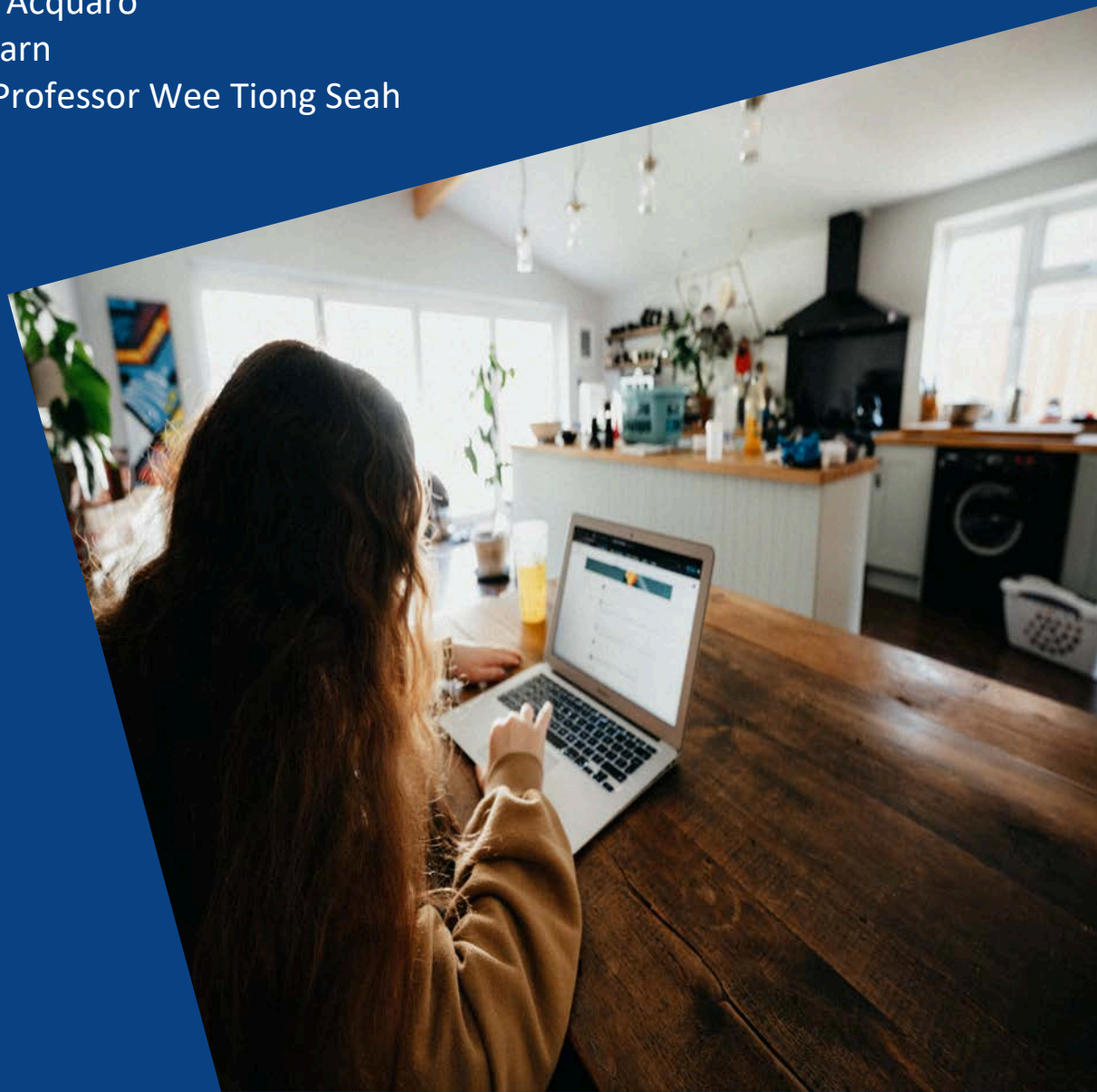THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne Graduate
School of Education

Australian Education Survey

Examining the impact of COVID-19
Report Summary

Dr Natasha Ziebell
Dr Daniela Acquaro
Dr Cath Pearn
Associate Professor Wee Tiong Seah

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Introduction

A national survey exploring the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning across all educational sectors was undertaken by researchers at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. This research has recorded a snapshot in time during the height of the pandemic restrictions and the rapid shift to remote and online learning.

