

Reflections on teaching and learning during COVID-19 in Queensland independent schools



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OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE

Our Schools – Our Future is an Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) research-based initiative designed to promote informed public policy debate about schooling. Through commissioned and internal research, Our Schools – Our Future explores trends and issues in key areas which determine the nature and performance of our school education systems. While the initiative has a particular focus on the contribution of independent schools to our education provision and outcomes, it examines a range of issues and trends relevant to the development and implementation of effective public policy for schooling. All research reports are available to members online.

DISCLAIMER

Independent Schools Queensland has published this paper to promote informed debate on issues in school education. The authors accept full responsibility for the views expressed herein. Independent Schools Queensland does not necessarily support all of these views.

Foreword



The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on every aspect of our modern lives and especially on the way schools engaged with their students, parents and communities.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) commissioned this research paper to better understand how our member schools responded to and met the challenges presented by the pandemic and the extended period of remote teaching and learning during 2020.

Dr Natasha Ziebell and Dr Lucy Robertson, highly experienced researchers at the University of Melbourne, present a reflective perspective from our member schools with valuable insights into both the positives and negatives for staff and students, and their families, of this unprecedented period of disruption.

The report highlights the agility of autonomous independent schools to respond to the changing needs of their communities. Ordinarily, schools are key places of support for young people and this became heightened during the pandemic. Through working tirelessly, teachers quickly found new practices to engage remotely with students and parents in their home contexts. School leadership sought to establish continuity of teaching and learning experiences, including daily routines, combined with increased flexibility to address emergent concerns faced during uncertain times.

Respondents identified many opportunities and new learnings prompted by the need to embrace remote online engagement with their students. Increased use of a range of technology platforms and a broader adoption of online teaching and learning were noted as a basis for ensuring students remained engaged in learning whether in the classroom or at home. Students were presented with opportunities to increase their agency in terms of taking more responsibility for their own learning.

The independent schooling sector in Queensland has demonstrated its resilience and emerged from the 2020 pandemic with significantly increased enrolments in 2021. Anecdotal evidence suggests a growing number of families valued the agile responses of independent schools to this crisis, their committed focus on student engagement and wellbeing, and their strong connections with their communities.

This and other recent research commissioned by ISQ show that Queensland's independent schools remain well placed to continue being innovative, adaptable pacesetters into the future.

DAVID ROBERTSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS QUEENSLAND

Introduction

*Right:
Bundaberg Christian College*

In Australia, 2020 began with a continuing drought and a prolonged, devastating bushfire crisis that destroyed over 17 million hectares of land, 3,094 homes and took 33 lives (APH, 2020). The Townsville region was still recovering from a one-in-100 year flooding event in 2019, while in early autumn widespread flooding from a one-in-50-year event impacted on lives and livelihoods in NSW and Queensland. Starting in early January, news reports about a fast-spreading novel-Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in China began circulating globally. The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Australia on 25 January 2020, with the Prime Minister declaring the COVID-19 outbreak to be a national pandemic on 27 February, and then on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic. The pandemic has dramatically impacted on the lives of billions of people worldwide. UNESCO estimated that more than two billion students were impacted in 2020, with school closures affecting around 80% of the world's student population as many students commenced some form of remote schooling. One year later, close to half the world's students are still affected by partial or full school closures, and it is predicted that over 100 million additional children will fall below minimum proficiency levels in reading as a result of the health crisis (UNESCO, 2021).

Australian State and Territory governments responded to the health crisis by imposing measures to protect their populations, which in turn directly affected schools. Apart from Western Australia and the Northern Territory, all states and territories closed schools for significant periods of time in 2020, with two periods of extended school closures in Victoria (Biddle et al., 2020). Schooling in Queensland was disrupted for five weeks from 30 March to 25 May 2020. Students of essential workers were permitted to continue attending school onsite, but the majority of students experienced a period of remote learning from home, with a staggered return to school from 11 May.

Across most of Australia, schools shifted rapidly towards the temporary use of remote learning at a previously untried scale, requiring school leaders, teachers and other staff to implement new and innovative approaches to support student learning, health and wellbeing. This involved adapting schedules and classes for the online environment and rapidly establishing new tools, methods and modes for teaching, learning and student support, with varying levels of preparation and training. School leaders, teachers, students and parents rallied to meet the challenges head on.



Australian experiences, challenges and opportunities during remote learning

Throughout 2020, several surveys were undertaken in Australia to capture educational practices and to document the experiences, challenges and opportunities for students, parents and schools. One of the first was the Australian Education Survey, which was conducted between 25 April and 25 May 2020 with contributions from 850 primary and secondary teachers at a time when remote learning was underway in regions within Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania.

The data highlighted that access to digital devices, reliable internet, having a suitable space for learning, attendance and task completion was essential in supporting student engagement with learning (Ziebell, Acquaro, Pearn and Seah, 2020). While some students had excelled during the remote period, others disengaged from school completely. Teachers found that interpersonal interactions and the quality and volume of feedback were easier to manage in a classroom than in the online environment, with a considerable increase in their workload during remote learning. While students found ways to communicate with each other, the social environment was more challenging to replicate online. 75% of teachers reported that they felt the remote learning period was having a negative effect on students' emotional wellbeing. There was a sense that the remote learning period had encouraged a greater appreciation of friendship, belonging and connectedness to school communities. Other positives to emerge for teachers included increased collegiality, collaboration, adaptability, creativity and adopting new teaching approaches (Ziebell et al., 2020).

Towards the end of 2020, Biddle et al. (2020) surveyed 732 parents of children in early childhood, primary or secondary schooling across Australia about their COVID-19 education experience. The report states that although 48%

of respondents were very satisfied and 40% were somewhat satisfied with how their child's school/centre handled changes related to the spread of COVID-19, 13% were very concerned and 37% somewhat concerned that their children would fall behind in their education due to COVID-19 disruptions. Concern was greatest for those born overseas in a non-English speaking country, from a low-income household, or whose children attended a government secondary school (Biddle et al., 2020).

Parent engagement during COVID-19 was the focus of a report written by Willis and Exley (2020). The report provided illustrative examples generated through Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and the Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QISPAN) to exemplify components that promote parent engagement through C-H-A-N-G-E (**C**onnections, **H**ome-School alignment, **A**gency, **N**ew and different roles for parents, **G**enerative collaboration among teachers, and **E**mpathy). The report states that while there was variability in experiences, the remote learning period necessitated closer home-school partnerships which led to more positive outcomes in engagement with student learning and wellbeing (Willis & Exley, 2020).

The annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing survey captured insights from principals about managing schools during the pandemic. The survey results were generally consistent with previous surveys, indicating that school leaders continued to be at risk of fatigue, mental health decline, and burnout (Riley et al., 2020). Constant exposure to occupational stressors combined with long work hours in 2020 led to a decline in long-term health indicators such as burnout, sleeping troubles, stress and depressive symptom, as well as short term indicators such as work pace, demands and role clarity, compared to the 2019 survey. This was offset by gains in many short-term measures such as influence, workplace commitment, social support from supervisors and colleagues, and work-family conflict. Although 83% of school leaders were subjected to at least one form of offensive behaviour during the 12 months,

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

disruptions to the education landscape by COVID-19 and increased understanding of what educators face led to notable decreases in threats of violence, physical violence, bullying and gossip and slander (Riley et al, 2020).

Multiple studies were conducted by the Department of Education in Victoria focusing on the impact of the six week remote learning period from March to June 2020 recording the experiences of students, parents/carers, teachers and school principals and identifying the lessons learnt for future planning (see Armitage and Loukomitis (2020), Learning First (2020), Victorian DET (2020a and 2020b)).

Learning First (2020) reported that daily attendance rates and morale on the whole remained high, with parents gaining unprecedented insight into current education practices and students and teachers gaining new skills and trialling new pedagogies. Insight drawn from across these studies suggests that students were more likely to have positive experiences of remote learning if they had adequate access to technology and the internet, were disposed to embrace student-led learning approaches, were supported by parents/carers who engaged in their learning, experienced routines and structure, and were supported by teachers who communicated clear expectations, prioritised student wellbeing and adjusted subject content while modifying or deferring assessment (Armitage and Loukomitis (2020); Learning First (2020); Victorian DET (2020a)).

Key learnings for future remote and on-site schooling included maintaining greater connections with parents; refocusing on how to deliver the best learning experience for all students; a more expansive use of digital platforms in teaching, for parental/carer engagement and school operations; and continuation of mental health and wellbeing check-ins (Armitage and Loukomitis (2020); Learning First (2020)). For students that were at risk, vulnerable, disadvantaged or had additional needs, future supports should focus on continuing to engage these families, taking action to bridge the 'digital divide' and making more effort to improve on-site learning experiences (Victorian DET (2020a)). These lessons were then drawn on by the Department during the second extended period of remote learning in Victoria from July to September 2020, for example by improving student digital access, increasing on-site options for students that were at risk, vulnerable, disadvantaged or had additional needs, increasing opportunities for students to engage in live chats with staff and peers to improve student mental health and wellbeing, providing student support services and staff wellbeing resources, as well as developing professional development resources to support online teaching practice and additional resources to support parent/carer engagement and communication (Victorian DET, 2020b).

As remote learning unfolded across Australia, concerns were raised about inequitable differences in educational experiences that might arise for vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Watterston and Zhao (2020) identified that generally, student wellbeing and mental health

is one of the most significant challenges arising from the pandemic and other recent crisis events in Australia. As Cahill et al. (2020) highlight, emergencies can potentially have a greater adverse impact on the health, wellbeing, social and financial situation of people with increased vulnerability, in turn affecting student behaviour, engagement and levels of anxiety due to their increased exposure to instability. Schools play a critical role in providing immediate and ongoing support for children and families, with teachers often noticing challenges that students are experiencing and then accessing supports, including referrals to specialist services if required (Cahill et al., 2020). In April 2020, Brown et al. concluded that approximately 46% of the Australian student population were vulnerable to adverse effects on their educational outcomes, nutrition, physical movement, social, and emotional wellbeing as a result of being physically disconnected from school. Factors contributing to adverse educational outcomes included lack of physical space, technology and resources to support home learning, as well as lack of parental/carer time or capability to support and facilitate home learning (Brown et al., 2020).

