to determine our online or offline data collection approach and tools. Taking into account the various emotional, social and economic difficulties faced by our participants, we seek to highlight the importance of constant reflection and multi-layered ethical considerations when researching with vulnerable participants, particularly in a disrupted field setting marked by intersecting hazards.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, fieldwork, education sector, research ethics, online and offline, COVID-19 pandemic

As researchers who started their dissertation projects around the same time as the global pandemic of COVID-19, we found ourselves grappling with uncertainty and anxiety. Our research plans were suddenly in flux, and we had to rethink not only our timelines but also our data collection methods. While online data collection is not entirely new, the pandemic's push for rapid digitisation made it a more central tool. However, we quickly realised that some critical elements of our methodology still relied heavily on our physical presence

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in the field – something we could not easily replace. This forced us to adapt, innovate and rethink how we could keep our research on track amid unprecedented challenges.

In this paper, we discuss our research journey in the disrupted field of Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic (simply “pandemic” from now on) and how we navigated the challenges that emerged. Researching the topic of politics and education during a pandemic posed different challenges in various degrees. Mutmainna Syam’s project investigates the competition of meaning-making of democracy and democratic values in the Indonesian education sector, focusing on the case of the city of Makassar in Central Indonesia. She conducted her field research in public and private schools as well as in Islamic boarding schools, in Makassar in early 2021 and early 2022, each time for around six months. Dissa Paputungan-Engelhardt’s research centres on religious intolerance and conservatism in Indonesian public high schools. Her first phase of fieldwork took place from March to June 2022, primarily in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. She conducted the second phase between May and July 2023 in Jakarta, Serang, Bandung and Yogyakarta.

Because many actors play a role in the education sector, it is essential to obtain and maintain direct contact with actors at national and local levels as well as to conduct direct observation in schools, i.e., in physical presence / co-location. Most importantly, having direct conversations allows us to grasp local influences that affect an interlocutor’s answers. Due to the pandemic, we encountered different situations in the field marked by disruption, among them differing abilities of research participants to afford online methods, changes in the field due to the shift of activities online or interactions that incorporated both online and offline communications and engagement. Moreover, the new normal in the education sector required us to continuously switch between online and offline interactions as schools followed instructions from the Ministry of Education to alternate regularly between online and offline formats in late 2021 and in 2022. These circumstances led to some dilemmas: What are the inequalities we have to engage with? What are the gaps between us as researchers in European universities and the participants in Indonesia? How should we navigate the data collection process when the pandemic hits the population hard?

This paper highlights the importance of recognising local particularities and acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to data collection in disrupted field settings. It is essential to consider existing social inequalities and to engage deeply with the emotional, personal and social circumstances of participants. This calls for non-extractive, meaningful engagement, particularly when using online methods. Furthermore, our empirical findings show that online and offline methods are complementary and coexist in ways that enhance one another, as our research journey experiences demonstrate.

As the largest Muslim electoral democracy in the world, Indonesia's promising democratisation has faced various problems since 1998, such as the rise of intolerant acts towards religious minorities (van Bruinessen 2011, Hamayotsu 2013, Soedirgo 2018), limitations of civil liberties (Mujani / Liddle 2021), vote-buying (Aspinall / Berenschot 2019), oligarchy (Hadiz / Robison 2013, Winters 2013) and the rise of Islamic majoritarianism (Schäfer 2019, Peterson / Schäfer 2021). In this democratisation process, the education sector is one of the main engines that promotes democratic values in Indonesia (Künkler / Lerner 2016, tho Seeth 2021). For both our research projects located within this sector, we employed multiple qualitative research methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, observations and analyses of textbooks, archives, syllabi and regulations/laws/policies, along with discourse analysis. Our interlocutors and participants were policymakers, religious elites, members of civil society organisations, teachers, students of senior high schools (aged 16 to 19 years) and parents.

To identify the problems and the feasibility of online methods at the beginning of the pandemic, we carried out pilot studies at the end of 2020, using an online format, before we started the first phase of fieldwork. During the pilot study we approached and talked to activists and members of Islamic organisations in Indonesia via Zoom and WhatsApp chat. In doing this, we faced several challenges, including ethical issues related to digital data collection, as well as strategy and infrastructural problems such as internet connectivity issues and different time zones. Accordingly, we assessed our research questions and, more importantly, evaluated key issues to identify areas for improvement. The pilot study was an essential step to familiarise ourselves with and evaluate our online interview methods, as well as to understand our interlocutors' capacities.

COVID-based restrictions on travel posed challenges for researchers, since there was a gap in the responses to the pandemic in the global North and South. At the same time, unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines between countries affected government policies (Tarigan / Milko 2021). As citizens of Indonesia, we had the advantage of being able to visit our home country while complying with strict travel regulations. From the beginning to the middle of 2022, we were able to conduct our fieldwork in different cities (Jakarta, Makassar and Yogyakarta) while simultaneously paying attention to pandemic regulations during a "new normal era" – i.e., with people living alongside the coronavirus while adjusting to working from home, learning or attending school from home, and complying with face mask regulations in public spaces. We understood that direct encounters with our interlocutors might still expose us to COVID-19 infection. Therefore, we always followed a hygiene protocol for field research: self-testing before interviews or visits, wearing face masks during talks and keeping our physical distance during direct interaction.