This research project was divided into four sections, focusing on:

- The challenges and opportunities experienced by teachers as the whole teaching profession moved to remote and online learning, while schools remained open for those students who could not stay at home during this period.

- Teachers' views on students' educational progress, social development and emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 isolation period.

- Teachers' observations of student learning during the remote learning experience.

- The experiences of primary and secondary teachers during the period of remote learning.

The following summary of the research reports the results, supported by illustrative examples of the effect that COVID-19 had on students and teachers during the period of remote learning.

PART 1: STUDENTS

Access to Remote Learning

Access to Devices

49.45% of teachers reported that *all* of their students had access to devices and 43.28% of teachers reported that *most* of their students had access to devices. Of the teachers that reported that all of their students had access to devices, fewer primary teachers (37.46%) than secondary teachers (56.25%) indicated that all of their students had access.

1.5% of all respondents reported that only a few students (25%) in their class had access to devices. Teachers identified that student access to devices was a key issue, and that some were using only their phone to access online learning. In some cases, students needed to share devices with other family members.

Access to Reliable Internet

Even though most students had access to a device, student access to reliable internet for synchronous teaching and learning activities was more varied. Only 10% of teachers identified stable and reliable internet 100% of the time for their classes. 70.25% of all teachers reported that stable and reliable internet was available to students 75% of the time and 11.47% of teachers identified that students had stable and reliable internet 50% of the time.
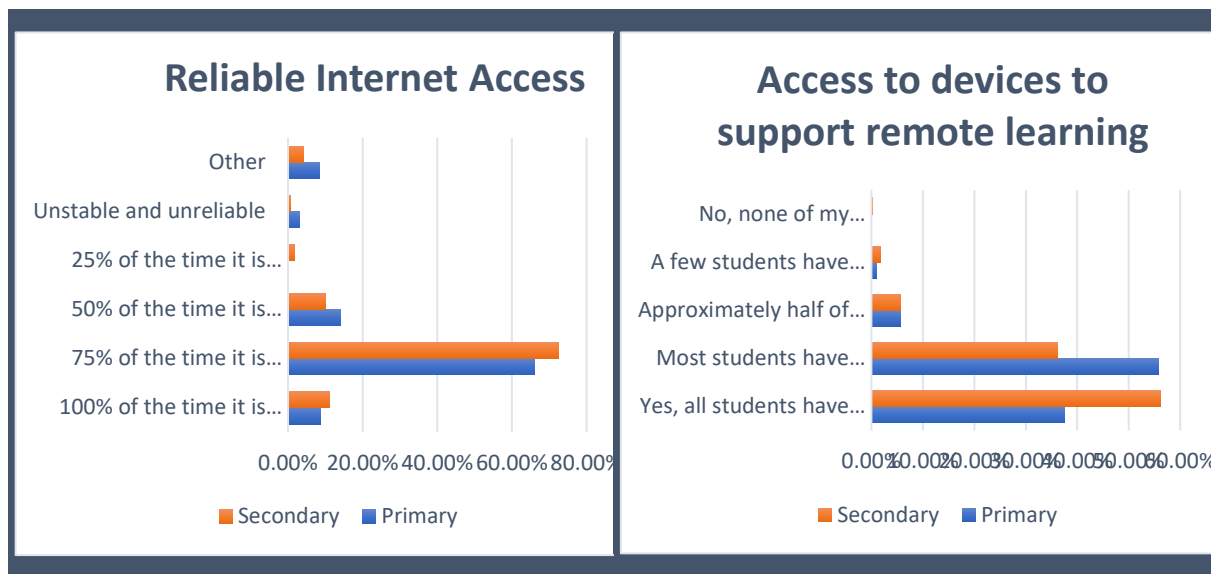
Attendance

15% of all primary and secondary teachers reported that their students *always* attended online classes at the designated times. 16% of all primary and secondary teachers reported that their students attended online classes at the designated times only *half the time*. Survey responses indicate that attendance was highest across both primary and secondary independent schools. A greater percentage of students across rural primary and secondary schools did not attend online classes at the designated times set by the school.