Research commissioned by the Australian Government concluded that an extended period of remote learning was likely to result in poorer educational outcomes for early years students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with English as a second language, those with special learning needs, and students who were generally less engaged with school (Australian Government DESE, 2020).

Acknowledging that the pandemic would affect every child differently, Clinton (2020) reported that children more likely to be at risk included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with additional physical, cognitive, emotional or behavioural needs. Clinton (2020) stated that absences of up to 10 weeks might not have a significant long-term effect on educational outcomes for most students. However, disruptions to schooling can exacerbate existing challenges for vulnerable students, with attendance and engagement being key concerns. Thus, recovery efforts should focus on students, families and communities that were already 'vulnerable' and for those students identified as being negatively impacted by a disruption to schooling (Clinton, 2020). McDaid et al. (2021) state that when addressing educational disadvantage, responses that are 'nimble, responsive, and adaptive to individual circumstances are required' (p. 51). Reinforcing this message, a survey of 312 Victorian families of autistic children by AMAZE conducted from late August to early September 2020 revealed that only 20–30% of respondents believed that their child was receiving support that entirely or mostly met their needs during the Term 3 lockdown (Amaze, 2020). Overall, 60% of respondents felt their child's mental health and wellbeing had declined during school disruptions and about 50% reported a lack of progress in academic learning. They suggested that on return to school, additional support was needed for mental health and wellbeing, targeted catch-up assistance and personalised adjustments/modifications (Amaze, 2020).

Effective practice for future remote learning in the Australian context

Some studies sought to identify effective practice in remote education for ongoing or future applications by reviewing the Australian and international evidence base. Drawing on published literature, Dabrowski et al. (2020) proposed that core principles for good practice in remote education included support for teachers, community partnerships, parental involvement, student engagement and education for inclusion and equity. Teaching preparedness and practice was central to successful remote teaching, with teachers required to have access to appropriate technological resources, support and professional learning in how to design learning incorporating effective digital pedagogies (Dabrowski et al., 2020). Dabrowski et al. argued that community partnerships could transform school structures and curriculum by reinforcing personal and cultural identities, connecting with families and the wider community. Parents and carers were central in supporting students during remote schooling but cannot replicate the role of teachers or provide the social and physical infrastructure and resources available in schools.

Adopting a “parents-as-partners” mechanism fosters effective and collaborative communication between school and family, which can support and enhance student educational experiences during periods of remote education (Dabrowski et al., 2020). Student engagement, self-regulation, resilience and capacity must be supported during remote learning, which requires effective teaching practice and strong connections in the school community, as social connections and relationships are important protective factors against school dropout. Finally, the review found that best practice in remote teaching needs to be responsive to different contexts and cannot rely solely on technology. Understanding the impacts of learning in the home environment requires knowledge of specific student experiences during school closures (Dabrowski et al., 2020). Additionally, it is important to develop strategies to support the health and wellbeing of students during lockdown and isolation measures.

Cowden et al. (2020) reviewed literature in the Australian context in early childhood, primary and secondary settings focusing on emergencies, access and equity, distance education, blended learning, and quality teaching and learning using technology. They proposed that four key themes underpin all good pedagogical practice regardless of the mode of delivery or context, these being:

- (1) quality of teaching
- (2) the role of technology
- (3) the importance of context, and
- (4) the home learning environment.

Concurring with Dabrowski et al., Cowden et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of supporting teachers through the provision of resources, support and professional learning to effectively implement digital pedagogies, noting that technology is a tool that complements rather than replaces teaching. Therefore, learning needs and purpose rather than technology should shape schools’ responses to remote learning. During, immediately post-pandemic, and into the future, it was vital to focus on the health and wellbeing of students and teachers, as well as educational outcomes (Cowden et al., 2020). Cowden et al. argued that school leaders and teachers who know and understand their students and communities best – with consideration given to the age of children and their access to learning resources – are better informed when developing differentiated responses and selecting appropriate adjustments to learning design. As students face increased educational vulnerability whilst studying at home, access to resources and support for parents/caregivers is particularly important, with schools playing a key role in providing a range of learning materials and practical strategies for families. Finally, Cowden et al. (2020) advocate for developing strategies that include physical and social re-engagement and differentiated learning on return to the classroom, to mitigate any negative impacts of remote learning.

Understanding the Queensland Experience of Remote Learning

While there is a growing body of literature and research into Australian experiences and lessons from remote learning, there is limited published research specifically focusing on the Queensland context. This report aims to capture and honour the insights and experiences of teachers working within the Queensland independent schooling sector. The data contained in this report provides a 'moment in time' reflection on teachers' and leaders' personal experiences and as such, we cannot claim that this is representative of the Queensland population either within the Independent sector or across all education sectors. The report does explain factors and issues impacting specific contexts and these personal perspectives can make a valuable contribution to the developing knowledge base about the impact of COVID-19 on education in Australia.

An online survey was distributed to principals and teaching staff at Queensland independent schools from 23 March to 1 April 2021, with 74 complete responses lodged. During this survey period, Greater Brisbane experienced a total lockdown from 29 March to 1 April, with other regions experiencing tighter COVID-19 restrictions, which may have influenced both the number and content of responses received. Overall, responses were received from four of the education regions, as shown in Figure 1. Responses were predominantly received from staff at secondary schools (66%), followed by primary schools (24%), with the remaining responses from P-12 schools (3%) or an unspecified school sector (7%). Other key demographic data are summarised in Figure 2.

The survey posed questions about beliefs into the impact of the remote learning period on students' academic progress, social development and wellbeing, followed by whether supports for teachers during the remote learning period and on students' return to school were adequate, before focusing on whether students were given sufficient support after the remote learning period. The survey concluded with three open-ended questions regarding perceived opportunities as a result of remote learning, the most challenging aspects of teaching during remote learning, and whether there were any current challenges that needed to be addressed as a result of COVID-19.

Figure 1

Responses
received from
each education
region



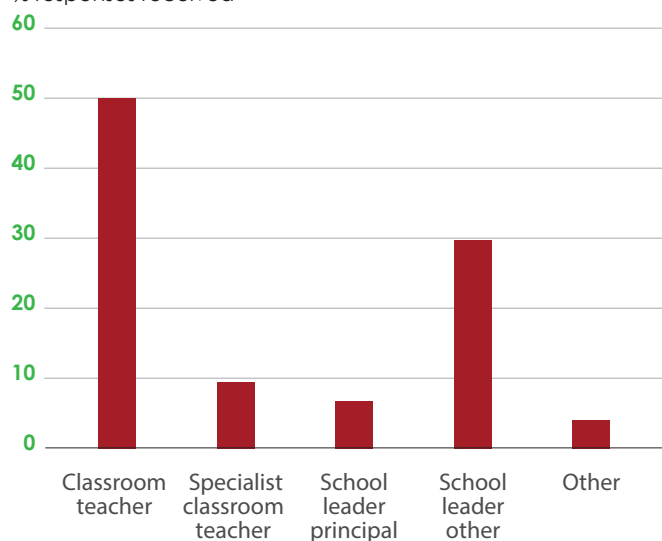
Map base sourced from <https://teach.qld.gov.au/teach-in-queensland-state-schools/our-schools>

The survey was distributed using the Qualtrics platform and analysed using R software. The qualitative responses were thematically coded using NVivo. Semi-structured interviews with six leaders and teachers were conducted across two schools that prompted reflections about their experiences of teaching and learning since the beginning of the global pandemic. One school was located in the metropolitan region of Brisbane and the other was located in regional Queensland. In the following report, the schools are referred to as S1 (School 1) and S2 (School 2). The interviews were transcribed and inductive coding was used to identify key themes emerging from the data.

Figure 2: Distribution of survey responses by respondent role and teaching experience

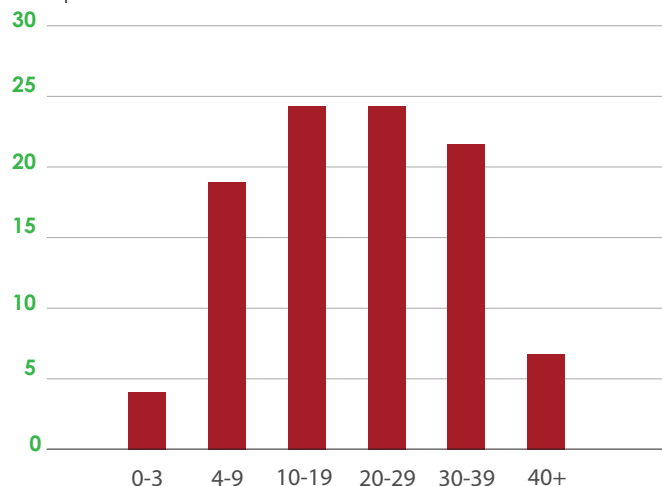
School Role

% responses received



Years Working in Education

% responses received



Findings

*Right:
The Glennie School*

*Far Right:
Clayfield College*

The impact of the remote learning period on students

The majority of survey respondents felt that the remote learning period had a neutral or negative impact on students, with this negative impact more cited for student social development and wellbeing than for academic progress (Table 1, Figure 3).

For example, 32% of respondents expressed negative sentiment about student academic progress compared to 54% expressing negative sentiment about the impact on student wellbeing. The percentage of respondents who felt that remote learning had a positive impact decreased from 17% for academic progress to 7% for student social development or wellbeing. However, fewer than 5% of respondents felt that the remote learning period had an extremely negative impact on students. Interestingly, a greater percentage of classroom teachers thought that there were positive impacts for student social development or wellbeing than the percentage of school leaders (excluding principals). Some of the positive impacts described by respondents included students gaining a bigger perspective on life, an appreciation of health and the simple things, or appreciating their friends and connections outside the home more than they had in the past. Feelings about impact on academic progress could be mixed, as one secondary teacher described: "For those who are self-disciplined and tech savvy, it works well but for some it gives the opportunity to disengage". Additional comments about impacts on student wellbeing tended to focus on negative impacts, for example: "Those who had poor internet connectivity felt excluded from goings on on social media" and "You cannot monitor a students wellbeing from a screen. The physical tells of wellbeing are important and remote learning does not allow that".