Since online data collection is nothing new in scholarly work (Coleman 2010, Hine 2014, Pink et al. 2015), there is a whole body of literature that helped us navigate our data collection. Hine (2020) proposed virtual ethnography as a less traditionalist approach to ethnography and viewed the internet as a site of interaction. Mann and Stewart (2000) developed an ethical framework for online qualitative research that includes detailed informed consent, confidentiality, “netiquette” and, most importantly, the argument that ethics in the online environment is largely in the hands of researchers as they build awareness and sensitivity in the setting. We also benefitted from protocol guides for pandemic research.<sup>1</sup> Jamieson (2013) elaborated on practising “thick” intimacy as part of co-presence despite the limited shared space and gestures in online-mediated communication. Co-presence would call for a repertoire of intimacy, sustaining long-term relationships and “being there”: transcending space and immersing ourselves in the site. However, it is important to recognise that online-based data collection and communication can create feelings of anxiety and discomfort, as it often fosters a sense of surveillance and control (Ling / Yttri 2006). This dynamic can exacerbate existing inequalities, power relations and hierarchies (van Dijk 2005, van Deursen / van Dijk 2011, van Deursen / Helsper 2018). Additionally, concerns regarding privacy and state surveillance may further complicate the situation (Pant / Lal 2020).

The literature on online data collection, however, suffers from a lack of empirical evidence from the Global South, with its complex issues of social inequality (Miller / Horst 2018, Ragnedda / Gladkova 2020, Reñosa et al. 2021). Digital inequalities extend far beyond infrastructure and are deeply intertwined with factors such as literacy and education. While digital inequality is also present in the Global North, it is significantly shaped by higher levels of education, setting the situation apart from the Global South. In the Global North, 80 per cent of people have internet access, compared to just 35 per cent in the Global South. In Europe, only 2.4 per cent of the population cannot afford an internet connection, while in Asia, only 49 per cent of the population uses mobile internet (Broom 2023). In the Global South, some more fundamental challenges such as digital literacy and awareness of online scams, data breaches, hacking and other cyber threats remain critically low. These issues are further exacerbated by limited government efforts to address them. In Indonesia, for instance, policies in the field of Information and Technology Law (ITE) tend to prioritise censorship and access restrictions over digital inclusion and security. This focus on online surveillance and control often reinforces illiberal democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes, rather than promoting a more inclusive and secure digital environment. The pandemic of COVID-19 further exacerbated this “digital divide” (Lai / Widmar 2021).

1 See “Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers”, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2025).

The burgeoning literature during the pandemic focused on various aspects of conducting research, such as addressing ethical implications of fieldwork and data collection, and strategies for them (Batool et al. 2022, Fleschenberg / Castillo 2022, O'Sullivan et al. 2022, Konken / Howlett 2023), or the practicality of using online tools to replace offline methods (Newman et al. 2021, Bowland et al. 2022, Howlett 2022). Moreover, a group of anthropologists proposed patchwork ethnography as a flexible research approach that adapts to researchers' constraints by piecing together fieldwork in shorter, intermittent visits rather than long, continuous stays, allowing for a more accessible and sustainable way to conduct ethnographic research (Günel / Watanabe 2024).

In response to the challenges highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the academic field of political science has heeded calls to re-examine institutional ethics review systems (Barroga / Matanguihan 2020) and to explore "ethics for practice" frameworks that go beyond traditional Institutional Review Board reviews (Jacobs et al. 2021, Konken / Howlett 2023). While anthropologists have long engaged with such ethical debates, particularly concerning the logistical and ethical complexities of fieldwork, discussions about ethics in the discipline of political science "more broadly have been nominal" and have lacked sufficient ethical reflection and responsibility (Konken / Howlett 2023: 851). With the rise of online data collection and the use of positivist research models during a pandemic and disrupted fieldwork, political scientists can benefit from discussions in other disciplines, particularly anthropology, on conducting research and navigating research ethics.

Our work is situated within the body of literature on navigating strategies in disrupted fields (Batool et al. 2022, Konken / Howlett 2023), responding in particular to calls for political science research to be ethically sensitive in such disrupted field settings. Our two empirical studies show how conducting only online fieldwork in the education sector is not entirely effective, especially during periods of heightened vulnerability and increased inequality in disrupted environments. The fluidity between online and offline contexts is increasingly relevant in the digital age. Coleman (2010) criticises the existing literature on online and offline data collection that tends to treat these methods as sharply divided and with little interaction between them. Accordingly, our research approach might also be affected by this binary. We aim to add to Coleman's argument by emphasising that online and offline data collection should not be viewed as separate tools in separate contexts. Similar to patchwork ethnography that combines several methods as an alternative to conventional ethnography, our fieldwork experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that combining online and offline methods not only enriches research methodologies but also addresses important ethical concerns.

Following the call of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) to see the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as post-pandemic times, as a venue to question the geopolitics

of knowledge and to introduce a “decolonial turn”, we explore ways to decentre dominant paradigms. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) urged researchers to consider the 10 Ds in the decolonial turn in the (post)COVID-19 world: deimperialisation, de-Westernisation, depatriachisation, deracialisation, debourgeoisement, decorporatisation, democratisation, deborderisation, decanonisation and desecularisation. Thus, the decolonial turn does not engage with just one dimension of political and economic life; it requires a broader transformation that addresses issues ranging from sexuality to spirituality and from linguistic to racial hierarchies (Grosfoguel 2007). In this context, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) cautions against the pervasive capitalist-extractive logic that replicates modern life solutions rooted in Eurocentrism. Guided by this perspective, we applied his critique during our fieldwork by first questioning the practicality of online methods, critically evaluating the tools used for online methods and reflecting on the nature of human relationships during the pandemic.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on our field observations, teachers and students faced heightened vulnerabilities due to the sudden shift to online education that exacerbated existing inequities. Many struggled with limited access to devices and reliable internet, especially in rural and low-income areas. Teachers had to adapt to new technologies and redesign curricula with little institutional support, while students, particularly those from marginalised communities, experienced significant learning loss. Economic strain added to the burden, with families struggling to afford devices and internet access amidst widespread job losses and economic crisis. Women bore a disproportionate burden, with female teachers managing teaching alongside increased domestic responsibilities, and female students often facing pressures to help in the household during online school hours. Social isolation and mental health challenges further compounded the difficulties, making the education sector one of those most affected by the crisis. This paper will explore these issues in greater detail in the following sections.