Task Completion

With the shift to remote teaching and learning, the completion of work assigned was necessary for teachers to determine engagement and educational progress. Only 2.4% of all teachers reported that their students always completed all work assigned at home. 54.3% of all teachers reported that students completed their work *most of the time*. 26% of teachers reported that students complete work *about half the time*. Primary teachers in government, catholic and independent schools had consistent responses to the number of students completing their work *most of the time*. Responses amongst secondary school teachers differed across sectors, with teachers in government schools less likely to have students completing assigned work at home.

> *"There is an element that is refusing to engage and I am unable to chase up (unlike when they are onsite)."*

> *"Some students are working well. Some have not submitted at all."*

Student Preparedness

The rapid transition to remote learning did not leave teachers and students with much time to prepare for this mode of teaching and learning. 57.85% of combined responses from primary and secondary teachers regarding student preparedness were within the range of *somewhat agree* to *strongly agree*. 34% of teachers *somewhat disagree* to *strongly disagree* that students were well prepared to engage in learning online in the home environment. 30% of teachers identified that they felt their students where *somewhat* well prepared to engage in learning online in the home environment.

Teachers working in primary schools in the catholic, government and independent sectors responded similarly in response to the question relating to student preparedness to undertake online learning at home. However, in secondary schools, there were some differences. 74% of secondary teachers from independent schools, 69% from catholic schools and 48% of teachers from government schools *strongly agree* to *somewhat agree* that students were well prepared to engage in learning online in the home environment.

Student Preparedness: Responses by Location

52.63% of primary teachers from state or territory capital cities, 56% from regional areas and 30.43% from rural areas reported that they *strongly agree* to *somewhat agree* that their students were well prepared to engage in learning online in the home environment. 63.95% of secondary teachers from state or territory capital cities, 62.36% from regional areas and 39.13% from rural areas reported that they *strongly agree* to *somewhat agree* that their students were well prepared to engage in learning online in the home environment.

Work Standard

Overall, 56% of primary and secondary teachers reported that they ***somewhat agree*** and ***strongly agree*** that students were producing the same standard of work in the home environment as they would in the classroom environment. 37% of teachers ***somewhat disagree*** to ***strongly disagree*** that students were producing the same standard of work in the home environment as they would in the classroom environment. 53% of primary teachers identified that the work standard during the remote learning period was not at the same standard as face to face teaching. 65% of secondary teachers reported that students were producing the same standard of work in the home environment as they would in the classroom environment.

Primary teacher comments:

20 out of the 34 additional comments in this section made reference to significant parent support resulting in a higher quality of work being produced by students.

> *A lot of work is clearly being done by parents i.e., student have magically learnt how to spell every word correctly. So the work is higher standard for some students, but I don't believe it is authentic learning. Other students are barely completing tasks and struggling to understand or complete the work.*

Secondary teacher comments:

The following representative responses from secondary teachers were more varied, indicating that some students are doing much better in the remote learning environment, while others are not.

> *"Those who are able to are. But there are a lot of kids who usually need more extra support in the classroom that aren't able to do much at all."*

> *"Some are doing better, majority are doing the same."*

> *"Some students are producing more and better work. Some already disengaged students have become even less connected to school and school work."*

> *"The work produced by my students is a higher standard than in a normal class. They are free from distractions and are a bit bored, so are happy to complete their work really well."*

Work Standard: Responses by Location

41% of primary teachers from state or territory capital cities, 39% from regional areas and 35% from rural areas reported that they ***strongly agree*** to ***somewhat agree*** that students produced work to the same standard at home as they would in the classroom environment.

