

Learning through COVID-19

Maximising educational outcomes for Australia's children and young people experiencing disadvantage

Pillar 2 Report:

What do children, young people and families say about needs, and impact of COVID-19?



Title:	Pillar 2 Report: What do children, young people and families say about needs, and impact of COVID-19?
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Date:	3 February 2021
Revision:	Final

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Executive Summary

In response to COVID-19, 94% of the world's student population was impacted by transitions to remote learning. COVID-19 has also significantly affected families' health and socio-economic circumstances. Some children and young people already experiencing disadvantaged circumstances may be at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes than they would have been had the pandemic not occurred.

The *Learning through COVID-19* project is an immediate assessment that aims to understand the experience and needs of children and young people already at risk for poorer wellbeing, educational outcomes and future employment, whose risk of educational disadvantage has increased as the result of COVID-19. The project will also provide an evidence-based platform to respond to these students' needs in the recovery from COVID-19.

The *Learning through COVID-19* project is structured across three interrelated stages of work (Pillars 1 to 3) that are designed to inform solutions to address worsening educational disadvantage. Pillar 2 (this report) set out to understand the lived experience of COVID-19 on Australian children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage, its impact on their educational outcomes and engagement with school, and the response to COVID-19 of service providers to inform efforts to reduce educational disadvantage in this context.

Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19

International evidence on the experience of COVID-19 paints a complex picture. Internationally, and in the context of varied, but often extended periods of remote learning, there are concerns about the *potential* extent of *learning loss* and that educational achievement gaps by socio-economic status could widen. However, there is currently insufficient evidence of *actual* learning loss available from the pandemic to inform these projections. In Australia, recent insights point to the impact of the lack of digital access, the challenges of learning from home, lack of social connections, mental health impacts, and uncertainties around future study, training and employment opportunities. The second lockdown in Victoria has brought additional challenges to children, young people and families there, and extended home schooling has brought greater risk of disengagement from school.

Who are the students at risk of poorer educational outcomes?

Learning through COVID-19 focuses on three cohorts of students likely to be most affected by the educational disruption of COVID-19:

- Cohort 1: Young children who started school already behind.
- Cohort 2: Older students who were already at risk of disengagement, who may not return to school but whose employment prospects have worsened.
- Cohort 3: Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system.

Pillar 2 data sources and limitations

This Report summarises quantitative analyses of Department of Education population and sample data (New South Wales, Tasmania), 39 semi-structured interviews with children, young people and their families in New South Wales, Tasmania, and Queensland (Cohort 1=7, Cohort 2=22, Cohort 3=10), and semi-structured interviews (n=21) and an online survey (n=39) from stakeholders representing non-government organisations providing education and support services for children and young people experiencing disadvantage across Australia. A videoconference-based *academic roundtable* was held with Australia-based experts in the fields of education and disadvantage. Data collection and analysis were completed between September and November 2020.

These data are high quality and fit-for-purpose but the extremely rapid assessment means they have some limitations:

- Education Department data have some population non-response on attendance and disciplinary sanctions. For NSW it was necessary to use a proxy for Cohort 1 (i.e. students whose Year 3 NAPLAN reading and numeracy results are in the bottom quartile). The NSW data is a longitudinal sample survey of students.
- Student members belonging to Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 were more likely to leave the survey, and thus the data potentially underestimate educational disadvantage.
- The lack of a suitable control group in some analyses limits the extent to which effects can be attributed to the impact of COVID-19. The NSW data for Cohorts 1 and 2 and the TAS data for Cohort 2 include control groups. In TAS, there is no control group for Cohort 1. We can identify if educational disadvantage worsened during the pandemic, but not if this was likely caused by the pandemic. There are no comparable non-members for Cohort 3, and thus we cannot tell if the changes observed in Cohort 3 are distinctive to members of that cohort.

- Only children and young people who were members of the cohorts were eligible to take part in qualitative interviews, so no comparison can be drawn with students who are not experiencing disadvantage. There were no rural or remote participants, and only two students identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which suggests that their perspectives could be underrepresented.
- Interview recruitment was conducted with organisations working with students experiencing disadvantage and was sometimes limited by families choosing not to participate and service providers finding it difficult to identify families who met the inclusion criteria.
- There is no national sampling frame for the non-government organisations and the sample is limited to those who chose to participate.
- Invitations to participate were sent out through relevant peak bodies and through existing networks of Project Team members, which could have led to some selection bias.
- Some stakeholders worked for organisations receiving funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, which could have impacted on their reports.
- The qualitative data represent participants' own accounts, impressions and perspectives even when reported as statements of empirical fact.

Impact of COVID-19 on attendance, disciplinary absences, conditions of learning and learning loss

Pillar 1 established that the three cohorts of children and young people were already at risk of poorer educational outcomes, and that their educational disadvantage could potentially worsen as a direct result of COVID-19.

The quantitative analyses of Education Department data suggest that the disadvantage gap in attendance increased during COVID-19 in Cohorts 1 and 2, and that for Cohort 2, the increase was potentially caused by the pandemic. The impact of this growth in attendance gap on educational attainment remains to be seen.

Previous research suggested that if online teaching is available and effective, learning loss could be mitigated. Previous research has also found students learn less when home schooling, and have varied levels of engagement with online learning. The students interviewed in the *Learning through COVID-19* project struggled with remote learning, but also learned to adapt during lockdown. Learning loss was described as a multifaceted and dynamic experience. Students and their families talked of feeling unable to keep up, falling behind, and then, in some cases, catching up with learning.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, COVID-19 appears to have closed disadvantage gaps in participation

in school clubs, largely by causing club participation to fall for all students in 2020. In interviews, many students were vocal about missing sports. It is likely that this experience was universal, rather than specific to students experiencing disadvantage.

In Cohort 1, the disadvantage gap in bullying increased during the pandemic and our control group analyses suggest the pandemic was potentially responsible. Disadvantage worsened because non-cohort members reported less bullying during the pandemic, while Cohort 1 members did not. Positive benefits of the COVID-19 lockdown were also reported. Some students, with sensory needs and mental health challenges suggested home schooling was less stressful than being at school.

Students at flexi-schools described their schools before COVID-19 as very supportive and that support continued throughout lockdown. Flexi-schools are a form of alternative schooling in Australia, which provide schooling for, often marginalised, young people who have struggled in the mainstream schooling system. Flexi-schools are smaller than mainstream schools, and provide intensive, timely and multifaceted support to their students. This model of schooling, which was already designed to be flexible and responsive to students' complex needs, may have been better placed than mainstream schools to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

The supportive roles of parents/carers, teachers and community in mitigating the risk of learning loss should not be underestimated. More broadly, the immediate government response to the transition to home learning across Australian jurisdictions, through the development of online information, tools and resources, provision of funding and resource support, could have helped mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on learning.