Our experiences in the field highlighted vulnerabilities that extend beyond the ontological aspect. As Han (2018) points out, vulnerability is influenced by multiple dimensions, including social and political structures that unevenly distribute precarity, as well as cultural and social contexts. The pandemic itself revealed and exacerbated existing inequalities, amplifying vulnerabilities. This necessitated a more careful approach when engaging with the field. Thajib (2022) further emphasises the importance of affective ethnography in such conditions. Researchers must engage their interlocutors with empathy and shared responsibility, staying attuned to the emotions and experiences of participants while navigating sensitive relationships.

This paper presents reflections from our field notes, from our encounters with three sets of challenges while we incorporated online and offline methods during our fieldwork in Indonesia. The first challenge was to understand the

social conditions at the grassroots level, especially in the education sector. We re-evaluated our understanding about how the COVID 19 pandemic regenerated and accelerated inequalities and vulnerabilities of social groups. We demonstrate this phenomenon based on our findings and our observations in the first part of this paper. In the second section, we highlight our reflexivity and positionality across different contexts as a call for constant reflection and continued ethical research praxis. In the third section, we carefully consider the capacity and capability of our interlocutors and strategise our approach accordingly by incorporating both online and offline methods. By focusing on the emotions and difficulties faced by our participants during the pandemic, the third part of this paper illustrates the conditions of our interlocutors, which shaped and determined our subsequent online or offline approach.

## **The state of Indonesia's education sector: Multi-layered inequalities**

When Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoECRT) encouraged distance learning to curb the COVID-19 outbreak, many civil society organisations and media reported obstacles in schools, in both rural and urban areas. Nadiem Makarim, then minister of education, expressed surprise that many areas in Indonesia did not have stable internet connections or electricity. His critics have used his statement to accuse him of lacking experience with the education landscape in Indonesia (Rezkisari 2020), particularly because of the fact that the huge disparities and infrastructure problems have always been a serious topic of discussion at the government level (Muttaqin 2018, Harahap et al. 2020). The Indonesian education sector suffers from a complex accumulation of inequalities, such as low-quality teaching, lack of education funds and limited access to resources for both the urban poor and those living in rural areas. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2020) ranked Indonesia among the lowest in terms of student performance, placing it 72nd out of 77 participating countries. The 2020 Service Delivery Indicator survey by the World Bank revealed that Indonesian students were, on average, 1.5 years behind in learning compared to their international counterparts (World Bank 2020). With its enforced online learning policy, the COVID-19 pandemic thus unfolded upon existing, multi-layered inequalities in the education sector.

When we first arrived in Indonesia for our fieldwork, we observed that the pandemic had accelerated inequalities in the education realm. We observed at least two main inequality problems that became more visible with the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. First, the economic disparity between middle-lower income

and upper-income pupils in Indonesia made online learning a significant challenge. The capital city Jakarta illustrates this disparity best; fancy apartments, shopping malls and skyscrapers are surrounded by *kampung* (crowded and low-income urban neighbourhoods) (Rukmana / Ramadhani 2021). While middle-class and wealthy families can easily provide better facilities for their children, many poor households struggle to afford smartphones and fast internet. In our conversations with parents, they described how they felt pressured to buy smartphones or laptops with internet packages to enable their children to participate in distance learning. For many people in Indonesia, smartphones and stable internet connections remains a luxury out of their reach (World Bank 2021), yet households needed either to have a wireless access at home or to buy internet data packages for their children's smartphones to enable them to join online classes. Moreover, internet services in Indonesia are among the most expensive in Southeast Asia and provide some of the slowest speeds in the region (Khidhir 2019, Wibisana et al. 2022). Consequently, specific criminal acts increased during the pandemic with media reports of parents stealing smartphones, laptops or other valuable devices to be able to provide these gadgets for their children's education (Alifia 2022).

The second problem encountered was the quality gap between schools, which marred the transition to the new normal.<sup>2</sup> Excellent facilities could only be found in a few schools, mostly in big cities (Aprilisa / Kartowagiran 2022, Tatang et al. 2022) while most public schools have not changed much in the past decades: learning equipment, sanitation facilities, teaching quality and school buildings remain in poor condition. Under such circumstances, many schools do not have proper resources and could not effectively conduct a transition to online or hybrid classes (Pinandita 2020). This returns us to the first problem – the reliance solely upon families to provide the necessary online learning equipment.