66% of secondary teachers from state or territory capital cities, 62% from regional areas and 56% from rural areas reported that they ***strongly agree*** to ***somewhat agree*** that students produced work to the same standard at home as they would in the classroom environment.

Educational progress

When asked to respond to the question about the perceived impact on students' educational progress the patterns of responses were similar for both primary and secondary teachers. Those teachers who responded that the impact would be a negative one focused on the issue of not being able to provide feedback as they would if they were teaching face-to-face classes. Special Education teachers were concerned about the impact that a change of routines and programs would have on their students. Teachers who indicated that there would be positive educational outcomes for their students focused on skills such as their students' improved use of technology and an improvement in independence, organisation and resilience. Many teachers indicated that there were going to be both positive and negative impacts on their students, depending on the amount of support their students had received during the remote learning period, especially for those learning at home. Teachers indicated that the better the support at home the more positive educational outcome for students. For some students, remote learning could have a negative impact as they did not have access to resources and their usual routines. Some teachers suggested it was too soon to make a judgement on the impact.

Social Development

Successful and healthy social development helps students form positive and meaningful relationships with family, friends, teachers, and others. The responses from the primary and secondary school teachers were rather similar: slightly more than half of them felt that the impact would be at least slightly negative, and a quarter identified that it could turn out either way for students. The overall message appears to be that many students found means and ways of communicating with one another anyway, albeit not in a physical manner. Many teachers also expressed optimism that remote learning would develop a greater appreciation of friendship in their students, and also a valuing of attributes such as connectedness, empathy, and kindness. The role of the students' families in fostering social development – or cushioning its negative impact – was mentioned.

Emotional Wellbeing

Three out of four of the primary and secondary school teachers surveyed were of the view that the remote learning would negatively affect students' emotional wellbeing to some degree. This would manifest in forms such as anxiety (including obsessive-compulsive disorder related to personal cleanliness), feelings of disconnection, withdrawal from interacting with others, and missing friends. As with social development, students' families are seen by teachers as an important factor in determining the extent to which individual students will be affected, and how they will be affected. It appears that social and emotional learning might take a more prominent role in school curricula when students return to school.

"Biggest single concern is student and teacher wellbeing. Adolescent people are not designed to work or learn in isolation from their friends and peers. I am not concerned at all about academic progress. Good teaching will soon fill any gaps created by online teaching, and teachers that I work with have done incredibly well at adapting to the online environment. It is the social-emotional wellbeing of our young people, particularly those at risk in their homes, that is my biggest concern."

PART 2: TEACHERS

Work Hours and Mode

More than two-thirds of all teachers indicated that they worked more hours than usual every week. This included 68% of the primary teachers and 75% of the secondary teachers with nearly 50% overall working more than 6 hours extra each week. Some teachers indicated that they were working more than an extra 20 hours per week. For example, a primary teacher commented that remote learning had taken over his/her life:

> *"My life consists of remote learning. Recording lessons, responding to work, providing feedback, attending meetings, and everything else in between."*

> *"The pressure on us right now is enormous. It is difficult to manage healthy breaks away from work because parents and children and our leaders all require so much from us right now... It's hell right now for teachers. A literal living hell."*

A secondary teacher highlighted the difficulty of working from home while supervising his/her own children's remote learning:

> *"I'm getting up around 4 most mornings to finalise my day's lesson planning and to do corrections. That way I'm available during class time for my students- and during frees/ recess/ lunch can then help/ monitor my three children's schooling."*

At the time, only a very small number of primary and secondary teachers (1.75%) had not changed their work mode due to the COVID-19 situation and were still teaching in their regular classroom. Nearly a quarter of the primary teachers, and slightly more than a quarter of secondary teachers, indicated that they were still working at school but their teaching mode had changed due to a change in student attendance or the fact that their students were at home. Most teachers indicated that they were working from home and using remote methods for teaching.