Table 1: Nature of sentiment expressed in survey responses

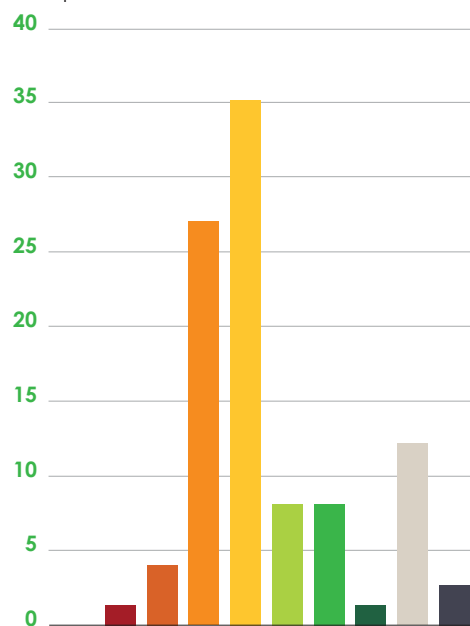
STATEMENT	SENTIMENT OF RESPONSES (% TOTAL RESPONSES)		
	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	POSITIVE
Impact on student academic progress	32	35	17
Impact on student social development	45	36	7
Impact on student wellbeing	54	26	7
Received adequate support during remote learning	8	8	76
Received adequate support on students return to school	16	5	72
Students received sufficient support after remote learning period	12	10	66



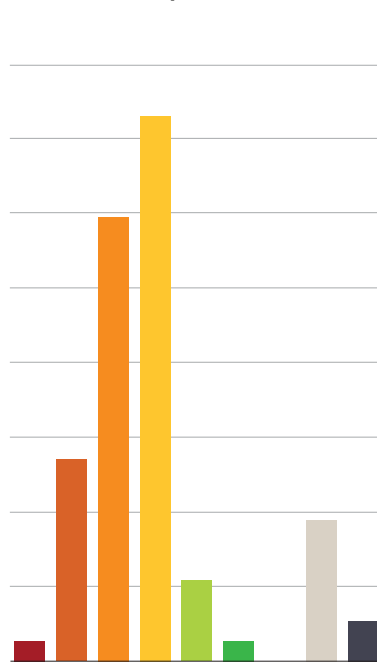
Figure 3: Teacher beliefs about impact of remote learning period on students

Academic Progress

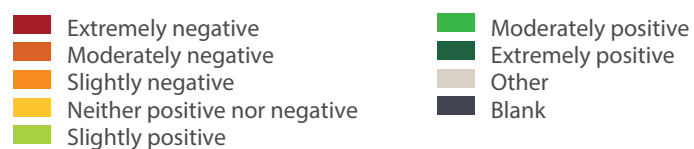
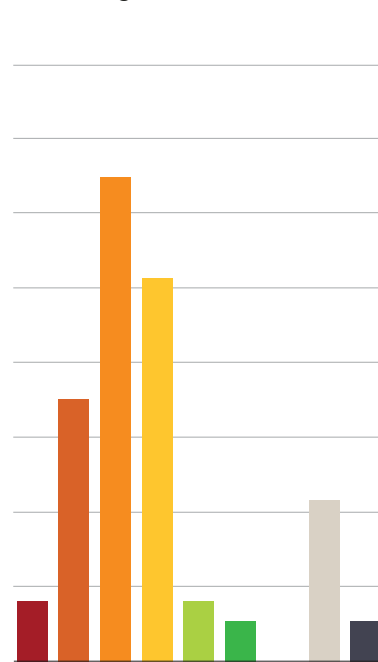
% responses received



Social Development



Wellbeing



Support for students after remote learning

Most respondents (66%) believed that students had received sufficient support after the remote learning period (Table 1, Figure 4). Respondents based in primary schools tended to be a little more positive about the level of support for students than their secondary school colleagues. As one secondary teacher noted: “We have worked hard to bring things back to normal as quickly as possible. We are not there yet but we are close”. Those who indicated additional support was required suggested that there needed to be a “greater emphasis on student wellbeing rather than on ensuring academic standards are maintained”, with requests for additional counsellors and psychologists to assist with this.

Case Study 1: Planning ahead

SCHOOL 1, PRINCIPAL

School 1, located in Brisbane, has adopted a ‘scenario planning’ approach as standard practice, providing a structure within which a plan for future situations is already in place and then activated in the event that a particular scenario becomes a reality. This provides an enhanced capacity to plan for and respond to change, with key people within the school informed about what needs to be done, by whom and when.

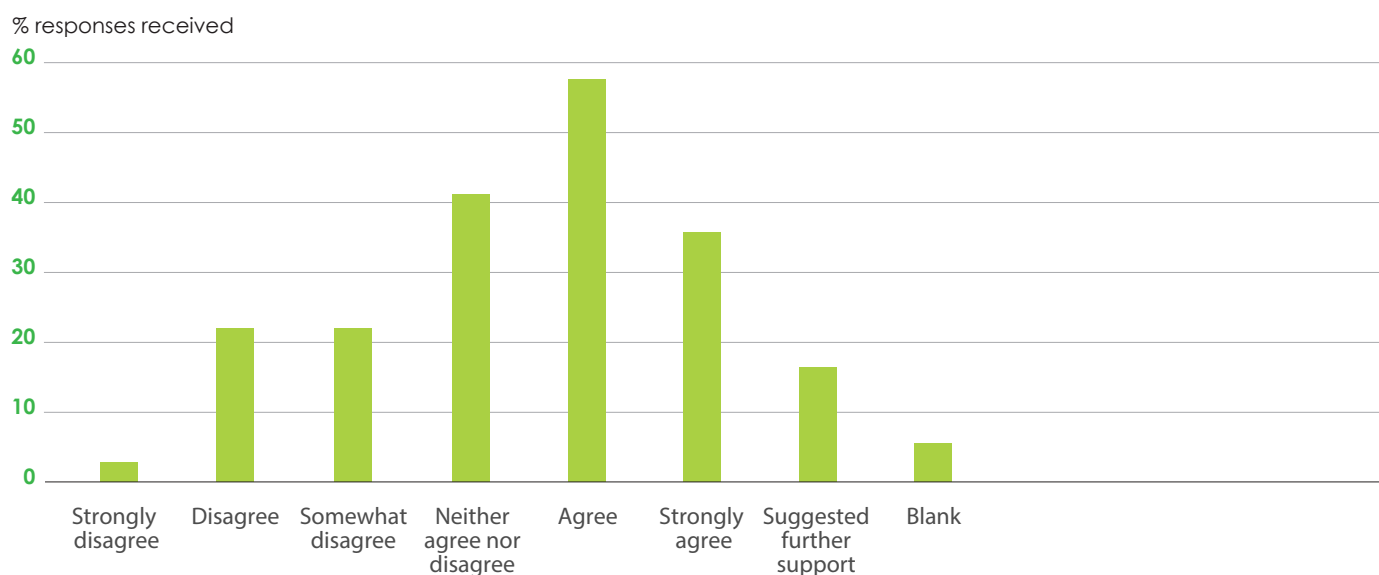
The school had some students in Wuhan that were unable to return to Australia to commence the 2020 school year,

so the global pandemic had an impact on the school from the first day of the school year. Due to the existing ‘scenario planning’ school practices, the leadership team were immediately responsive to the situation and began planning for a probable future involving COVID-19 reaching Australian shores and impacting on the school community at a local level. As the school’s principal reflects:

I’d suggest probably a lot of people looked to others for that decision-making or that comfort when in reality, you needed to make very local decisions and take control of it very soon... So, because we have that as part of our culture, our DNA, we started at that point in time really seriously thinking about what would happen if there was an outbreak in Brisbane and we had to go into lockdown just like they did in China, in Wuhan. So really, probably from the second week of Term 1, we started planning and preparing for eventual lockdown. So we were putting in place all the systems, the technology we needed. We worked out how we would actually do it, we then spent time training staff, we spent time communicating with parents, we communicated with them on a regular basis. So when it was called – the lockdown – we basically were ready to go, well-prepared, ready to go. We just flicked a switch literally and everything went online.

The school leadership took immediate action to shield the school community from the negative impacts of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. These scenario planning structures also allowed for the provision of targeted professional learning to support staff during the transition to remote learning, as the principal stated, “Every day that went by towards the announcement of the lockdown, was another day that we had to train people”. The planning

Figure 4: Teacher beliefs about whether students were given adequate support



provided stability in dealing with the eventuality of the pandemic, with flexible implementation so that elements of the plan were acted upon if and when it was needed. During the remote learning period in 2020, the principal prioritised the provision of stability and familiarity in the online environment to support student wellbeing, beginning with routines:

So if you're feeling thrown into something that's quite different and in disarray, then yes, it negatively impacts your wellbeing. So creating the same structures online as what we did at school, I felt were really important. So we replicated the school online almost the same as what you would see it here at school. So we have a six period day and I'm talking secondary school. Junior school is loosely structured around periods as well. So the same six period day. We created an online bell and we sent that program out to everyone.

When managing the second lockdown at the end of Term 1 in 2021, the existing structures for managing the change were already in place, so the school made a transition back to remote learning rather than extending the term holidays:

"And it's interesting this three-day lockdown too because a lot of schools chose just to close their doors and end the term early, using the excuse, 'Well we only had 24 hours' notice. It's the end of the term anyway. So off you go.' Whereas we just said, 'Nah, we'll just go online again.'"