Beyond the lack of infrastructure and the inequality in the Indonesian education system, during our fieldwork we found that students from middle- and lower-class families had to cope with the needs of their households during online school hours. In the nuclear family, parents were overburdened with the sudden shift that brought all work and study to the home. Parents, especially women, bore a heavy burden in managing the needs of family members – a situation that also occurred in other countries (Chauhan 2021, Dinella et al. 2023). Children often had to participate in household chores during school hours, thus neglecting their online classes. Due to online schooling, some students even dropped out of school and no longer wanted to return. As a result of the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, some students decided to take on paid jobs,

<sup>2</sup> The new normal in the education sector required, for instance, a constant monitoring of school operations and updates. In 2022, schools implemented offline learning according to guidelines from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. These guidelines were determined by the number of COVID-19 cases and vaccination rates among students.

such as construction work, package and food delivery or app-based drivers. When schools returned to in-person instruction, some of the students decided to continue in these jobs. Most of these students mentioned financial problems encountered since the pandemic and a lack of motivation to return to school.

As elsewhere, the process of the new normal – the adapted routine for pandemic living in Indonesia – was not easy. The Ministry of Education responded to the foreseen impact on education during the pandemic with various strategies ranging from implementing an emergency curriculum to cooperating with the private sector to make online learning less of a burden, especially for those in rural areas. However, these efforts still required complicated procedures of administration and were at the same time only helpful for some target groups. Parents and teachers did find some innovative ways to cope with this situation. For example, some teachers creatively adapted their methods by using local radio stations in areas with limited internet access. They instructed students to listen to the radio broadcasts at designated times, mimicking a classroom environment (Septina 2020).

To conclude, the government's responses were insufficient due to the lack of long-term and sustainable strategies to tackle the problems mentioned. Furthermore, existing inequalities have now been coupled with many new adjustments from the government, such as the preparation for the new curriculum, *Merdeka Belajar*.<sup>3</sup> The more concerning aspect that emerges from the situations described above is the impact upon students, teachers and parents, since they have carried the double burden of adapting to the new normal and preparing for the change of curriculum. Against this backdrop, it was essential to understand the changes that occurred within the Indonesian education sector during the pandemic in order to adjust our own pandemic-appropriate methodological approach (Hammersley 2006). We observed that the COVID-19 pandemic also further deepened inequality within the education sector. These conditions affected the way we interacted with our interlocutors in terms of developing ethical considerations and appropriate research intervention.

<sup>3</sup> As part of the learning recovery effort, the Merdeka Curriculum (which was previously referred to as the prototype curriculum) was developed as a curriculum framework that is more flexible while also focusing on essential material and developing the character and competence of students. For more see Sihombing et. al 2021.

## **Navigating the field: Constant reflections and ethical considerations**

The actual situation in the field extended beyond disruptions related to health and social issues. In addition to the pandemic, multiple crises occurred while one of us was conducting field work in Makassar city. In January 2021, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake in a neighbouring province claimed hundreds of lives. In March 2021, a suicide bombing occurred at the Makassar Cathedral. In April 2022, student organisations, among others, protested in Jakarta against government plans to amend the Constitution and to postpone the 2024 elections. In mid-2022, there was a scarcity of basic housing needs across Indonesia. All these crisis events heightened the complexities of conducting research in such an environment even beyond the challenges of the pandemic setting. These multifaceted context conditions, shaped by diverse and intersecting hazards, required us as researchers to navigate carefully, to be sensitive and to adapt continuously – whether offline or online.

Our approach to online fieldwork was not limited only to WhatsApp correspondence and online interviews via Zoom. To continue building and expanding our relationships with interlocutors, we used Zoom or Google Meet to conduct online focus group discussions, observed online learning, attended online teacher trainings and participated in online events and meetings of religious organisations.

The first challenge of online data collection is immersion. Hine (2014) highlights immersion as a benchmark for the researcher: immersion requires a rich and meaningful engagement beyond verbal communication, involving an understanding of and participation in the way of life of the people being studied. Immersion is also a way to feel empathy by subjecting oneself to the participant's circumstances (Goffman 1989). Especially at the beginning, the use of online communication tools left relationships feeling awkward: the interlocutors often answered our questions only briefly and we could not explore their experiences further. Before every interview, we always gave or sent our interlocutors a consent form along with a short explanation of our research. When meeting, many interlocutors nonetheless often asked us first about our research topic and how we wanted to proceed with the interview. Most of the time, we assured them that it should be more like an informal conversation or sharing their point of view with us. At times, the interlocutors specifically requested some initial questions in advance and prepared by writing down possible answers, which they would then read during the discussions. Thus, we often could not determine their circumstances beyond what they told us online and it was quite challenging for us to assess the situations behind the scenes. Consequently, we felt that we were not fully immersed in the field because there was only limited space and interaction during the screen time.

The second challenge during our online data collection was how to build trust. With the feeling of disconnection with interlocutors and with interview questions often concerning sensitive topics, building trust was an important step for both online and offline approaches. However, offline communication offers a more fluid interaction. When we moved from online to offline, we observed that people were more welcoming in real life. Often, with our interlocutors, we drank coffee together while having a natural conversation about our research questions and personal experiences. With closer interaction and more meaningful co-presence we were able to build trust more intimately and informally. With the online approach, our strategy for building trust with the interlocutors was always to openly communicate our intentions to them. We explained our research, obtained informed consent and tried to create a meaningful interaction.