Internet Access (Teachers)

Approximately 75% of primary teachers reported that their internet connection was stable and reliable for more than 75% of the time while approximately 90% of secondary teachers thought the internet was stable and reliable for at least 75% of the time. Teachers commented about some of the difficulties they had encountered while trying to teach remotely. For example:

- *"Hard to host video chats with students. They have to have their audio and video turned off otherwise my internet drops out. I don't usually have internet issues but the bandwidth demands of video hosting is huge."*

- *"Currently hot spotting off my phone as my modem died and the telco are SLOW at replacing it."*

- *"We are remote and satellite internet, which is not always reliable and very expensive."*

Teacher Preparedness

78% of all primary and secondary teachers agreed to varying degrees to feeling well prepared and supported for the move away from face-to-face teaching. This included 81.38% of the secondary teachers while 72.69 % of the primary teachers indicating that they *somewhat agreed*, *agreed* and *strongly agreed* to feeling prepared and supported for the move to remote learning.

More than 77% of all teachers agreed to some extent that they were confident in their ability to deliver classes online. More primary teachers (83.17%) than secondary teachers (74.05%) agreed that they were confident in their ability to deliver classes online when they chose *somewhat agree, agree or strongly agree*.

Curriculum Development Support

At least half of the teachers agreed (to different extents) that they have been given professional development (50.4%), extra time (77.2%) and curriculum development support (68.1%) during this period. Approximately half of the teachers (50.4%) somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree that they had been provided with professional development as they moved to remote teaching.

Remote Learning Tools

Approximately one-quarter of teachers used pre-recorded videos in their teaching. Teachers also used a wide range of tools including apps to conduct synchronous lessons (Zoom, Google Meet), pre-recorded videos made by teachers, pre-recorded videos available online, interactive games and tasks, learning platforms (such as Edrolo and Education Perfect), classroom organisation programs (such as Google Classroom and Teacher Dashboard 365) and tasks that could be completed in the home environment. Nearly twice as many secondary teachers (14.21%) than the primary teachers (7.8%) indicated that they used group tools such as Microsoft Teams and Google docs. However, more than twice as many primary teachers (14.16%) than secondary teachers (5.97%) used tasks that made use of the student's home environment such as gardening and cooking. Secondary teachers indicated that they used Learning platforms such as OneNote, Canvas, Compass, SEQTA, elearn and Blackboard Collaborate. Many used a variety of online modes.

Challenges

"Unrealistic expectations of teachers - using multiple platforms concurrently with very little training. The time to prepare per class is limited yet we are supposed to provide technologically advanced methods of delivery."

"It is overwhelming and misunderstood by much of the wider community how difficult this time has been, mainly because as teachers it is in our nature to just get on with it because we don't want to let our students down."

The challenges reported by teachers were categorised into five key areas related to:

1) Teaching

2) Learning

3) Parents and Carers

4) Health, Safety and Wellbeing

5) Work Mode.

While there were serious concerns about the capacity of remote learning to replicate classroom practice, the current lockdown period also exacerbated existing issues and resulted in the emergence of significant wellbeing and mental health problems. Teachers expressed concern about students who had not engaged with school at all during this period, and for more vulnerable students, providing additional support has been severely impeded by remote learning modes. This is despite the attempts to actively and persistently communicate with families.

There is a sense that the disruption to students' schooling will be managed through good curriculum design once students return to school. Good instruction is essential, and teachers spent a lot of their time recording videos or sourcing information in a form with which students could engage. This was particularly challenging for teachers who use materials, demonstrations and resources for teaching, such as instruments, experiments and concrete materials. One of the fundamental activities of good teaching is the informal assessment and 'in the moment' adjustments teachers make by providing feedback and through differentiating their instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. Moving to remote teaching has meant that teachers could not interact with students, see their expressions, or have 1:1 conversations to monitor student progress as they normally would in a classroom setting. This resulted in some teachers identifying that it was difficult to provide differentiation to meet the individual needs of students. Some teachers were confronted with situations where students refused to turn on their cameras or a need to work within the scope of school policies prevented them from doing so. This complicated things further because not only did this prevent them from gauging what students needed help with, but they were unable to track who was in attendance.