Case Study 2: The remote learning experience teaching younger children

SCHOOL 1, PRIMARY TEACHER

The primary teacher from School 1 worked at another independent school during 2020 and reflected on their experience as a Year 2 teacher at the time. When the lockdown was first announced, the school provided staff with immediate professional learning in the use of technology for remote learning. While some of these programs were effective for teaching older students, the teacher found that Microsoft Teams and a school app proved challenging when trying to engage younger children. The tools proved difficult for young students because in order to submit work, they had to use Teams or take a photo of their work and email it to the teacher, which created an additional level of complexity to managing remote learning. In contrast, the Seesaw app used at the teacher's current school (School 1) is more intuitive and user-friendly for young students because they can edit and submit their work within the same program.

The school emphasised taking a flexible approach towards student on-site attendance in cases where teachers and parents were concerned about a student's academic progress and/or wellbeing. Initially, only the children of essential workers attended school. However, the class included five English as a Second Language students, with one only student having one term in Australia, so these students were allowed to attend school where they could be supported with developing their English language skills. Another student was in the process of getting a specialist diagnosis and the teacher and parents recognised that the transition back to school would be particularly challenging. To minimise potential challenges for the student, they attended school for one to two days initially and then by the fifth week, returned to school full time. In other cases, students that were becoming disengaged at home were also encouraged to return to school.

Working online, the teacher noted that it was more important to keep students engaged and if any material was recorded, it was felt that the teacher needed to record the video so that students would be guided by a familiar face:

One of my top little girls, she did start to become disengaged and so that's why I then went online for my learning... She was disengaged because she couldn't see me. The reading check-in wasn't enough. She just wanted to see me every day and most of the time was to show me her cats.

The teacher observed that students' home lives and situations were quite diverse, demonstrating the complexity of catering for all students' needs and the necessity of being responsive on an individualised level. In some cases, parents were juggling their work schedules and supporting students with their learning:

Mum would work with her in the morning, online, while dad did all his work for work and then they would swap over in the afternoon. Mum would go do her work in her office and dad would sit with her. And then at night time, after she'd gone to bed, both parents would get back on and catch up on what they could.

After the lockdown period, the teacher observed a heightened sense of vigilance around health and safety. The parents' personal connection to the challenges that their friends and family were facing overseas began to influence student behaviour when returning to school:

They started turning up with their gloves and their masks and their long-sleeved shirts, covering everything up. Because I think they were worried then about the spread. I think it was more when people were allowed to start doing things, they became more worried. During that five weeks' lockdown, they weren't as concerned, because the contact was very limited. They were coming to school, going home

and only having that small contact. But I think it was more when we were letting everybody come back in Term 3, they started wearing the masks, they started wearing gloves and the jumper every day. And I think it was more because of what was happening over in China was scaring them here... Because their death rate was increasing and I think because their parents were there, their fathers were there.

The teacher expressed the importance of student engagement and wellbeing as an ongoing priority. Furthermore, reflecting on what was working and what wasn't was essential when using technology and structuring teaching and learning for younger students.

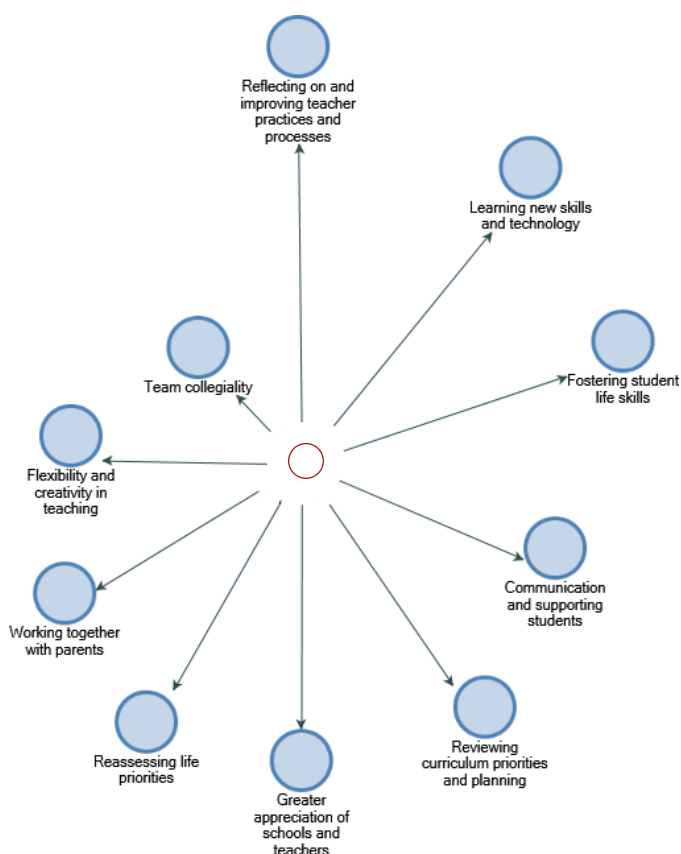
Opportunities in teaching and learning that emerged during remote learning period

There are countless variables that have affected the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on individuals and school communities. Some people have had to overcome adversity and dealt with significant stress associated with the impact of the pandemic, but alongside the challenges, there have also been many positive examples of strength and resilience. In education, the pandemic provided a catalyst for exploring more novel ways of teaching and learning, and has exposed some of those enduring practices that now need to be modified and updated. The remote learning experience has also further reinforced those effective practices that are highly valued in education. For example, the remote learning period highlighted the importance of investing in positive relationships, belonging and connectedness to school and the school community.

For many survey respondents, the period of remote learning prompted exploring new ways of teaching, evaluating which educational practices and activities were of critical importance, and highlighted fundamental aspects of classroom teaching that they had possibly previously taken for granted. In all, 89 opportunities were identified by respondents, which were grouped into the ten themes shown in Figure 5.

The opportunity identified by the greatest number of respondents was the chance to *reflect on and improve teacher practices and processes*. Many of these responses concerned the increased use of technology and online learning to deliver education, for example: "Opportunity for the whole school community to consider technology a little more and how it could be used in the teaching and learning process", with some taking this further: "Opportunities for schools to see how they could improve their current practices to ensure that students can learn equally in the environment of a classroom or remotely". Some reflected on their recognition of skills in successfully teaching through remote learning, such as "Discovering just how much we were able to provide for the students learning remotely". For others, the contrast with standard teaching gave them a chance to reflect on the value of being in the same room as their students. For example: "A deeper appreciation for having students in the classroom" and the "realisation of the importance of face to face teaching in terms of gauging student understanding".

Figure 5: Opportunities in teaching during remote learning period identified by respondents



Note: The length of each arrow represents the number of responses. The theme with the greatest number of responses is at the top, centre of the diagram.

The chance to *learn new skills and technologies* was the next most cited opportunity as a result of remote learning. This opportunity was relevant for students, teachers, and in some cases parents: “Teachers and students engaged in online platforms and learnt elements of technology some thought they could not engage in before this period”. Schools acquired new ICT tools, and staff became exposed to a range of online learning platforms and web conferencing tools, learning how to “better navigate and use technology”, becoming “more effective with technology” and finding out about “increased ways to learn through technology”. For some, this was accompanied by greater *team collegiality*, drawing strength from “excellent team spirit with our peers”.

Another key opportunity raised by respondents was the *fostering of student life skills*. The period of remote teaching gave students a chance to develop “resilience, independence and responsibility for their own learning”, needing to “log in on time and do the tasks set”, and for secondary students “learn how to self manage tasks” and “develop prioritisation skills”. As one teacher commented, “The students of today will be working more remotely from home and need to get used to doing that”. Some noted that “It allowed certain students to excel” and that “Some students found that they work better in an online environment”. One respondent identified an unexpected opportunity for senior students “to discover whether online learning suits them prior to engaging in online courses at university”.

Many respondents appreciated new opportunities in *communication and supporting students* during remote learning. This ranged from “Finding new ways of doing things and communicating in online ways”, seeing “greater individual participation in discussion” through to having “greater individualised communication with a greater number of students” or noting that “Communication with all stakeholders increased”. Some found that with the shift in communication modes they could “provide support for families and individual learning supports for students”. This increased communication as well as the house-bound nature of remote learning led to opportunities in *working together with parents*. For some, existing relationships “were strengthened”, while others noted that parents were able to engage with their students’ work, observing how their children “learn and respond to tasks”, which could be “an eye opener for some!”. This increased exposure to student learning at home in turn led to a *greater appreciation of schools and teachers*. Respondents observed that parents “valued schools and teachers more”, now “understood the value of teacher education and training”, saw “how much teaching staff put into their lessons and the time that staff put aside to give additional help” and had a “better appreciation of what is done in class”. The period of remote learning also led to many students placing greater value on being at school. As one teacher noted: “Most students were keen to learn and be at school. I found they were

more appreciative of the connections they had at school, their teachers and the opportunity to be somewhere other than home.”

The shift to remote learning gave many respondents the opportunity to *review curriculum priorities and planning*. As one teacher noted, remote learning led to “a need to be more organised, rethink and therefore reinvigorate learning activities”, or as others stated: “being forced to consider what content was truly important”, to be “flexible in curriculum delivery”, and adopt “more efficient, streamlined methods”, such as by “eliminating unnecessary things that have just always been done”. Reconsidering these priorities gave some opportunities for *flexibility and creativity in teaching*. As one teacher put it: “I liked the ‘freedom’ of online teaching. It afforded me to be more flexible in using my time”. Another focused on addressing student engagement by “Coming up with various ideas to engage students whilst teaching them and attempting to make learning fun for them which would help assist their want to learn.”

For some, the changes during remote learning were an opportunity to *reassess life priorities*, both their own and for their students. One noted that the situation “really sorted out the students who were willing and wanting to learn”. Some teachers adjusted their teaching focus, for example: “We had more of a focus on exercise, creativity and social engagement as we realised how critical these things are”, while others encouraged “responsible use of time and resources”. The importance of relationships was highlighted to many, with children and adults alike becoming more aware of their own abilities and needs.

A silver lining: Making the most of new opportunities

Some of the key themes that emerged as opportunities from the interviews related to teaching, students and building teaching networks. Illustrative examples of these themes are provided below.