For offline data collection, we also conducted interviews, focus group discussions and observations in schools. In addition, we engaged with various religious organisations by attending their events, such as celebrations of their important days, conferences and seminars. The offline approach provided us with wider socio-cultural contexts and helped us understand the nuances in the field by sharing experiences in more direct, interactive ways with our interlocutors. When we went to the field physically, it did not necessarily mean that we moved completely offline. Online meetings have now become mainstream practice for high-ranking policymakers in Jakarta. Civil servants in ministerial offices have no problem with budgets for technology. Despite the hygiene precautions that we would take in face-to-face interactions, some interlocutors still preferred online interviews to save time. Similar situations also applied to activists and members of Islamic organisations familiar with online tools. The more advanced circumstances of government staff were in contrast to our school visits and interviews with parents, teachers and students. It took some time for many teachers and parents to adapt to online learning practices, especially given their limited resources. Although we realised that observations in the schools exposed our participants and ourselves to the risk of infection, direct interactions were the preferred option for them.<sup>4</sup>

Navigating our fieldwork during the pandemic challenged us to find the best approach without neglecting the limited infrastructure and online fatigue that our participants faced. Knowing this situation and the socio-cultural context at the grassroots level, we did not want to pursue online data collection that exploited our participants. While the growing body of literature on conducting research during the pandemic urged researchers to shift to online data collection (Barroga / Matanguihan 2020, Boland et al. 2022, Torrentina 2020), we criti-

<sup>4</sup> Some of our participants in schools are still in their teenage age (16–18 years old). In these cases, we got permission from the teachers for conducting interviews. Our interactions with students were mostly when we participated in online and offline class activities. We took notes of their responses and expressions and photos of their collective activities – all after previously obtaining consent from the teachers.

cally reconsidered the fieldwork context and sought to decenter our thinking by rejecting a singular solution. In this process, we asked ourselves about the existing inequality between researchers and participants, the capacities of the community for online engagement, and the social, health and economic instability during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. We thus emphasise that there is no universal, one-size-fits-all method for data collection in disrupted fields. First, it is essential to understand the local context and assess various factors, including participants' biographies, gender considerations, age, educational background, demographics, social structures, interview timing, familiarity with online tools, existing inequalities and identification of marginalised groups. Second, we must strive to decolonise our practices, fostering non-extractive and meaningful engagement (Nhemachena et al. 2016, Manning 2018). Finally, we acknowledge the inherent limitations of qualitative methods when applied in disrupted contexts, as further illustrated below.

The first aspect of navigating our fieldwork during the pandemic was to understand the specific form of engagement with our interlocutors, to understand the biography of our participants, including their age, educational background, profession, demography and gender. The assessment would help us to determine in which cases we should conduct online or offline data collection. We decided to engage with young-to-middle-aged participants in our online data collection and to target participants familiar with digital tools, based on their educational background and profession. We also considered the demography of the participants – urban or rural area, centre or periphery – and assessed whether the area had sufficient internet coverage given Indonesia's disparity and uneven infrastructural development, which has led to huge social segregation in terms of telecommunication network access.<sup>5</sup>

Interview timing was another essential consideration and included concerns of different time zones and, most importantly, of the “internet rush hour” in the given local time zone. We noticed that some specific times with high internet traffic would make the connection slower, particularly in the afternoon from 4 pm until 8 pm. We often experienced severe lag and internet interruption during these hours in Zoom interviews, which led to distorted audio and subsequently risked misinformation. Most importantly, interruptions created uneasy interactions and frustration between researchers and interlocutors. As a result, our interactions, as well as the answers provided, were cut short. In addition, we questioned the platform used. Though recommended by some scholars (Archibald et al. 2019), Zoom might have been convenient for us as researchers but not for our participants, as it requires significant quantities of processor memory

<sup>5</sup> In some of our online interviews, we experienced connection issues with our interlocutors. At times, we could barely understand what they were saying throughout the conversation. For instance, in one of our earlier online meetings, an interlocutor was travelling to a rural area in East Java and struggled to find a spot with a stronger signal. This resulted in frequent audio lags during the conversation.

and as some of our participants felt overwhelmed using it due to its novelty or limited time frame (unless paying for a premium package). They found other communication applications, such as WhatsApp, more convenient.

During our fieldwork, one of us observed students attending an online class via Zoom on their mobile phones. Many students either do not have personal laptops or share one with family members. Most schools used Zoom for online classes. In some cases, teachers also used WhatsApp groups to coordinate the class. For quite a number of students, Zoom required too much of their mobile phones' limited memory. Moreover, during our observation, all students had their cameras turned off while the teacher delivered a 15-minute monologue. When one of the authors asked why students had turned off their cameras, they explained that disabling them helped reduce lag in the internet connection. The students noted that teachers typically send long voice messages through the WhatsApp group and instruct them to complete homework assignments.

Under these circumstances, we repeatedly asked ourselves whether online data collection – through internet ethnography, continuous Zoom observations, or interviews – was a real alternative. Or were we simply forcing the online method due to pandemic-related methodological discussions rooted in global North knowledge production, without fully understanding the local context and its specificities. We had to face the fact that online activities would be inconvenient for our participants, especially teachers and students. In addition, online classes also did not run effectively. Thus, we decided to avoid an intensive online class observation and online interviews with students and teachers, and to conduct only limited observations in online classroom settings and participate in online teacher training conducted by the Ministry of Education. In our opinion, researchers conducting observations of online classes in Indonesia or interviewing students and teachers online are likely to influence the natural dynamics of the classroom. Their presence and visibility might create artificial interactions and pressure teachers to present an idealised version of their teaching practices.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with minimal infrastructure and resources, left both teachers and students in highly vulnerable positions. This further complicated the situation, as it added significant stress to those already struggling to adapt to the challenges of online education.