In New South Wales and Tasmania, the length of lockdown was possibly too short to have a significant impact on learning. The longer lockdown in Victoria may have a greater impact on students and the differential impact on learning loss across jurisdictions requires monitoring.

Impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and wellbeing

There was little evidence to suggest that COVID-19 was associated with significant growth in disadvantage gaps for student engagement. Members of Cohorts 1 and 2 were less engaged than non-cohort members on all measures of student engagement before the pandemic, but these disadvantage gaps in engagement did not grow more over time for students experiencing COVID-19 disruptions, than for students who did not.

Adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing among children and young people are being reported in Australia and internationally. The adverse impact of COVID-19 on mental health is important in itself and has implications for student engagement,

learning and attainment. Social isolation, lack of social connections and fatigue have all been reported in other research.

Among students interviewed in the *Learning through COVID-19* project, feelings of anxiety were palpable and students talked of the difficulties of feeling ‘stuck’ in one location, their loss of social, family and peer connections, and important milestones or events, which impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. Stakeholders also reflected on students’ more general sense of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation. Social connection and sense of belonging were presented as critical ingredients for keeping students engaged in school.

Stakeholders acknowledged pressures placed on families, teachers and schools during home schooling, which were often compounded by digital inequities, but also noted that home schooling presented new opportunities for increased engagement, and flexibility in the future.

These findings mainly reflect the experiences of a relatively short lockdown, and longer lockdowns will potentially have a greater impact on students’ mental health and wellbeing, and engagement with school. This in turn could lead to greater learning loss.

Strength and resilience among children and young people experiencing disadvantage

Stakeholders reported that volatile transitions into further education, training or employment might generate a *crisis of hopelessness* among students. Yet, even with increased uncertainty regarding futures for school leavers, all students interviewed planned to finish school and move on to vocational training or further study. The COVID-19 lockdown also provided them with an opportunity to take stock.

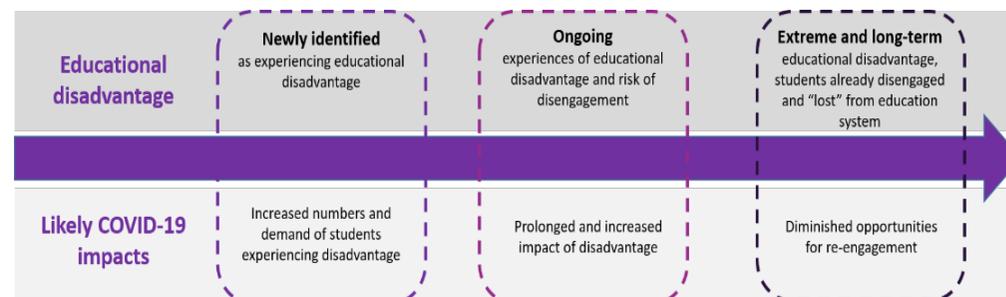
Overall, the children and young people interviews highlight the many challenges that children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage face. For many, COVID-19 was simply the latest challenge impacting already complex life circumstances. The stakeholder consultations paralleled the views of the children and young people, whereby COVID-19 exacerbated, rather than created, problems.

Understanding COVID-19 in the context of the ongoing challenges faced by children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage, and their strengths and resilience should be central to the response to the impacts of the pandemic.

Whether these strengths and resilience are specific to children and young people experiencing disadvantage or common to all children and young people is unknown and worthy of further research.

Understanding educational disadvantage during COVID-19

This Pillar 2 Report provides a complex picture of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic among Australia’s children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Moving forward, experiences of educational disadvantage should be considered as occurring along a continuum.



There are students who are newly identified as experiencing disadvantage as a result of COVID-19, students who were already experiencing disadvantage and for whom it is likely to continue and heighten as a result of COVID-19, and students and families who are ‘lost to the system’, with COVID-19 likely to further diminish opportunities for re-engagement and moving out of long-term educational disadvantage. Responses are needed for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic disruptions are multifaceted. They are also experienced differently by students and schools, and pandemic responses are implemented and received in variable ways. The responses and solutions are also likely multifaceted and varied in their effectiveness and implementation, and students receive different doses and have different receptiveness. Given these complex and interlinked relationships, the pandemic does not seem to have had a uniform impact on all forms of educational disadvantage, especially in the short term. Unpacking this impact in detail will require ongoing research into how different forms of COVID-19 disruption interact with the underlying system of educational disadvantage.

Identified gaps

Pillar 2 has strengthened the understanding of the experience of educational disadvantage among Australia's children and young people, but a number of knowledge gaps remain. Recommendations for future research include:

- Longitudinal tracking of student outcomes across multiple samples, which would help to establish whether observed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have longer-term implications.
- Identification and analysis of other indices of educational outcomes, including student achievement, to provide a richer understanding of the diversity of impacts on learners resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Investigation of the variability in student outcomes across schools and the relationship between student outcomes and school-level strategies to support students during COVID-19.
- Analysis of Victorian Education Department data and other data sets that include children from Victoria to examine the unique impacts of repeated and extended remote learning for students.
- Linkage to post-school destinations surveys, such as the Next Steps (Queensland) or On-track (Victoria), to examine if COVID-19 has affected educational decisions among young people in the short and longer-term.
- Exploration of the mechanisms that may have led to drops in attendance rates of Cohort 1 and 2 students, including ongoing monitoring to ensure that rates return to pre-COVID-19 levels as restrictions are lifted.
- Further exploration of the areas of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement and how these were affected by COVID-19 to understand what works and for whom.
- Exploration of how students, teachers and schools assess academic performance and the meaning of learning loss in the context of COVID-19.
- Further longitudinal investigation of if, to what extent, and in what ways disadvantaged school leavers' educational and occupational aspirations evolve as the mid-term repercussions of the pandemic become clearer.
- Research on the experience of hope and uncertainty to understand whether this is a general phenomenon or specific to particular cohorts.

What are the emerging areas for action?

Addressing the challenges of educational disadvantage in Australia which have been amplified by COVID-19 requires a systems-based approach. This approach includes appropriate and early interventions, which aim to prevent as well as treat problems, targeted across the life course, and a holistic orientation that addresses more than just the individual student experience. It requires working with students, families, schools and communities to co-develop solutions.