Teaching

ATTITUDINAL FACTORS RELATED TO COPING AND WORKING

And so I figured rather than just be like upset and angry about it, just to absorb it and go with it and see what I could do and whether or not it could actually change my teaching style or improve me in another way. So, yeah, it was fun.
(S1, Secondary Teacher)

REVIEWING CURRICULUM PRIORITIES AND PLANNING

It was a good way to clean out something that maybe we've been doing for a long time, and then thought the value of it was not necessarily there.
(S2, School leader)

PEDAGOGY AND THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

And it made me realise that I could do that more and not just stick to a classroom environment all the time. And I think it's the experiential learning rather than the traditional rote learning... it shows them how their education is relevant in the real world.
(S1, Secondary Teacher)

REFLECTING ON AND IMPROVING TEACHING PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

I think it was good in that we could really critically reflect on, "Well, this is how it's been done in the past. It doesn't have to be..." The things that had just been done because they've been done before, how can we change it and make it better?
(S2, Primary Teacher)

Students

FOSTERING SKILLS IN STUDENTS SUCH AS INDEPENDENCE AND TAKING INITIATIVE

They are being more independent, they've not had to be this independent, and they've not had to use that initiative... They amazed us, their behaviour was awesome.
(S2, Primary Teacher)

ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENT RESILIENCE

I don't think it had a huge impact, we're looking one year down the track on these kids. They're very resilient, they're very persistent
(S2, Primary Teacher)

SKILLS FOR 'REAL LIFE' BEYOND SCHOOLING

[Referring to the Year 12 cohort] You are actually developing better skills than anyone would have developed when they were in Year 12. You are going to be the most employable group of people ever. You're going to have more resilience. You really are going to be a remarkable group of people.
(S1, Principal)

Building teaching networks

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER SCHOOLS

They tried to put heads of faculties in contact with one another. And in terms of teaching staff in specialty areas, we tried to exchange details to make sure that we could talk about what was going on and what was working and what wasn't working.
(S2, Secondary Teacher)

SEEKING ONLINE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO CONNECT AND NETWORK WITH OTHER TEACHERS

There were a lot of networks... on Facebook and things like that... And I think it certainly highlighted how connected we could be, and how much we could work together, whether you're working in Catholic Ed or independent or the state school system.
(S2, Secondary Teacher)

The leaders and teachers showed remarkable positivity in their reflections about teaching and learning, and in their comments about interpersonal relationships with families, students and colleagues. The interview responses to the personal challenges experienced by individual students and colleagues were respectful, compassionate and communicated a desire to ensure that what has been experienced over the past 18-months is used to enhance the education experience for students more broadly. These types of positive and responsive attitudes can contribute to protective factors, such as having a sense of purpose, building social cohesion, feeling supported and the ability to cope and have the potential to mitigate some of the negative effects of living during a pandemic (Cahill, Dadvand, Shlezinger, Romei & Farrelly, 2020).

Case Study 3: Reflections on the impact of the remote learning period

SCHOOL 2, SECONDARY TEACHER

The secondary school teacher at School 2 explained that students responded differently to the remote learning period and on returning to the physical classroom, observing that students were now “relatively settled”. Some students responded to the remote learning period well and were able to work autonomously and progress with the learning tasks at their own pace. The teacher described how some students with learning difficulties could take the time they needed to complete tasks rather than trying to keep up with the pace of the class, which in a classroom setting left them feeling under pressure and resulted in gaps in the content. However, some students were unable to meet the communication demands required when working remotely and did not complete as much work as was expected.

Returning to the classroom resulted in two key adjustments relating to simplifying or reducing curriculum and assessment tasks, as described here:

We adjusted assessment where possible, and again, just stripped it back. What are the key things that we need the kids to demonstrate, or do we actually need to assess them again, given that they're coming back and it's already been so disrupted? So there was some tasks that were removed completely from the curriculum program just for last year, just to make sure that we weren't causing that additional stress unnecessarily. And instead, we could focus on filling those gaps as we came to it.

Additional learning interventions were planned to complement the classroom-based curricula programs, including lunchtime tutorials to assist students with upcoming assessment tasks, specialised tutorial appointments for mathematics, science and English, simplifying assessments, or removing particular assessments completely from the assessment schedule. However, some students did not access these additional supports:

The problem though is, those kids who just thought they were too far gone, didn't actually engage in that process. And so there's classroom support that you can provide for those students, and like I said, revisiting activities or trying to do things in different ways to cover the same content, just to try and engage them in the learning process as part of that... So we're still making those decisions now. Are there things that we need to go over again before we actually move forward onto new content, and what type of prior learning are we asking them to recall?

During the remote learning period and when returning back to the classroom, teachers had heightened awareness of individual students' academic progress and their wellbeing and of their obligation to address this in a timely manner. In addition to dictating the mode of schooling for students, the pandemic affected and continues to have a significant impact on lives and livelihoods. What was happening in the home and community environment affected students in the learning environment and their wellbeing. In some cases, this was positive, but in other cases, there was a negative effect. Teachers were working with multiple layers of complexity in their roles, from the policy level to the school, classroom and individual student levels. Student needs were expressed through dialogue, behaviour, engagement and academic progress. Teachers needed to recognise these expressions of need and respond sensitively and in an appropriately nuanced manner, as this teacher describes:

“Some of those conversations were really key in terms of keeping kids on track. There were a lot of incidences that we weren't aware of being remote from the student, where we could then identify, okay, we'll pass that onto the pastoral leader, they're not coping, or parents were losing jobs, and things along those lines that we weren't quite aware of. So having those conversations with them when we saw that there wasn't necessarily that continuity of learning, were really important. And it crossed over into the pastoral world as well. So that helped us keep kids on track and make sure that we were helping them progress with the content where we could”.

Even with the additional support and new initiatives being offered, some students are still struggling to catch up and keep up, although teachers are continuing to direct students and offer access to the additional support at the school level:

And that came down to the classroom teacher recognising that gap... it was really up to staff to step up and touch base, and have those conversations with students as they notice those gaps occurring. And trying to recommend, “How about we have a look at this page again, or how about we revisit this activity?” Or “Hi, I'm going to be on lunchtime tutorials, how about you come along and just have a chat then?” So for some kids that worked really well, but like I said, for others who weren't really willing to engage, we're starting to see that those gaps have occurred now. And they're starting to kind of struggle a little bit... So it's still bit of catch up and making sure that we're doing what we can to support them. But it's a bit of a battle at times, that's for sure... It was quite a wake up call for me in particular, in terms of actually looking at that student data and thinking about those individuals one-on-one, as opposed to going through as a class as a whole.

FINDINGS CONTINUED

This process requires careful reasoning and decision-making related to the design of assessments and how student progress is being monitored. While formal and informal assessments can be made at a whole class level, analysing the data and anecdotal information with a focus on identifying the current needs of individual students is required. The alignment with the curriculum and content at the classroom level then indicates the gaps that need to be addressed to ensure that foundational concepts and knowledge are established so that the student can continue to make progress. In this case, the targeted observation and analysis of classroom level data indicates a focus on teaching individual learners based on where they are at rather than ploughing ahead with the planned curriculum if it was not suitable at that point in time.

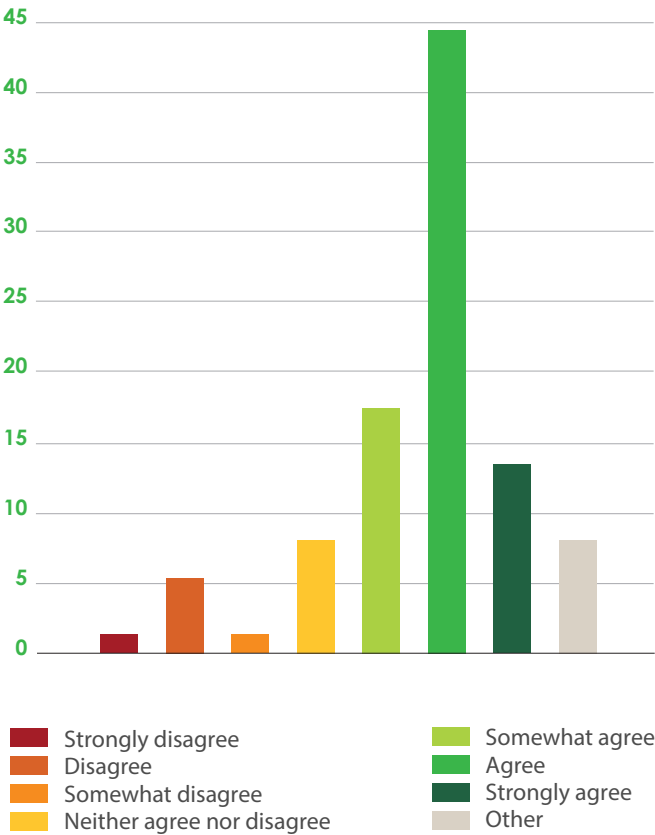
Adequacy of support for respondents during and after remote learning

More than 70% of all survey respondents were positive about the level of support they received both during the period of remote learning and after students returned to school (Figure 6, Table 1). All additional comments about support during remote learning were positive, highlighting the support work and training provided by their particular schools. 16% of respondents were negative about the adequacy of support after students returned to school, with these respondents being either classroom teachers or a school leader other than a principal, and more likely to work in a secondary school setting. They provided no additional detail as to why they felt inadequately supported. Of note, none of the five principals that responded to the survey felt that they had received inadequate support during or after the period of remote learning.