Online methods might potentially make some participants feel more relaxed, and might be considered safe spaces to express ideas in a more private environment, especially on sensitive issues. In our cases, however, we observed that some participants perceived Zoom as a formal platform, a formal space. As a

6 In mid-2021, one of the authors observed an online school session in Makassar city when the teacher asked all students to turn on their cameras for one minute to take a photo of the online class for a report to the local Ministry of Education and to create a positive impression during evaluations of the school's online learning implementation.

result, they tended to be more mindful of their gestures, attire and use of formal language while interacting on camera. To perceive Zoom as a formal space might result from the fact that during the pandemic it served as a medium for formal meetings and activities in most of everyday life. For instance, during a Zoom interview in 2021 with a high-ranking member of a religious organisation from Makassar, the participant was very distracted by the small red recording icon on the screen. This caused him to become very self-conscious, which affected the flow of the conversation. He asked whether he could smoke while we were talking because all body movements and gestures were being recorded, and he felt uncomfortable being recorded while smoking. Before we began the recording, we already had asked about his consent and agreement to the recording. To address his concern, we assuring him that we would delete the video version of the recording and would save only the audio version. When conducting an offline interview with the same interlocutor, the interaction was more fluid and more informal without much worry about his actions and gestures, and we had a fruitful conversation.

In our reflection, the act of turning on the camera subconsciously prompted some participants to transition from their informal environment to a formal or artificially formal space confined within the boundaries of the screen. This dynamic ultimately created a gap between participants and researchers, fostering a more formal mode of communication, particularly since the relationships began entirely online. Although we acknowledge that formality and informality coexist, and are intertwined and inseparable (Koster / Smart 2019), we initiated the conversation with the formal arrangement, following formal bureaucratic procedures and the fact that some aspects of data collection need the formality to some degree. On the other hand, we also agree with other scholars (Röcker 2012, Swain / Spire 2020, Swain / King 2022) who argue that informal conversations minimise asymmetrical relationships, limit the effect of power structures and have the potential to produce more realistic and naturalistic data as well as create more engaging and in-depth conversation. The fluidity of our co-presence may evolve over time and through interactions, as formal and informal conversations continually shift during the process of building a meaningful relationship.

While the online or virtual communication was initially optimistic with the spirit of democratising communication networks (Kollock / Smith 1996) and producing an open and egalitarian network (Spender 1995), the power relations did not eventually diminish and instead created different forms of segregation and alienation. Power issues that are manifested in online life, such as infrastructural inequalities, eventually create a gap between those with different levels of access and digital literacy. A major attempt to overcome this gap is collaborative research projects between researchers and participants, for instance the Reinventada project that provides skill upgrades for technology, infrastruc-

ture and knowledge to marginal communities to enable their collaboration in research.<sup>7</sup> During our fieldwork we gave workshops and trainings on education and research methods, provided COVID-19 kits for interlocutors and mobile credit to students we interviewed. In the online data collection, we had limited capacity and only promised further collaborations when we could meet directly, which allowed us to keep close contact and connection with our online interlocutors as well as to build sustainable interactions.

Another consideration of ours was to be particularly sensitive to gender dimensions and dynamics during fieldwork. During the pandemic, women were the most exploited group, considered as major frontliners in many sectors. This became even more important since most of the teachers we interviewed were women who juggled multiple roles within a wider patriarchal societal setup. Several reports highlight the increased vulnerabilities of women during the pandemic, who, for example represented the highest numbers in terms of employment loss, gender-based violence, overwork and dropping out of school (Flor et al. 2022) or comparatively multiplied negative effects when working as scientists (Michalekko et al. 2022). This calls for personal, epistemological and gender reflexivity in our field. Understanding the existing gendered power relations has provided us with a better approach to our data collection.

As women and natives of the community, we as researchers also faced several challenges. Both online and offline interactions were affected by patriarchal relationships and by our fluid positions as simultaneous insiders and outsiders. We are native to the place of our research, we speak the local language and share the same cultural practices and norms with our participants. At the same time, our participants kept referring to our educational background as researchers from a Western European university. We mostly portrayed ourselves as people with curiosity driven by our research work. In this fluid positionality, our participants saw us as part of the community, sharing similar familiarity with surroundings and kinship, but also as people with different views who are largely exposed to Western culture and academics. For some communities the West has a negative connotation. Abidin (2020) called this fluidity that of an “exotic inbetrueener”.

As women, we adapted and adjusted our outfits, the way we talked and our gestures when conducting face-to-face interviews. The fluidity of our positionality was predominantly evident as that of a curious outsider who wanted to learn more about the complex systematic problems in the Indonesian education sector. We realised that women studying abroad in Western countries are often perceived with a negative connotation as “liberal women” – in the Indonesian case, liberalism and immorality are synonymous (Bourchier / Jusuf 2023, Schäfer 2016). We often faced the situation where instead of interviewing, we needed

7 For more on the participatory pandemic research project Reinventada, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-A10SCzo4o> or <https://youtu.be/8QgQB9KERV4> (accessed 10 December 2024).

to hear lengthy preaching, mostly from men, about how women should behave and position themselves. Interestingly, in contrast to offline interviews, in which we had to be more concerned about our appearance, in online interviews we were more relaxed and had little concern about our looks. In offline interview, interlocutors even questioned one of the authors about why she does not wear a hijab – a topic that did not come up in online conversations. Most often, we needed to make sure our outfits were appropriate and that we followed the various dress standards of our interlocutors when interacting offline. In many cases, digital communication via WhatsApp correspondence and digital interviews via Zoom benefitted us by lifting the barrier of religiously inspired gender segregation (Mudliar / Rangaswamy 2015). Some interlocutors who would have refused to meet for face-to-face interviews due to gender differences were open to online communication. Nevertheless, in both online and offline contexts, we encountered patriarchal and patronising attitudes that subjugated women to various degrees. For example, in one of our online focus group discussions, we encountered some sexist comments such as when one participant remarked that dealing with women can be quite complicated.