COVID-19 support will need to be ongoing, not short-term, and needs to be accompanied by effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure that evidence-based options for action are grounded in an understanding of, not just *what works*, but *what works, for whom, in what circumstances*.

Based on the insights presented in this Pillar 2 Report, and building on the findings from Pillar 1, four priority focused action areas have been identified.

What are the emerging areas for action?

- Student mental health, wellbeing and hope**
 - Early, preventative intervention
 - Increased mental health support in schools
 - Improved protective factors to prevent mental health issues developing
 - Capitalise on student social connections and sense of belonging
- The future role of teachers, schools and communities**
 - Provide adequate resources to support transition back to curriculum-based learning
 - Empower students to take control of their learning
 - Provide parents with the digital literacy skills and learning strategies
 - Recognise the need to be 'nimble', flexible and adaptive
- Digital equity**
 - Support teachers to develop and implement online learning through blended approaches
 - Provide support to build parents' and students' digital and technical literacy
 - Sustain access to digital devices and connectivity
- Protections for the most vulnerable students**
 - Ensure adequate economic provisions are made for people
 - Targeted and tailored responses across locations and jurisdictions
 - Remain nimble, responsive, and adaptive to individual circumstances
 - Stabilise placements and schooling for children at risk and strengthen support networks

Next Steps

This Pillar 2 Report highlights the complexity of educational disadvantage among Australia's children and young people. It has validated, but also challenged some of the assumptions made about the impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage. The information presented has progressed the understanding of the system of educational disadvantage and the focused areas, which will be taken forward in Pillar 3 to inform evidence-based options for action to maximise educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

Background

In response to COVID-19, 94% of the world's student population were impacted by transitions to remote learning (United Nations, 2020). COVID-19 disrupted schooling and significantly affected families' health and socio-economic circumstances. Some children and young people already experiencing disadvantaged circumstances may be at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes now than they would have been had the pandemic not occurred. The *Institute for Social Science Research* (ISSR) at The University of Queensland is undertaking a study, funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, to explore the impact on learning through COVID-19. The study aims to understand the experience and needs of children and young people already at risk for poorer wellbeing, educational outcomes and future employment prospects, and provide an evidence-based platform to respond to these students' needs.

Educational disadvantage comes in many forms and refers to disadvantage with respect to the learning outcomes and educational milestones that need to be achieved to ensure satisfactory onward progression in school and beyond. The Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020) set out an understanding of educational disadvantage in the context of the ecological system and the life course. The approach recognised that children and young people grow and develop in environments that are shaped by economic, social and cultural systems and institutions, and that these environments in turn support or limit opportunities to progress through education. It also recognised that human development occurs across people's lives and that their lives are organised according to socially and historically specific stages such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age and later life. Educational milestones such as Preschool, Primary School, early Secondary School and later Secondary School mirror these stages and key educational transitions and events (such as leaving school early) matter for later life events.

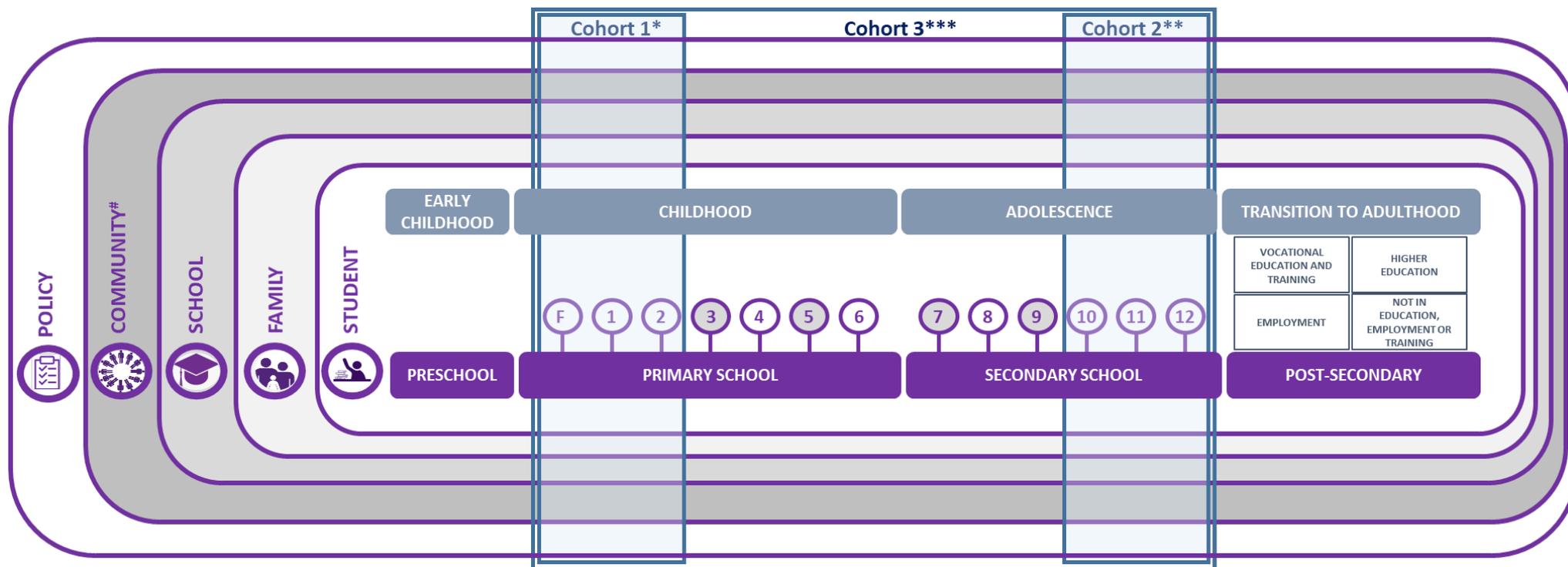
Life course theory and ecological systems theory highlight that in order to understand how COVID-19 potentially exacerbates educational disadvantage, it is necessary to recognise how students' educational lives are organised across pre-defined educational trajectories, which unfold in interconnected environments influenced immediately by families, schools and communities, and more distantly by other social, economic and cultural institutions.

This project focuses specifically on educational disadvantage that is exacerbated by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors that are associated with educational disadvantage in general, such as the policy and institutional design of the education system, societal patterns such as socio-economic inequality, housing inequality or residential segregation between social and demographic groups, are outside the scope of this work.

