

Chapter 4

Virtual Learning

Post COVID–19:

Factors for Consideration to Enhance Student and Teacher Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The impacts of COVID-19 on education have changed how many schools and education providers deliver education with the rapid transition to online learning environments. This research highlights the critical factors influencing student and teacher engagement while also highlighting opportunities for educators to enhance the engagement for their students, utilising results from two focus groups and qualitative surveys through a case study on school districts across South Australia. This provided an understanding of the critical factors influencing teacher and student engagement and identified opportunities for improvements to the levels of student engagements through online learning environments. This research has identified best practices within schools and across the Department of Education that can support virtual learning and digital engagement into the future. In addition, through the identification of critical factors influencing student and teacher engagement, exploration of opportunities to support students and improve overall digital engagement can be identified.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the critical factors impacting student and teacher engagement during the rapid implementation of virtual learning due to COVID-19 in South Australia and explore best practices and opportunities for the future. This chapter extends findings of previous research on rural school, teacher and student engagement, which identified the importance of three critical factors impacting both teacher and student engagement, support, access and learning needs (Papavasiliou & Papavasiliou, 2021). The aim of extending research is to understand if there are similarities and/or differences between the experiences of virtual learning across student and teacher engagement and school location. Furthermore, this research explores the best practices that arose during COVID-19 that can inform future virtual learning and opportunities to enhance student and teacher engagement through online learning platforms. In addition to the opportunities for consistency and future, the research explores factors for ensuring content and material shared virtually was engaging, and how appropriate support was provided for both teachers and students. Data collection involved teachers from various school districts, subjects and year levels and utilised qualitative surveys and focus groups to explore their experiences.

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all countries and sectors. This was specifically evident in education, where risk of infection transmission resulted in closures of face-to-face activities across all educational institutions (ECLAC, 2020). This global reaction was felt within Australia, where many early learning centres, junior and secondary schools closed and had to rapidly transition their teachers and students to remote learning (Sacks et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that not all students were affected equally, this could have related to socioeconomic status, location or support networks at home (ECLAC, 2020). The detrimental impact to student learning in rural and remote areas of Australia is understood with inequalities evident between educational outcomes between metropolitan and rural and remote areas. Furthermore, the impacts on the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (both positively and negatively) are unknown, and the affects could cause consequences and opportunities in both the short and long term (Schleicher, 2020). It is clear that there are a number of unknowns associated with the short and long-term implications of shifting education online for both student and teacher engagement.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Federal and State Governments implemented online or virtual learning systems, either encouraging or mandating virtual learning for all students in primary or secondary schools (Hendry, 2020). This decision was made quickly, in response to the rapidly changing environment, and having significant impacts on teachers and student's ability to engage and interact with one another (Hendry, 2020; Zagon, 2020). Along with

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