While navigating online methods, we drew insights from various reflections, emphasising the need to decolonise our approach and way of thinking by questioning mainstream knowledge and prioritising locality, specific engagement and gender-sensitive awareness. We further aimed to understand field conditions and strived for non-extractive relationships and meaningful engagement. In the next section, we will explore the fluidity between online and offline data collection.

## Co-existence of online and offline

As mentioned above, we aimed to assess the situation on the ground in the Indonesian education sector and pandemic-specific impacts related to our research projects in order to be able to categorise our target groups based on their capabilities for online interviews. The first group of interlocutors included members of civil society organisations, policymakers, other stakeholders and religious elites, who had also moved their activities online. On the basis of this premise, we assumed that they possessed familiarity and proficiency with online tools. We approached this group mostly in the first round of our fieldwork. The second group were the more vulnerable and the most affected during the pandemic, namely teachers, parents and students. The huge disruption in schools in 2020 made us postpone our direct observation and interviews in schools and shift our focus to interviewing the second group. We later conducted face-to-face interviews with them and direct observations in our second round of fieldwork at the end of 2021 and 2022.

In the Indonesian education sector, teachers and students had the most difficult time during the pandemic. During our fieldwork period we encountered as the most significant form of social pandemic impacts the strong emotional responses from our participants, especially students and teachers, concerning the isolation from peers and the sudden shift to online schools. Emotions shared about everyday cultural phenomena are important because self-embodied expressions reflect major public issues. Understanding our participants' emotions was a way to create cultural communication and cultural intimacy. Rather than seeing emotions as an uninteresting and unimportant part of the observation, we elaborate this aspect and demonstrate why this is important during the disrupted field (Herzfeld 2009, Diphorn 2013, Pellatt 2003).

For example, teachers told us that students showed online fatigue; they were often less motivated to participate in online class activities, were not interested in doing the tasks, and many did not even show up to online classes. All the students we interviewed also shared their discomfort with having to attend school online. Public and Islamic boarding school students reported similar anxieties about online schooling, such as learning loss, motivation, depression and lack of supporting infrastructure. During a face-to-face focus group discussion held in March 2022 with nine students from a private Islamic school in Makassar, students reacted strongly when asked about their experiences with online schooling, responding with loud exclamations and deep sighs. They described online school as torture and claimed not to be learning anything at all. Students in need of socialising found themselves trapped and desperate; other students expressed being very stressed and unable to follow the sudden changes they faced. A typical example is the statement of a student from one Islamic private high school, interviewed as part of a focus group discussion with seven other students in March 2022 in Makassar:

Yes, online school is a culture shock! It feels like I did not study at all, especially because everyone has a different learning style. What we said [...] a visual learner, a motoric learner, a listener, understanding something when they hear or meet directly. For me, whatever it takes, offline! I do not want online anymore!

Across different cities in Indonesia, teachers interviewed – many of them women – expressed similar concerns about learning losses, and about being overwhelmed with the demand for household chores and teacher workload in a home-based work environment. At the same time, they had to expand their skills to master unfamiliar new technologies for online classes and needed to prepare an emergency curriculum and to create their own syllabus for online schooling.

When schools went back to an offline in-person format, most teachers encountered difficulties in adapting and faced various challenges. One challenge was student dropouts. Students hesitated to join classes and extracurricular activities due to health and motivation problems caused by disengagement and low motivation during the pandemic. Subsequently, teachers expressed their frustra-

tion with students' lack of discipline, concentration and motivation. An example of this is the frustration expressed by a school headmaster, interviewed during a visit to an Islamic Boarding School in Makassar city on 18 May 2022:

[...] there is about an 80% educational loss we suffer, especially when the students returned back again (physically to school) [...] We repeat everything again from the beginning. Not only about their knowledge, but also the character [...] and their [students' character] change is very dramatic. The way the student makes their uniform, their politeness, their interactions [...] what we achieved before the pandemic on the student's character, it's all reset down and we need to start all over again.

Indonesian Islamic boarding schools are known for their strong culture of discipline. Students are trained to sleep, wake and study strictly according to a set schedule. In addition, they are taught specific cultural and religious habits to practice within the school, such as proper etiquette, the way to address teachers and elders, and appropriate manners for eating and drinking. The headmaster's frustration is just one example of the enormous effect of the pandemic on various types of schools in Indonesia.

In the new normal era, public schools went back to offline formats with strict hygiene measures, lower attendance and reduced hours in closed rooms. For the most part, learning was still conducted in hybrid mode: teachers giving most assignments in the form of online documents that students could work on at home. Ever since the pandemic, students seemed to be inseparable from smartphones; thus, they were spending more time in cyberspace. Schools also allowed smartphones to support their learning activities. This condition raised parents' and teachers' concerns, because children often misused this freedom. One high school teacher, interviewed on 8 April 2022 in Jakarta, expressed her concerns about the distraction potential of smartphones in class:

[...] they [students] are sometimes more interested in social media, playing games online, or other things. We once had a problem when students sent links to pornography content to each other in one class. As their teacher, we feel like a failure with this event. Young people nowadays are really prone to such a thing because of the internet.