Figure 1 represents the ecological and life course model for children and young people in the *Learning through COVID-19* project, and demonstrates the influence of the broader external factors on the individual.

The risk factors for educational disadvantage that are likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 reflect compounding risks experienced by the students as a result of their individual, family, school and community circumstances, and where they live. Based on previous studies, three cohorts of students were identified as likely to be most affected by the educational disruption of COVID-19 and are the main focus of this report:

- **Cohort 1: Young children who started school already behind;** defined as children who have been identified as developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) for children in their first year of formal compulsory schooling (or appropriate proxies where AEDC data are not available).
- **Cohort 2: Older students who were already at risk of disengagement;** who may not return to school, but whose employment prospects have worsened. Defined as Year 10, 11 and 12 students with school attendance below a 90% threshold (or appropriate proxies where detailed attendance data is not available), except for those who do so to take up employment or alternative learning or training opportunities.
- **Cohort 3: Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system;** defined as children who have had at least one referral to the child protection system due to abuse or neglect, or because of involvement in the youth justice system.



Notes:

* Cohort 1: Young children who started school already behind.

** Cohort 2: Older students who were already at risk of disengagement, who may not return to school, but whose employment prospects have worsened.

*** Cohort 3: Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system.

Community reflects the immediate community where the child or young person resides and includes the socio-economic circumstances of that community and the available social and support networks, services and opportunities. Broader societal systemic influences are considered separately in the narrative discussion of this report.

F = Foundation Year; Grey circles represent NAPLAN testing.

Figure 1. The ecological life course model.

That said, the lessons learned in this study are anticipated to have wider reach beyond the three cohorts.

Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19

International evidence on the experience of COVID-19 is emerging, but much has yet to be peer reviewed. In the Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020), four developing (and often interrelated) themes across the ecological life course model were noted: lost learning and student engagement; student mental health and wellbeing; parent and carer and digital resources within the family; and teacher capacity. Students were reported to learn less during home schooling and have varied levels of engagement with online learning, and students experiencing disadvantage were reported to have fewer resources for home learning. There were concerns over student mental health and wellbeing, reduced social connections, and uncertainty for the future. Parents/carers were reported to have difficulties managing working from home alongside supporting home schooling, and did not always have the teaching and digital skills required. Teachers also faced digital literacy challenges and experienced substantially increased workloads. While some studies reported that challenges were greater for those experiencing disadvantage, only a small number of studies considered the impact of COVID-19 on those already at risk of poorer outcomes.

The evidence available to date points to a complex picture. Internationally, and in the context of varied (but often extended) periods of remote learning, there is concern about the *potential* extent of *learning loss*, and that educational achievement gaps by socio-economic status could widen (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). An early study, which has not yet been peer reviewed, suggests that remote learning in Germany more than halved children's daily learning time, and that effects varied by a student's prior achievement, but not by other indicators of educational disadvantage such as parents' education (Grewenig et al., 2020).

A rapid evidence assessment by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (including no Australian studies) projected that the attainment gap could widen by an estimated 36% (but certainty is limited by the variable quality of the studies included) (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020a). Drawing from a second review of remote learning (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020b), the EEF noted that if online teaching was available and effective, the projection could be overstated.

However, as noted above and reported in Pillar 1 (McDaid et al., 2020), students have been reported to learn less when home schooling, and have varied levels of engagement with online learning. None of these reports draws on evidence or data gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is currently insufficient evidence of *actual learning loss* available from the pandemic to inform these projections. In England, the Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)

completed 380 school visits in September to October 2020 and reported that most students had returned to school, but that the extent of lost learning during the lockdown period was still difficult to assess – with concerns about knowledge and skills in literacy and mathematics (Ofsted, 2020). Adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing were also reported.

In Australia, the New South Wales Department of Education (2020) carried out optional online assessments of reading and numeracy for students in Years 3, 5 and 9 to assess and support student progress after the return to school. Tests included NAPLAN items that could be compared with 2019 NAPLAN performance. This comparison showed that August to October 2020 results were very similar to May 2019 NAPLAN results for Years 3 and 5 reading, and Years 5 and 9 numeracy. Year 3 numeracy 2020 results were substantially higher than pre-COVID-19 results and Year 9 reading results could not be compared. The Department concluded that students in August to October 2020 were performing at the same levels in Year 3 reading, Year 5 reading and numeracy, and Year 9 numeracy as 2019 students were achieving in May, suggesting an approximate learning loss of 2–4 months. No subgroup analyses were reported.

Other impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people contacting Kids Helpline (during January to April 2020) were reported in September 2020 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). There was a reported increase in the number of helpline calls, which commonly centred on concerns about mental health, social isolation, impacts on education and family life, and changes to plans and usual activities. While socio-economic status was not reported, the Kids Helpline report identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's most common concern was changes to essential services and support. For culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people, mental health concerns for females and impacts on family life for males were common.

The Smith Family (2020) and the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (2020 a, b, c) also recently reported on the lack of digital access, the challenges of learning from home, lack of social connections, mental health impacts, and uncertainties around future study, training and employment opportunities. The Smith Family (2020) also noted that the second lockdown in Victoria (VIC) has brought additional challenges to children, young people and families in VIC, with more mental health impacts and the experience of fatigue – and the extended home schooling increasing risk of disengagement from school. The Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (2020 a, b, c) further noted reports from services that some children and young people who were less engaged in school had in fact completely disengaged.

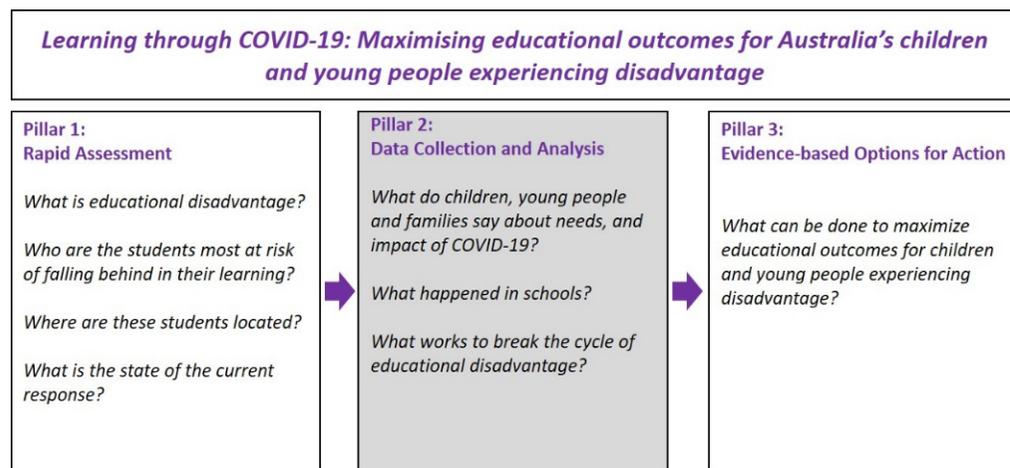
Young people in their final year of high school were also particularly worried about how their assessments would be affected and the impact that this could have on their future education, training and employment plans (Commission for Children and