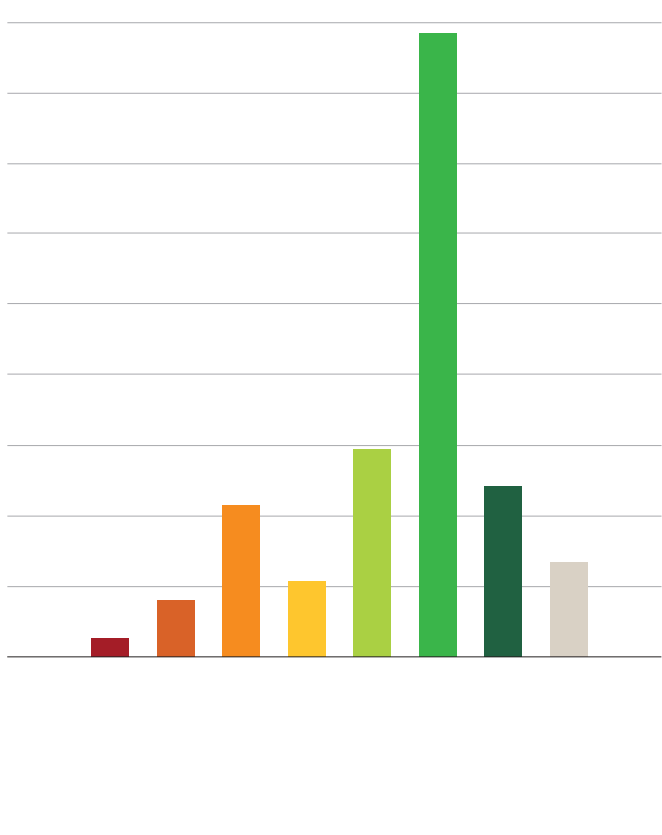
Figure 6: Teacher beliefs about whether teachers were given adequate support

During Remote Learning

% responses received



On Return to School



Challenges in teaching during the remote learning period

Engaging in teaching during the remote learning period created some challenges for most respondents, with nearly 100 individual challenges identified, which were grouped into twelve key themes as shown in Figure 7. These themes address aspects of teaching practice, student learning, resources and regulations, workload and management, expectations, and mental health and wellbeing.

The challenge during remote learning described by the greatest number of respondents was the impact on *monitoring learning*. Not being in the same space as the students meant that teachers lacked “immediate feedback” and “body language feedback”, to “read faces to see who is engaged and who understands”, or as one teacher stated: “Being unable to read the body language and facial expressions of students and so engage early in another pedagogical method to improve learning”. In a regular classroom setting, teachers can easily and quickly gauge engagement and understanding incidentally during the lesson, whereas during remote learning this took longer or involved extra effort. One respondent “missed those moments to check understanding through incidental conversations”, while others found it difficult because “you did not know if the students were actually there, listening and working. They could be online, but it was hard to check in to see if they were actually working.”

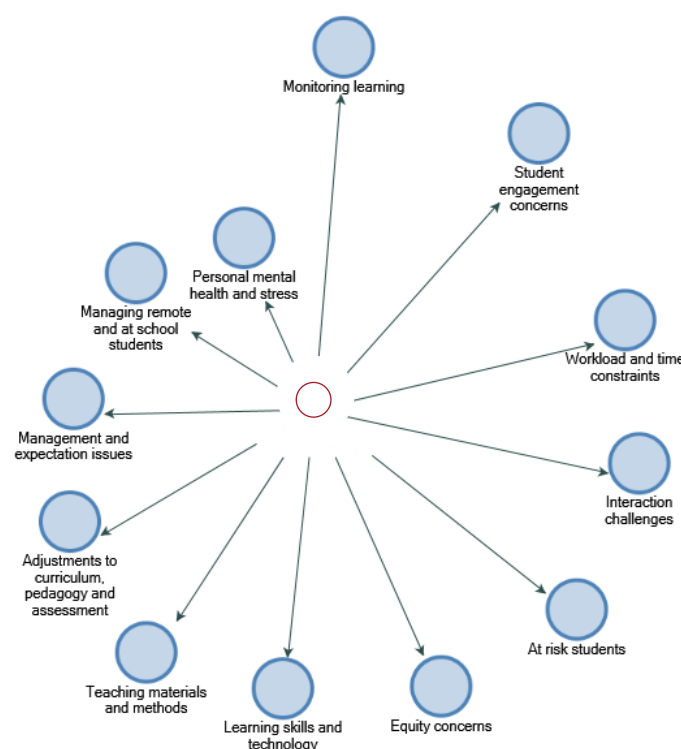
Linking to this, the next most raised challenge was *student engagement concerns*. “Ensuring that all students were engaged in their learning” proved difficult for many. As one teacher highlighted, “Although some students shined, even more than usual, some students were difficult to engage”. Teachers could spend time developing a video-based lesson, but then “Many students didn’t engage, they may have watched the video but not tried any of the suggested activities to go with it”. Respondents noted that “disengaged students became more disengaged” and “disengaged students got further and further behind and developed poorer habits”. Being physically distant from disengaged students was a particular challenge, as one respondent explained: “These are basically the ones, who in your classes, are hard to engage anyway. Without physical presence they get distracted and find it hard to engage with work without physical direction.”

Many respondents found that *interaction challenges* made remote teaching difficult or less enjoyable. For primary teachers in particular, remote learning led to them missing “the social interaction of the students” and “not seeing the students and continuing to build relationships to improve their learning”. A specialist teacher noted that “not being able to teach all of the students at once” was challenging, while others found “not having contact with the students”

or “developing relationships with students” and “monitoring student wellbeing” difficult. This could impact on their personal satisfaction in teaching, for example: “not seeing people face to face affected my motivation”.

A key challenge for many survey respondents in the remote learning period was *workload and time constraints*. Some found their workload was expanded due to “the amount of work that went into putting the lessons together, the marking and making sure that all students were keeping up-to-date”. Many then grappled with fitting an expanded workload into each day, for example “learning all the online platforms and having the time to conduct classes and make phone calls to parents to ensure students were engaging in learning and parents were coping.” or having “greater demands on my time as lessons had to be very well planned and set up for effective learning. More time was needed to review individual submitted work to check for engagement of students”. As one teacher highlighted, this could be incredibly draining as “I had to do double of everything. I had to plan like a relief teacher was coming in every day for my remote learners, whilst still teaching normally in class with the students I had with me.”

Figure 7: Challenges in teaching during remote learning period



Note: The length of each arrow represents the number of responses. The theme with the greatest number of responses is at the top, centre of the diagram.

FINDINGS CONTINUED

I then had to wait until the work from home got sent to me to mark, which arrived at all hours of the night. I never got downtime as it all got sucked into planning and marking as I was dual teaching”.

Some respondents found it challenging to manage *at risk students* or had *equity concerns* in teaching via remote learning. Teaching online made it harder to deliver required support to “passive students and students with needs”, to “chase up the work of less independent learners” or support “students who couldn’t work through challenges by themselves”. This could be frustrating, as one teacher highlighted: “I was unable to effectively assist students with high learning needs, sometimes even with a parent in attendance. There were other students who normally receive individual support who had no home support at all”. For some, additional effort was required to maintain standards of learning for at risk students: “Trying to work online, with hard copies of materials for those without technology access, and to provide classroom content for vulnerable children and those of essential workers meant three times the quantity of preparation”. Other equity concerns raised by respondents included inconsistencies in the technology available to students, connectivity to home internet, that some parents could not or did not connect with the school, and that some students lacked “basic supplies at home like coloured pencils and felt pens”.

Several other respondents found *managing remote and at school students* through a hybrid or dual delivery mode challenging, and this could be heightened by equity concerns. For example, one primary school specialist art teacher described challenges in developing lessons that could be completed by those at home and those at school, given differences in the materials they could access. Others challenges relating to *teaching materials and methods* included issues with the functionality of IT equipment or unreliable internet access during synchronous teaching.

While some saw the shift to the use of technology during remote learning as an opportunity, other respondents found *learning skills and technology* to be challenging. The challenge arose from the need to be “across many new forms of ICT” in a “very limited time” or “in a hurry over the holiday period”. This was particularly difficult for some respondents with more than 20 years of classroom teaching experience and a theme that was also noted in the interviews. As one survey respondent noted, “I’m not very IT savvy. I can do what is required of me but I was pushed beyond my current ability and it almost broke me!”. For others, *adjustments to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment* proved challenging. Some were mindful that “being on screens for long periods is not necessarily best practice” or found “not being able to teach certain content specifically to the students” difficult, while others found “representing the curriculum in a new way” or “modifying courses to match remote learning” to be an issue. Some respondents were frustrated that “Many parents

and students elected to focus on the “main” subjects such as Maths and English, and many specialist lessons were ignored although we made them available.” Assessment could be difficult due to “not being able to see the children complete their own work independently”. For others, the quality of student work was of concern despite making allowances for remote learning: “Expectations of students were not as high as normal, however our ‘lower’ students became even lower, and the ‘higher’ students finished their work quickly, sometime very sloppily”.

The remaining challenges during remote learning identified by some respondents concerned *expectations* and their *personal mental health and stress*. Some found that demands for additional daily communication between them, school management and parents increased their workload and became unreasonable. As one teacher described: “My family life was really affected as I was either working bulk hours a day or was too exhausted from the day. I had to take to drinking coffee to just get me through the day – and I never drank coffee beforehand”. Some found the experience so stressful that “Even the suggestion of learning from home occurring again reduces me to tears and my anxiety skyrockets!”. Though as another notes: “Daily reports to managers and daily emails to students and parents made the workload intensive. But we got through it”.

Case Study 4: Impact on international students

Schools have been dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on their international cohorts of students since the beginning of the pandemic in January 2020. This section explores some of the approaches and challenges experienced by two schools that took different approaches to accommodate international students.

The first issue experienced by both schools was that students were unable to leave after spending the summer break overseas with their family. This was quickly followed by the impact of Australian international border closure policies that came into effect in March 2020 and continue in 2021. Currently, international students in Years 11 and 12 can apply for an individual exemption to the policy and complete a quarantine period in Australia, but all other students are not exempt from the travel restrictions at this stage (Australian Government DESE, May 2021). Some exempted students continue to have difficulties returning due to the cancellation of flights to Australia.

Initial concerns regarding any potential discrimination towards international students needed to be monitored and addressed as a matter of priority so that the focus could be on supporting and building relationships between students and the school.