In addition, the internet's double-edged sword raises concerns about digital literacy beyond technical capabilities, such as the ability to access illegal and harmful content, communicate inappropriately and violate privacy and security measures (Bauer / Ahooei 2018). Based on our observations, teachers, who are at the front lines in addressing these issues, face difficulty due to low digital literacy awareness as well as limited hours and interactions.

While continuing to observe online schooling, we noted the many challenges associated with virtual interactions. As mentioned earlier, these issues prompted us to visit the schools in person. Meeting offline allowed us to reconnect in person and to address the lack of intimacy and infrastructural barriers faced in virtual spaces. This shift to face-to-face interaction helped bridge these gaps and allowed for more meaningful exchanges, overcoming the limitations of

online communication experienced in our research interactions. Having said that, our experiences furthermore indicate that online and offline approaches usually co-exist(ed), especially during the pandemic and social distancing regulations. Hence, online and offline methods cannot be understood in dichotomous terms, as both approaches are complementary as well as necessary in conducting research, for example in educational contexts like ours. When we employed online methods, we still needed the co-presence provided by offline methods. When we shifted to an offline approach, we still reconnected with some of the interlocutors and participated in certain activities online.

## Acknowledging the limitation of qualitative methods

Under pandemic circumstances, coupled with natural disasters as well as social, economic and political turmoil, qualitative fieldwork is arduous labour as well as beset by disruptions. Consequently, it is possible to fall into several traps when qualitative methods (offline and online) are applied, such as online lurking instead of observing, employing strategic simplification and disconnecting from established relationships (de Seta 2020) or becoming blinded by the professional illusion of doing online research strategically while neglecting grass-roots social unrest. We thus need to acknowledge certain limitations in ethnographic and other forms of qualitative data collection.

Adams, Burke and Whitmarsh's (2014) concept of "slow research" is highly relevant for disrupted fieldwork like ours. Slow research means "working with an ethic or set of values and strategies that valorise different things from the emergent norm" (Adam et al. 2014: 180). It calls upon deliberating the way we do our work, i.e., pausing for reflection and deliberating how to create knowledge for local context particularities.<sup>8</sup> Slow research does not mean to slow down the research process, but to increase deliberation and (self-)reflexivity. Similar lessons can be taken from peace and conflict studies, which emphasise awareness, restraint and reflexivity in disrupted fields. Bond et al. (2020) suggest that researchers should take time to reflect, resist the urge for hasty decisions and begin by listening to marginalised voices. Only through this approach can we close the distance between ourselves and our interlocutors, avoiding actions that might hinder our understanding of them. By acknowledging these limitations, we can gain deeper insights into society and produce more reliable data.

In our research projects, for example, postponing fieldwork periods did not mean halting the entire study. Taking a pause and postponing our visit to Indonesia for several months given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other hazards

<sup>8</sup> Müller (2016) uses the term "slow science" as a counter culture against continuous pressure due to competition and rushing in research.

brought us a chance for more nuanced (but limited) online data collection and eventually, the opportunity to visit the field physically under better conditions – even though in the end it is us, as researchers, who might face consequences such as requiring extensions to limited funds and/or limited scholarships. Having said that, we think it is essential for researchers not to fall into the frustration and anxiety of meeting predatory academic demands. Online, offline as well as hybrid methods pose certain research limitations to consider when rushing in research. Furthermore, exposure to extractive research relationships is equally problematic. Research is not merely “on” and “about” the people but also about our engagement. The call for slow science to wait and see, to adjust to local context changes and dynamics, especially during a pandemic, is the key to unlocking our fieldwork and data collection and addressing disruptions in ethical ways.

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as an X-ray, exposing existing societal inequalities as well as deepening them (Slobodian 2020). COVID-19 is not a new rupture (Saeed 2020) but an acceleration of the ongoing rupture that exposes humans to “bare life” (Agamben 1998) and a radical discontinuity of everyday life. The way most Global South governments responded to the pandemic by imitating the Global North approach of prevention and pandemic regulations created social catastrophes. During our visits to Indonesia, we witnessed the brutality of illiberal lockdown measures caused by imitating those in other countries. At the same time, homogenisation attempts, discarding local contextualities, could also be observed with regard to research knowledge production. Researching in pandemic times presented challenges in several ways, as Santana et al. (2021) describe: physical, psychological and ethical challenges.

These challenges included the vulnerable circumstances of our research participants, which prompted us to always (re-)consider our choice of approach. We needed to constantly move between offline and online methods, which we regard not in dichotomous but rather in complementary beneficial terms. Patching online and offline approaches means in our cases carefully understanding participants’ particularities in their local environment and always reflecting our positionality as researchers, as privileged natives and privileged in-betweeners. Other challenges were related to the emotions, social gaps and economic difficulties faced by our participants as well as us as researchers.

We therefore argue that there is no one-size-fits-all data collection method when it comes to a disrupted field like that during the COVID-19 pandemic. We call for a constant reflection of dynamic and multi-faceted researcher positionality along with ethical considerations to pave the way for meaningful

and non-extractive research engagements. Ethically engaged research is more important than ever. We acknowledge that our strategies still have limitations and might not answer all uncertainties faced by qualitative researchers. The effects and legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic might still linger on for some time. Other pandemics or disruptions will occur, which makes it all the more important to avoid research designs and processes (and the speed thereof) that have the potential to exhaust researchers and participants. Sometimes, it is better to hit the pause button and postpone or rethink our research goals and approaches for a better, more meaningful and ethical outcome.

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