Young People, 2020a). There was also concern for the safety of vulnerable children and young people in the context of reduced visibility and the withdrawal of in-person support (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020b). However, negative experiences were not universal, and some students had positive experiences while away from the school environment – for example young people with sensory needs and mental health issues, for whom home schooling was less stressful than being at school (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020a).

Overall, the Smith Family (2020) notes that COVID-19 has added complexity to the lives of the students and families that they support, and that it has exacerbated what were already challenging circumstances. While there are concerns as to how students experiencing disadvantage will catch up, and that the lack of digital equity, ongoing mental health issues, and changing options for future study and employment will continue to impact young people for some time to come; there is also evidence of strength, resilience, and a retention of hope for the future (The Smith Family, 2020) – themes that are reflected in this report.

Purpose of this report

This Pillar 2 Report provides a summary of the empirical research for the second stage of the *Learning through COVID-19* project. Pillar 2 was informed by the findings of Pillar 1 (McDaid et al., 2020), and it will in turn inform priorities for actionable solutions in Pillar 3.



Methodological approach

To further the understanding of the needs of children and young people within Australia, and how these are likely to be impacted by COVID-19, an overarching design that enables triangulation of empirical evidence from quantitative and qualitative data sources was used. Data collection and analysis were completed between September and November 2020.

Education Department data analyses

A *quasi-experimental analytical design* was used to investigate whether COVID-19 exacerbated educational disadvantage for students in the three cohorts using data supplied by the New South Wales (NSW) and Tasmanian (TAS) Departments of Education.

The NSW data are from Tell Them From Me (TTFM) surveys of student engagement, wellbeing and students' perceptions of conditions for learning (e.g. school context) administered to primary and secondary school students in government schools, linked to administrative data on student (past academic performance on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)) and school characteristics (provided by the NSW Department of Education). Two years of data – before (2019) and during (2020) COVID-19 – for members of Cohorts 1 and 2 and their non-member peers in the same school years were included in the analyses. For each Cohort, a corresponding longitudinal sample of students observed for the same two school years before the pandemic (2018 and 2019) was examined as a control group that provided an equivalent two years of schooling without the disruption of COVID-19. The data were available until the end of Term 2, 2020. No data were available for Cohort 3.

The TAS data are administrative records on students in government schools (provided by the TAS Department of Education) containing information about student characteristics, school attendance, disciplinary sanctions, and students flagged with a care and protection order (data provided by the TAS Department of Communities). Cohort 1 analysis included two years of longitudinal data for students experiencing COVID-19, but no equivalent control group data. Cohort 2 analyses included a suitable control group. Cohort 3 analyses included data from 2018 to 2020 for students with contact with the child protection system, but no equivalent data were available for non-cohort members. Attendance data were available until the end of Term 2, 2020, and disciplinary sanction data were available until the end of August 2020.

Where a control group was available, statistical models (primarily using Difference-

in-Differences (DiD) estimation, extended to incorporate third-order differences over time between Cohort and other students, and before vs during COVID-19) were estimated. This technique was implemented using random effects models with third-order interaction (time*cohort*sample), controlling for a number of individual- and school-level factors,¹ and the results presented are predicted values (scores, rates or probabilities) – controlling for background student and school characteristics. Where a Pre-COVID-19 control group was not available, trends before and during COVID-19 were used.

A full outline of the data available, operational definitions, outcomes used in the analyses and the quasi-experimental design is provided in Appendix 1.

The robustness of the results was checked using sensitivity analyses that included varying the model specification, using a Lagged Dependent Variable design, restricting the NSW analyses for 2020 to data collected after remote learning periods had ended, and trying different statistical estimators. None of these tests yielded substantively different findings.

Children and young people interviews

Thirty-nine (39) *semi-structured interviews* (30 females and nine males) were conducted via Zoom or telephone (one interview was conducted in person following COVID-Safe protocols) with children, young people and their families. The interviews focused on their learning before, during and after COVID-19 lockdown, and their aspirations for the future. With the assistance of seven service providers (Appendix 2), participants who were located in NSW, TAS, and Queensland (QLD) and who met specified criteria were selectively invited to participate. Consent was obtained from all participants able to give consent (i.e. 18 years or older, or as a responsible adult) either verbally or in writing. For minors, parental/carer consent was sought and obtained, and underage participants gave assent through age-appropriate means.

Mirroring the three pre-determined cohorts, the participants included students from three distinct groups:

- Cohort 1: lower primary school students who started school developmentally behind (n=7).
- Cohort 2: senior students in their last three years of high school who were struggling at school and at risk of disengaging from school (n=22).
- Cohort 3: school-aged students who have had contact with the child protection system (n=10).

¹ See Torres-Reyna, O. (2015) Differences-in-Differences using Stata. Princeton University. Available online at <http://dss.princeton.edu/training/>

For primary school students, the parent/carer was interviewed first to gain insights into the family context of the child's experience with learning, followed by an interview with the student.

Interviews were captured using either audio recording (where permission was given), or by notation. Interviews were transcribed, de-identified and coded in NVivo 12 according to themes emerging from the data. This process was refined across the data collection period to capture the range of experiences in the data. A classification sheet was compiled in NVivo to capture attributes such as participant demographics, school type or learning type during COVID-19, to allow for more targeted analyses.

The analysis of the interviews focused on primary and secondary students, and where appropriate, differentiated between a mainstream and flexi-school environment for secondary students. These groups are referred to as *school type* in the results presented.

Stakeholder consultations

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with 21 stakeholders (Appendix 3), representing non-government organisations that provide education and support services for children and young people experiencing disadvantage in NSW, TAS, and QLD (four of which provide services across Australia). All interviewees provided written or verbal consent to participate in the research and provided permission to record the interview. All interviews were recorded but not transcribed, and a MEMO document was used throughout the interview process that recorded initial insights and themes arising from the interviews. The MEMOs were reviewed and analysed with referral back to the original recording and using a coding frame that captured themes from the Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020) emerging action areas. An iterative and consultative process was used to identify, refine and agree upon the key themes and insights.