Teachers raised concerns about their personal health and wellbeing while they were working from home, due to feelings of isolation, physical workspace, excessive screen time and dealing with stress. They also reported exhaustion due to the additional workload remote learning has created and, in some cases, they were attempting to manage teaching on-site and via remote learning at the same time. While teachers were generally keen to return to schooling, they were also confronted with the risk of having their health compromised due to COVID-19.

Issues of equity were raised for a range of reasons, including parental support, access to resources and devices, and reliable internet. Some students were spending all day engaging with remote learning using only a phone. Teachers feared that the pandemic and consequent remote learning will have had the most negative impact on vulnerable students.

Opportunities

"We are very capable educators and have done a remarkable job of supporting our students during an unprecedented time. This shall strengthen our relationships with students and parents, who have greater insight and appreciation of the role we play in their child's life."

Teachers identified various opportunities emerging from the shift to remote and online delivery which have been categorised into the following four key areas:

1) Student Engagement

2) Rethinking Schooling, Education and Curriculum

3) Parents and Carers

4) Staff Collegiality and Collaboration

5) Teacher Proficiency.

The shift to remote online teaching and learning has led to some interesting observations by both primary and secondary school teachers. Where students may have disrupted the class, some teachers commented that the shift to working from home has put a stop to this. It has been observed that student engagement has improved in some instances for students who would normally be disruptive and for those students who would be affected by disruptions in class. Improvement in student work was also observed, although teachers noted that this could be due to parents having significant input and editing student work. Teachers also reported that some students' organisational and time management skills improved.

Teaching and learning remotely also allowed for more creative approaches. Teachers reported that online platforms had been beneficial for differentiating learning and allowed for greater efficiencies in setting and preparing work for students online. The shift generated an interest and desire to look at flipped learning for students in the future, to rethink what is important in the curriculum and how the use of technologies is equipping students with vital digital literacy skills which will be of benefit in the future.

Another benefit emerging has been the improved partnership with parents and carers. Teachers identified that parents and carers have become more aware of their child's learning, their capabilities and the areas that challenge them. The increase in communication and support from parents and carers has strengthened school-home partnerships and is seen to be a great success.

Some teachers reported that staff collegiality and collaboration soared during this time. Teachers relied on one another as they transitioned onto online platforms. An increase in collegiality and collaboration across schools was also reported with a desire to help one another to support student learning. Teacher proficiency in the provision of online teaching also increased. Teachers reported that where they may have been hesitant to try digital modes of teaching and learning, the forced transition enabled them to discover a broad range of pedagogies which would otherwise not been utilised.

"I believe that there will be many opportunities to challenge the many rigid practices of teaching which haven't changed for years …it is a great opportunity for us to look at education as a whole and ask ourselves - what do we truly value in education, what are we doing well? What can we do to better and grow?"

Conclusion

This summary report outlines the findings from a large-scale national survey that investigated the impact of COVID-19 on education in Australia. The study provides a snapshot of the experiences and perspectives of primary and secondary school teachers nationally in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The data collected identifies wide-ranging factors affecting teaching and learning including, but not limited to, changes to work modes resulting in online and offline remote teaching. Changes to student engagement have been noted where in some cases students have become more focused, while at-risk and vulnerable students have been reported as disengaging from education. The data has highlighted the ability of teachers to quickly shift their teaching to remote learning platforms with many significantly improving their digital proficiency and collaboration with fellow staff members. Remote teaching and learning have also placed the spotlight on the importance of positive home-school partnerships. Teachers reported increases in communication and support from parents and carers which have resulted in improved student engagement. Alongside this, concerns were raised about a lack of communication and student wellbeing, particularly for those students living in challenging circumstances.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education will have far reaching consequences. A better understanding of the experiences of educators and students across the nation is essential in informing what supports and adjustments are needed now and into the future.