School 1's approach to supporting international students was to continue with the regular school timetable and engage in synchronous remote learning. This worked well for some students in Asia where the time difference was manageable, but for students in other regions, such as Europe, the time zone challenges were too difficult to overcome so they were unable to continue their education in the Australian school. To ensure that international students were able to engage with their classes remotely after students living locally could return to school, technical equipment was upgraded to include portable live microphones, and teachers set aside time so that they could provide 1:1 conferencing online with international students.

So yes, online learning was great. It was fantastic. And it created lots of opportunities... we've got 30 full-time international students online with us still... we took this as an opportunity to create new products... They join us for classes exactly the same as every other child does in mainstream classes. So teachers have taken what they learned and they teach kids online as well as kids in front of them... And they're actually desperate to come and meet people face-to-face. So you cannot replicate school on an online environment. You can, for short periods of time.
(S1, Principal)

School 2's approach was to continue to support students with their education, although they did not always attend synchronous classes. The school leader explained that students used their textbooks, with prescribed chapters, materials and notes. Occasionally, teachers would connect with international students via a Teams meeting. Overseas agencies were utilised to administer and supervise the completion of assessment tasks. One teacher noted their approach as follows:

But for some kids, because of the time difference, if you have a lesson period one and two, they're still sleeping and things along those lines. So it becomes a bit more challenging for them to actually join in live... They want to maintain their enrolment, so where possible, we've tried to encourage them to meet up with each other as well and have conversations and try and stay connected... But for those students, I will send them at the end of every lesson, "Here are the notes that we've covered in class, here's the textbook chapters that will help support that understanding. Please complete activity A B C, and send it back to me for feedback." They've done assessments that way as well.
(S2, School Leader)

As well as having students unable to return to Australia, some schools are supporting students in Australia who are unable to travel home to other countries due to border closures. For those students, one of the most significant challenges has been living so far away from their families

for extended periods of time. The uncertainty of both the local and global travel restrictions and the varying impact of COVID-19 on individual families and communities in different parts of the world has created additional stress and pressure for these students. The teachers play a critical role in supporting students' wellbeing and instilling a sense of stability and hope, in a situation where the students cannot return home.

"We have a number of students who've been in Australia for 15-months or more now without having seen family and we actually had a couple of students... whose [family member] passed away and they actually were doing a virtual catch up... with the family. And they took a couple of days off school because it was very traumatic. They hadn't been home to see her... At the end of last year, we had a number of them who hadn't quite rationalised that they wouldn't be going home. So a number of boys, and they're the big boys in tears, they're just sobbing because they just couldn't get home. And they were trying every angle to try and get home."
(S2, School Leader)

In both cases, teachers and leaders noted that it was important to maintain a sense of community and connection back to school, even if students were engaging remotely. This was achieved using strategies such as encouraging the students to connect with each other and allocating times where the teacher could connect exclusively with the international students.

Current challenges that need to be addressed

While most respondents were positive about the supports students received after the period of remote learning, many identified several challenges relating to COVID-19 that still need to be addressed. These were grouped into eight themes (Figure 8). Of note, the second most common response for this question was along the lines of ‘none’ or ‘not really’.

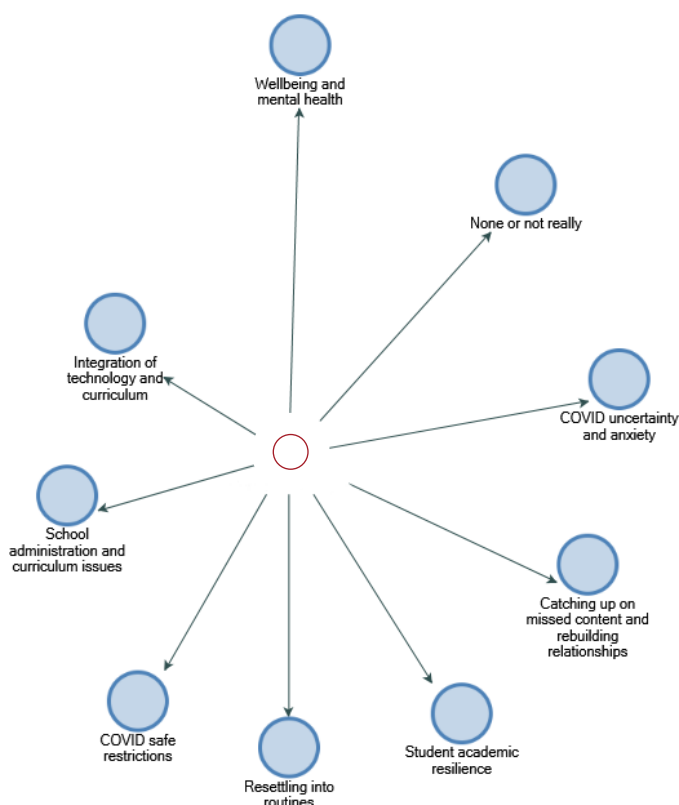
The current challenge of concern to the greatest number of respondents was *wellbeing and mental health*. This relates to both students and staff. Respondents expressed sentiments such as it “feels like a ‘COVID hangover’”, as “staff are still recovering from the impact of COVID”, that “Teachers were mentally exhausted after last year and I think first Term 2021 has been challenging for most as they struggle with the work load and increased illness in the community.”, or simply that there is “significantly reduced stamina for both staff and students after remote learning”. In terms of students, respondents indicated that “Many students are still highly anxious as a result of the pandemic and some are to the extreme of school refusal. These mental health concerns need to be addressed”. Other concerns focused on social

development: “Student wellbeing and behaviour took a hit... due to the fact that they did not have contact with other children their own age”. Another felt that the move towards online technologies has shifted relationships between schools, families and students, having “a huge impact on teacher-parent relationships and peer-peer relationships. While this may be a reflection of our society, remote learning pushed this into full gear and our students are struggling because of it”.

Part of the challenges for wellbeing and mental health stem from the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing and continuing. This *COVID uncertainty and anxiety* was the next most cited current challenge for respondents. While staff are still recovering, “parents are dealing with the financial aftermath and with settling back into the pre-COVID way of life”. As one respondent put it, there is a “general anxiety/fear of school closing again due to the virus, experienced by parents, staff and pupils alike”, and without knowing what criteria will lead to another lockdown “the possibility still looms and uses mental energy”. Many suggested the need to prepare for future lockdowns and to develop clear systems for management of staff, students and families in the event that COVID-19 flared up again. Some respondents were experiencing lockdown again at the time of completing the survey. As one person stated, “It seems as though snap lockdowns could happen any time and we need sensible, realistic responses and management, and adequate support for students and schools when they happen”. On a related note, some respondents identified *COVID safe restrictions* as being a challenge. This concerned issues such as the implementation of social distancing policies in small sites, or for some difficulties in “planning events, excursions, camps and the like, which require back-up plans, which are not always practical especially where large sums of money are involved.”

Many of the themes for current challenges focused on students, with *catching up on content/rebuilding relationships* the most cited of these by respondents. For respondents based at primary schools, the emphasis is on “rebuilding rapport with students and filling in the knowledge gaps”, as “students are a little behind in their learning”, while those at secondary schools were concerned about “catch up time”, “loss of a little teaching time”, students being “a little behind” or having “gaps that could have been picked up on earlier if they were in a classroom”, the latter being a particular concern for the 2021 Year 12 cohort. Another challenge concerns *student academic resilience*. Some respondents were concerned that as a result of the remote learning period students “developed bad habits which are hard to kick” or have become accustomed to being “spoon-fed because of the allowances they were provided during 2020... with less and less ownership being put back on students to do the work; revise the notes; use the resources and guides that teachers have prepared for them to use”. Another challenge

Figure 8: Current challenges that need to be addressed in 2021 due to COVID-19



Note: The length of each arrow represents the number of responses. The theme with the greatest number of responses is at the top, centre of the diagram.

raised concerned student online behaviour, specifically that “students are much more adept at using whole-class messaging chats and this has led to some online issues”. Some were concerned about students readjusting to school based assessment, such as standardised tests contributing to increases in student stress, or that as students had missed out on formative assessment for particular assignment types, they now lacked skills in undertaking them. This leads to the final student focused challenge, *resettling into routines*. Respondents described students as “taking longer than usual to re-establish routines and good school practices at the start of the year”, with some noting that “late arrival at school is more common”, or that “absenteeism seems to have increased”. As one respondent described: “Some students enjoyed learning at home, and a few still show signs of finding school a bit overwhelming”.

The remaining challenges raised by a few respondents concerned *integration of technology and curriculum*, and *school administration and curriculum*. Some felt that better integration of technology was required, particularly focusing on the need to equip staff and students with tools and skills in case remote learning was re-imposed, but also highlighting a need to consider how online learning is currently used, so that online resources were used “to enhance learning not as a supplement for classroom teaching”. One respondent felt that school administration teams needed to “avoid micromanaging, and take a more human-centred approach to staff and students”. Other identified challenges related to reconciling the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) senior syllabus, or the timeliness of QCAA confirmation of results.

The interviewees also expressed particular concern for the 2020 Year-12 cohort. The introduction of the new ATAR system meant that teachers were trying to implement a new system and there was some uncertainty around how that would work. Teachers and leaders explained that information from the QCAA should have been more efficient, while some of the adjustments regarding a reduction in assessment came as a relief, but this then also increased stress due to higher percentage weightings for individual tasks. It wasn’t until the final results were released that teachers and leaders at schools understood the impact on Year 12 students and were pleased and relieved that the students overall had received very good results. It was noted that the Year 12 cohort showed extraordinary resilience during 2020:

The students all got wonderful results. So it was all from the teaching staff, that was their checkpoint to say, “Okay, we haven’t done them a disservice over the last two years.” And we really couldn’t tell that until that very end point. And I think from that perspective the staff members still fronting all the time saying, “It’s fine, don’t panic. We’re all good.” The students are being really resilient saying, “You know what? This is fine. We can deal with it. The teachers are fine with it. So we’re okay.” (S2, School Leader)

Readjusting to school

After the remote learning period, there was a readjustment phase for both students and teachers. There was a sense that students needed to settle into a routine and there was a settling in period as teachers found the balance between giving students some leeway and returning to regular expectations. The S1 Secondary teacher explained that they were fortunate that there were generally minimal behavioural issues at the school, and it was a matter of just settling back in. Teachers’ experiences of learning progress varied across the different school levels. In response to how students have coped since returning to school and the interviewees responded as follows:

S1 PRINCIPAL

... all of them said, we actually really missed being here as everyone has probably said. They really appreciated being together and community, they miss their friends but they also said they miss the incidental pieces of feedback that you get from teachers. The main issues that we have been seeing and monitoring, and it hasn’t exploded to the degree that we thought, is in that wellbeing space.