To broaden the reach of stakeholder perspectives collected, an anonymous *online stakeholder survey* that mirrored the stakeholder interview questions was designed in Qualtrics, and the survey link was emailed to over 50 stakeholder organisations for completion or further circulation. Of the 62 survey responses received, the results presented are from 39 responses that contained complete data. Thirty-three (33) of the responses were obtained from QLD, three (3) from TAS, and one (1) each from VIC, Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA). The majority represented government-based organisations (n=18), followed by not-for-profit organisations (n=13), school organisations (n=6), and other (n=2). Roles included teacher (n=21), manager (n=9), CEO (n=2), policy advisor (n=2) and other (e.g. social worker, education consultant, researcher; n=5).

A videoconference-based *academic roundtable* was held with Australia-based experts in the fields of education and disadvantage (Appendix 3) to sense-check and validate preliminary findings of the *Learning through COVID-19* project and to identify additional gaps and actionable insights.

Ethics

Each component of the study was reviewed and received ethical approvals from The University of Queensland (Education Department Data Analyses Ethics Approval No.: 2020001634; Children and Young People Interviews Ethics Approval No.: 2020001606; Stakeholder Consultations Ethics Approval No.: 2020001606).

Data limitations

There are limitations to the data employed in this report. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

The quantitative analyses of the Education Department data were limited to available data.

- For NSW, it was necessary to use a proxy for Cohort 1 (i.e. students whose Year 3 NAPLAN reading and numeracy results are in the bottom quartile of the sample). This was because data on school readiness at Year 1 was not available. Year 3 NAPLAN represented the earliest information on student's school progress available in the data. As a result, the results reported refer to students who were behind their peers at Year 3, rather than at the start of the school.
- The NSW TTFM is a sample survey of students. Attrition analyses suggest that students identified as members of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 are more likely to leave the survey (i.e. not participate in the survey at the second time point and as such have been excluded from the analyses). In addition, for Cohort 2, boys, Indigenous students and those from low-SES families are also more likely to leave the survey. As such, the data might not include some of the most disadvantaged students and could potentially underestimate educational disadvantage.
- The lack of a suitable control group in some analyses limits the extent to which effects can be attributed to the impact of COVID-19. The NSW data for Cohorts 1 and 2 and the TAS data for Cohort 2 include control groups. However, in TAS, there is only a 'during-COVID-19' sample for Cohort 1 and disadvantage gaps cannot be compared to a Pre-COVID-19 sample. Similarly, there are no comparable non-members for Cohort 3 and trends in outcomes over time can only be tracked for Cohort 3 members.

The qualitative interviews were designed to explore the lived experience of COVID-19 on Australian children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage. As such, only children and young people who were members of the three cohorts were eligible to take part and no comparison can be drawn with students who are not experiencing disadvantage.

- Recruitment was conducted in partnership with a number of organisations working with children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage due to the vulnerable nature of this population. Recruitment was limited by families choosing not to participate and service providers finding it difficult to identify families who met the inclusion criteria in the short timescales allowed.
- The sample was predominantly female, with only nine male participants, suggesting that their perspectives could be underrepresented. There were no rural or remote participants and only two students identified as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which also suggests that their perspectives could be underrepresented.

The stakeholder consultations sought to gain input from key stakeholders across jurisdictions, service populations, and types of care, but also had to be pragmatic in the timescale available.

- There is no national sampling frame for these organisations and maximum variation across the sample in terms of diverse characteristics and contexts was sought, but is limited to those who were able and chose to participate in the timescales available.
- Invitations to participate were sent out through relevant peak bodies representing the organisations working in the education space and providing services to the three cohorts and through existing networks of Project Team members, which could have led to some selection bias.
- All stakeholders had to be approved by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and a number of stakeholders who participated worked for organisations receiving funding from the Foundation. This could have impacted on their reports.

The data from the qualitative interviews and the stakeholder consultations represent participants' own accounts, impressions and perspectives and should not be considered statements of empirical fact.

A note on Victoria (VIC)

At the outset of the *Learning through COVID-19* project the experience of COVID-19 across Australia was largely uniform, where most schools shifted to remote schooling for parts of Terms 1 and 2 as the result of State/Territory lockdowns. In VIC, a second wave of COVID-19 resulted in home schooling across Term 3. The *Learning through COVID-19* project timescales and the second-wave lockdown pressure on VIC Government Departments did not allow for a study re-design to include VIC, but VIC service providers and national service providers with activity in VIC were included in the stakeholder consultations. The potential differences in the VIC experience are highlighted where possible throughout this report, and it is acknowledged that the extended lockdown in VIC is likely to amplify the COVID-19 challenges that children and young people face.

What happened to student engagement and educational disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What do the numbers say?

Cohorts 1 and 2 show existing educational disadvantage on all outcome domains (attendance, disciplinary sanctions, student engagement and conditions for learning) before and during COVID-19.

Educational disadvantage on these measures for Cohort 3 cannot be quantified because of a lack of data on non-members of the cohort.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, educational disadvantage in attendance worsened during the pandemic, and in Cohort 2 this was potentially caused by COVID-19.

In Cohort 1, the pandemic also potentially worsened disadvantage related to bullying. This occurred because bullying of non-disadvantaged students declined during COVID-19, while bullying of disadvantaged students persisted.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, disadvantage in participating in school clubs fell during the pandemic.

Among students in Cohort 1, Indigenous students experienced growing disadvantage in positive classroom behaviours and learning effort that was potentially caused by the COVID-19.

Among students in Cohort 2, low SES students experienced worsening disadvantage in attendance and student effort in learning that were potentially caused by the COVID-19.

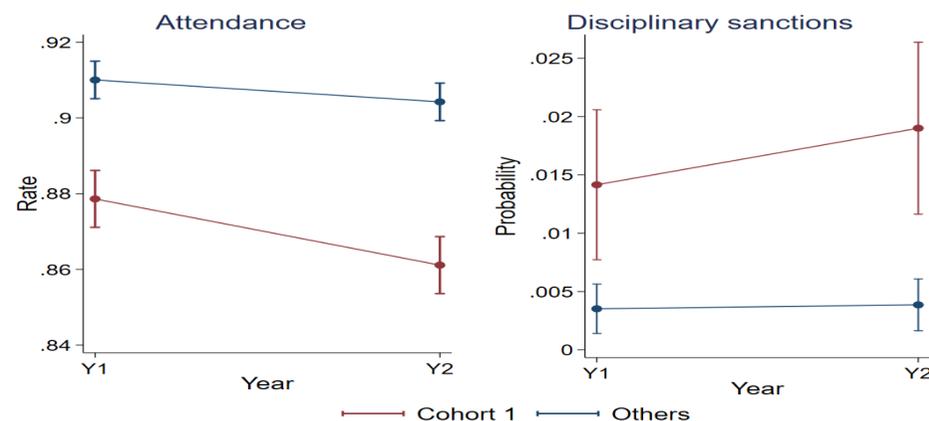
In Cohort 2, gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the experience of being bullied fell during the pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on Cohort 1: Young children who started school already behind

Attendance and disciplinary absences

In both years there are gaps between Cohort 1 and non-cohort members on attendance and disciplinary sanctions in TAS (Figure 2). These gaps signal educational disadvantage. Only the attendance gap showed a significant increase as students move from Year 1 to Year 2 (Figure 2). Disadvantage relating to attendance thus increased during the pandemic for this Cohort. However, without a Pre-COVID-19 control sample it is unclear whether the same trend would have been observed in the absence of COVID-19. The increased disadvantage could also reflect students getting

older or moving from Year 1 to Year 2 of formal schooling. Educational disadvantage in attendance increased during the pandemic, but there is no good evidence that this occurred because of the pandemic.



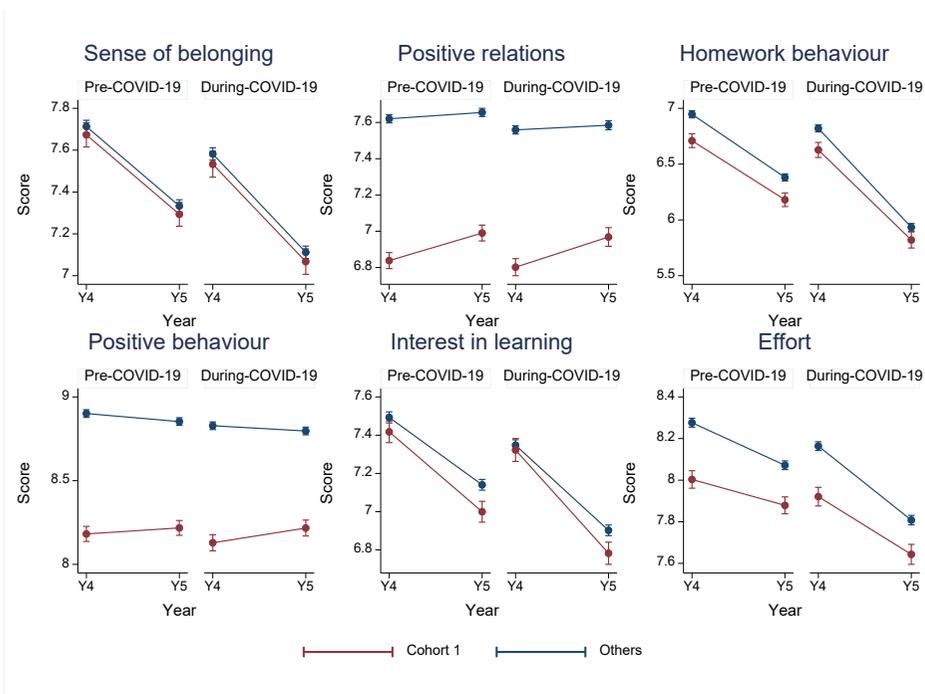
Notes:

Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

Figure 2. Cohort 1: Predicted attendance rates and the probability of disciplinary sanctions (TAS).

Student engagement

In both years, Cohort 1 members are less engaged than non-cohort members on most forms of student engagement in learning (Figure 3). Educational disadvantage in student engagement is particularly apparent on measures of positive relations, positive behaviour and effort. However, the changes in the engagement gaps over time did not grow more During-COVID-19 compared to the Pre-COVID-19 sample for Cohort 1 (Figure 3), so disadvantage did not worsen. Several Year 5 engagement indicators (sense of belonging, homework behaviour, interest in learning and effort) were lower in the During-COVID-19 sample compared to the Pre-COVID-19 sample in both Cohort 1 and non-cohort members (Figure 3), implying that student engagement was lower on average for all students during COVID-19, irrespective of their disadvantage status.



Notes:
Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

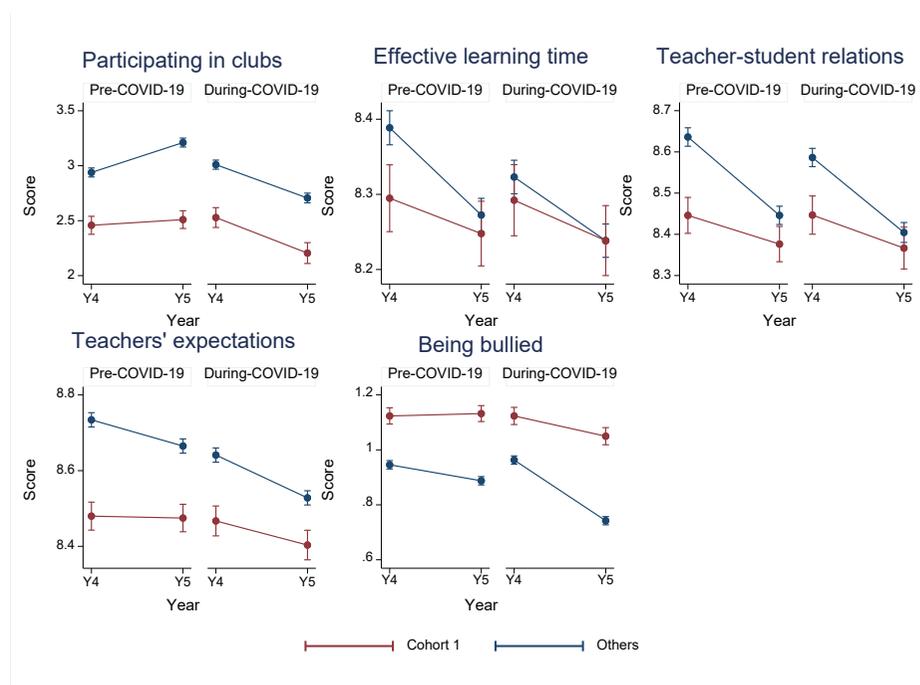
Figure 3. Cohort 1: Predicted values for student engagement indicators (NSW).