S1 PRIMARY TEACHER

They still need that reassurance that everything is going to be okay. But I feel this year it’s not as stressful. The kids, I think, are starting to feel like they’re not in a pandemic any more. I think because they’re back to normality for them. They’re doing everything they used to.

S1 SECONDARY TEACHER

I know that when they came back a few suffered with their grades, because they didn’t take their learning seriously online... And that by then they had given up, they’d had enough. And so I think reeling back that attitude, bringing back that enjoyment of the classroom is what our goal is for this year. To get them back into it’s okay to be comfortable in a classroom. It’s not the same as your bedroom or the lounge room but it’s okay to be back at school.

S2 SCHOOL LEADER

There was a number of students who really enjoyed the experience and came back and said, “I wish we could do school like that all the time. I really felt that I got so much more done and it was focused and I got a bit of teacher time because I got a one-on-one at some point”. But other students and probably the majority of students really struggled because they missed the contact. The five seconds as you’re walking out the door to touch base with the teacher, to ask something that was bothering them just didn’t happen.

S1 PRIMARY TEACHER

They're very persistent, very resilient. I think they're able to cope with change quite well. And then the fact that they settled back into class, I think, that week six, it was like you could see the relief on their faces, like, "We're back here. This is normal. Here's our routines, and here's our..." I think kids thrive on things like that. ... There weren't significant gaps in the kids learning or anything like that, because we still kept up with the content.

S2 SECONDARY TEACHER

They were relatively settled when they did come back, but there were obvious gaps in knowledge for some students... we try to be mindful of the fact that the kids had had a really big year. And we were still mindful of the fact that, home lives weren't necessarily great for everyone, parents still had businesses that were closed and so there was a lot of additional stress at home. There was still a lot of uncertainties, so a lot of fear, or anticipatory fear and anxiety around the fact that, what if this happens again? I'm going to have to go through this again. So, we were just trying what we could do to minimise and reduce that additional stress... So yes, the curriculum will have changed and the way in which we do things in classes have changed. But I think on the whole, I think it's back to the school and the way in which the school itself likes to run.

Curriculum design

Although many expect that teachers 'deliver' a curriculum and address 'gaps', curriculum making is in reality a remarkably complex and ever-changing process (Priestley and Phillipou, 2018). This curriculum re-forming process was intensified during the remote learning period as a direct result of the situation teachers were faced with. Teachers engaged in rapid curriculum decision-making to identify critical aspects of their plans and to remove content or swap it with other content that was more suitable for remote learning. The limitations of online and remote learning were identified and teachers preferred to leave those elements of the curriculum that were best taught face-to-face for the return to school. The remote learning period also exposed new pedagogies that teachers could use to complement their classroom practice. The creativity applied in designing engaging and authentic remote learning experiences was something teachers expressed that they would continue to incorporate in the classroom.

Specific adjustments

The impact of the remote learning period on individual students has ranged from some students excelling in their learning to some students disengaging with school, with the rest situated somewhere in between. One of the benefits of the remote learning period for some students with additional learning needs was that students could work at their own pace which was seen as being more effective than attempting to keep up with the class. Focusing on students that were having difficulties also provided the impetus for teachers to rethink the instructional and pedagogical practice they were using and to improve them in order to cater for specific learning and wellbeing needs. Simplifying the number of traditional assessment tasks across the board was another strategy used with consideration given to whether those curriculum goals could be assessed in different ways. Some schools continue to provide additional and individualised support for all students with extra maths, science and English tutorials at lunchtime.

Catering for students' needs during this time has required a balance between flexibility and stability. There are examples of schools being extremely responsive to individual students' needs and being prepared to make adjustments where and when it was deemed beneficial for students. Putting students' needs first and making reasonable adjustments on a case-by-case basis provided the necessary flexibility of the 'rules' in order to protect a sense of stability for the student. There are examples of teachers reassuring students by providing a sense of stability through routines, maintaining relationships and expectations while acting with flexibility where required to support students. Having both stability and flexibility at the local level put schools in a strong position to respond to any health and policy directives and to mitigate any negative impacts. When actions to changes are responsive, rather than reactive, this enables schools to continue working steadily towards educational goals.

Ongoing support for teachers and leaders

The commitment and dedication of school teachers and leaders as they worked tirelessly to support students' learning and wellbeing have been widely acknowledged.

The staff were amazing. To go through the levels of anxiety that everyone went in the lead up to it and the workload they actually had to prepare to teach online just in case, as well as actually do what they were doing in the classroom, was remarkable. I couldn't ask any more of them. (S1 Principal).

As many noted in the survey, parents and the wider community gained a new appreciation for what teaching involved during the remote learning period and praised the efforts of school staff. While teachers faced enormous challenges, this inevitably had an impact on their personal wellbeing and work-life balance, as communicated by respondents to the survey. Initiatives at one school included teacher wellbeing check-in sessions with the school's psychologist, counsellors and chaplain during lockdown. When supported, there was a sense that all responsibilities did not necessarily reside solely with individual teachers but with teams and communities working together to get through this period. Most teachers felt adequately supported during the period of remote learning, and praised the efforts of their school management, but some felt further support could have been provided when students returned to school. The survey showed that teachers are still feeling the impacts of COVID-19 in terms of their own health and wellbeing. A greater focus on teachers' and school leaders' wellbeing needs is critical if they are to successfully continue to meet the demands and expectations of their roles. The extent of needs will vary for different school contexts, individual teachers and leaders.

Conclusions

*Right:
St Margaret's
Anglican Girls School*

*Far right:
The Southport School*

We are currently living through a pandemic that continues to pose serious challenges across the globe. In Australia, families and communities are also still dealing with the effects of drought, floods and fires. Planning for an uncertain future in the short-term and longer-term is necessary so that schools can adapt quickly if and when required to provide both emergency responses and ongoing support for staff and students.

Crisis management literature focuses on the three phases of response, recovery and restoration. Planning ahead for different scenarios ensures that the response phase minimises the negative effects on people and communities, and that the recovery and restoration phases are well-supported. However, all possible eventualities cannot be planned for, so responsive and adaptive approaches are also required. School leaders and teachers have shown extraordinary leadership and resilience during this time, but they too are very much living, working and dealing with the impacts of the pandemic in both their professional and personal lives. Teachers and leaders have put in a monumental effort to support the health, safety, wellbeing, social and academic outcomes for students using both preventative and responsive measures. Some key insights emerging from both the literature and responses to the survey and interviews that have the potential to mitigate any negative impacts are as follows:

1. Schools are essential

Schools play a critical role in supporting students. Teachers are often the first to notice when students are experiencing difficulties. Participation in schooling, caring relationships, support and stability are protective factors that can support students. Effective schools promote connectedness, a sense of community and belonging.

2. Quality teaching

The remote learning period was a catalyst for changing the way that teachers worked. Some have already used this opportunity to review curriculum priorities, pedagogies and the nature of the classroom environment. By reflecting on the lessons learned, new opportunities for curriculum design, assessment practices and differentiation can be identified. Quality teaching can further be fostered through professional learning, time and opportunities for collaboration with other teachers within and beyond the school.



3. Contextual variations

Schools can provide a stable and safe environment by maintaining positive relationships, continuing normal classroom routines, monitoring students' ability to cope and supporting their social and emotional wellbeing. Within a stable environment, flexibility for reasonable adjustments should be made to support access and participation in all areas of school life. In particular, vulnerable children require individualised support and referrals to specialist services if required.

4. School communities

Student learning and wellbeing are strengthened when meaningful and collaborative school-family partnerships are established. A shared purpose, active participation and effective communication within a school community enhances student engagement and connects learning at home and school.

5. Optimism and resilience

Despite the challenges, teachers and leaders have shown remarkable optimism and resilience when reflecting on the impact of COVID-19. They have found and highlighted silver linings and have communicated a sense of hope and confidence for the future. When dealing with adversity, modelling how to deal with changes, working together, showing compassion and seeking opportunities for growth can have a positive effect on school communities.

Future Directions

What is worth learning in school is a question that has persisted for generations and in recent times, the debate has been amplified across all forms of media.

The following interview excerpt conveys one principal's perspective on the future of education:

We do need to shake up education but not because of a pandemic and that we could teach online. That's a load of crock. At the end of the day, a great education, leadership, anything, is all about relationships. So how can you develop relationships unless you're, well you can online, you can do it but it's not as effective unless you are in together in community... the pandemic really just highlighted how quickly things are changing and how we need to prepare young people for a world that will be very different to the one that you and I grew up in. (S1 Principal)

Recently, Watterston and Zhao (2020) identified six domains for transforming schooling that included rethinking the curriculum, rethinking assessment and rethinking teaching and learning. Since the pandemic began, there has been an intense and dynamic period of considerable creativity, innovation, reflection and responsiveness in education. Much of the work has been done at the school level with the possibilities for the future of education already capturing the imagination of educators. With the national curriculum review underway, there is an opportunity for genuine education reform more broadly, to learn about the past and to prepare for the future. We have already seen innovations in meaningful curriculum and assessment design, including addressing skills and dispositions for the 21st century, technologies, fostering autonomy, independence and building resilience, strengthened partnership with parents and a continued focus on relationships within and beyond school communities. By sharing knowledge and models of exemplary practice, they can continue to strengthen practice to act for and with others.

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