Conditions for learning

In both years there are gaps between Cohort 1 and non-cohort members on participation in clubs, student reports of teachers' expectations and being bullied (Figure 4). The participation in clubs gap reduced During-COVID-19, likely as a result of the remote learning period decreasing participation opportunities for all students, not just those experiencing disadvantage. The disadvantage gap in bullying between Cohort 1 and non-cohort members increased During-COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19, as non-cohort members reported less bullying during home learning. While the rate of bullying of Cohort 1 students did decrease slightly During-COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19, the decline was much less pronounced than in the non-cohort members (Figure 4).

Similar patterns were tested for low socio-economic status and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (risk factors for educational disadvantage that were identified

amongst those likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19), compared to their more advantaged peers. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, disadvantage gaps in relation to positive behaviours linked to engagement in class and student effort in learning grew more During-COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19.



Notes:
Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

Figure 4. Cohort 1: Predicted values for conditions for learning indicators (NSW).

Impact of COVID-19 on Cohort 2: Older students who were already at risk of disengagement

Attendance and disciplinary absences

In both years, there is a gap between Cohort 2 and non-cohort members on attendance and disciplinary sanctions in TAS (Figure 5). For both Cohort 2 and non-cohort members, attendance rates decreased as students moved from Year 10 to Year 11, but the gap widened more During-COVID-19 (Figure 5). The percentage of Cohort 2 students with at least one recorded disciplinary sanction dropped sharply between Year 10 and Year 11 in both Pre-COVID-19 and During-COVID-19, and by Year 11 has

largely disappeared (Figure 5), which may reflect the college system (Years 11 and 12) in the TAS context. The drop in sanctions in Year 11 probably reflects some changes in the student population, and changed behaviours by students and teachers.

Student engagement

In both years, Cohort 2 members were less engaged than non-cohort members for all forms of student engagement in learning (Figure 6). The changes in the engagement gaps over time did not grow more During-COVID-19 compared to the Pre-COVID-19 sample for Cohort 2 (Figure 6) suggesting that these forms of educational disadvantage persisted but did not worsen during the pandemic.

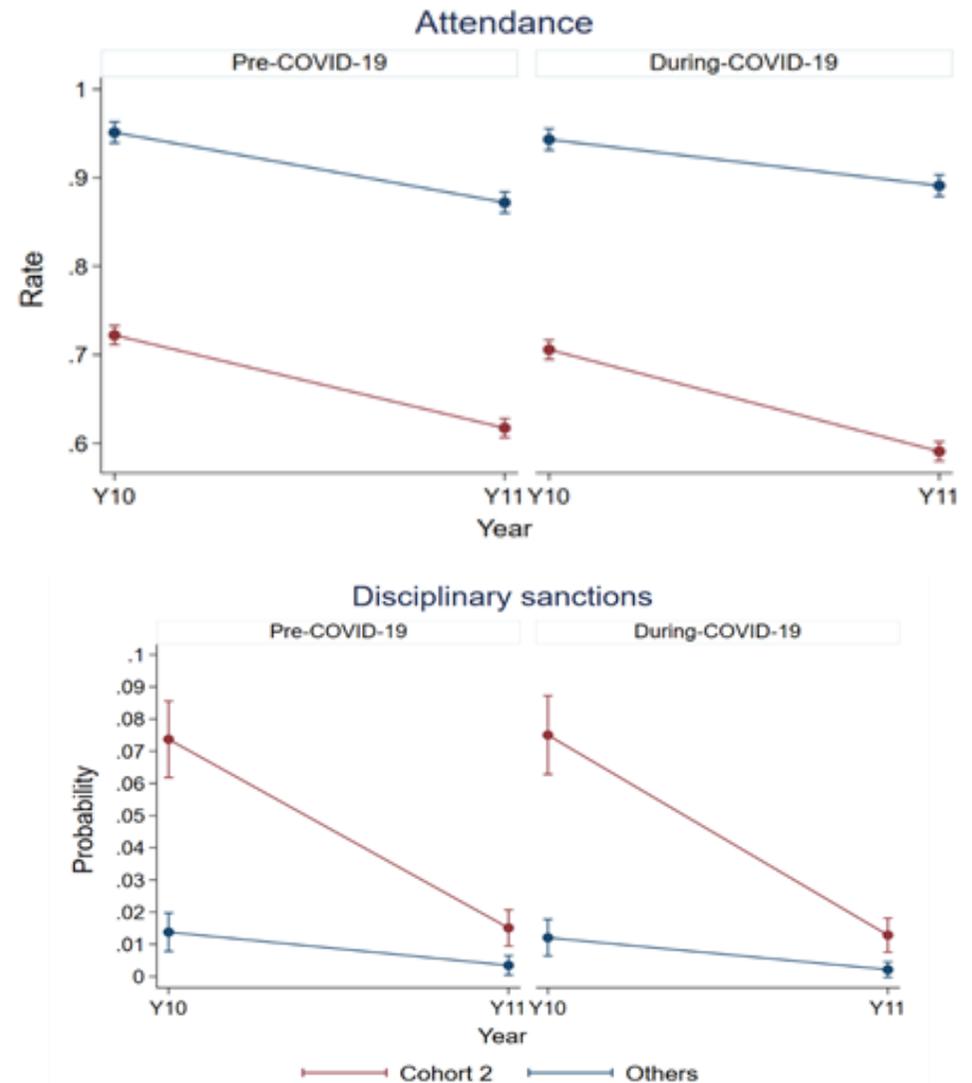
Conditions for learning

For conditions for learning, the patterns are again similar to those in Cohort 1 (Figure 7).

Irrespective of Year, there is a known gap between Cohort 2 and non-cohort members on conditions for learning (Figure 7), and the results are largely similar to Cohort 1. While the disadvantage gap in participating in clubs grew over time in the Pre-COVID-19 sample, it fell over time During-COVID-19, reflecting the overall decline in club participation.

COVID-19 effects on the growth of disadvantage were tested by comparing low socio-economic status students to others, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to non-Indigenous students. Socio-economic status was associated with a larger growth in the attendance gap During-COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19. Socio-economic status was also associated with the gap in student effort in learning, increasing more during COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19. Gaps in bullying declined over time During-COVID-19 compared to Pre-COVID-19 when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were compared to non-Indigenous students.

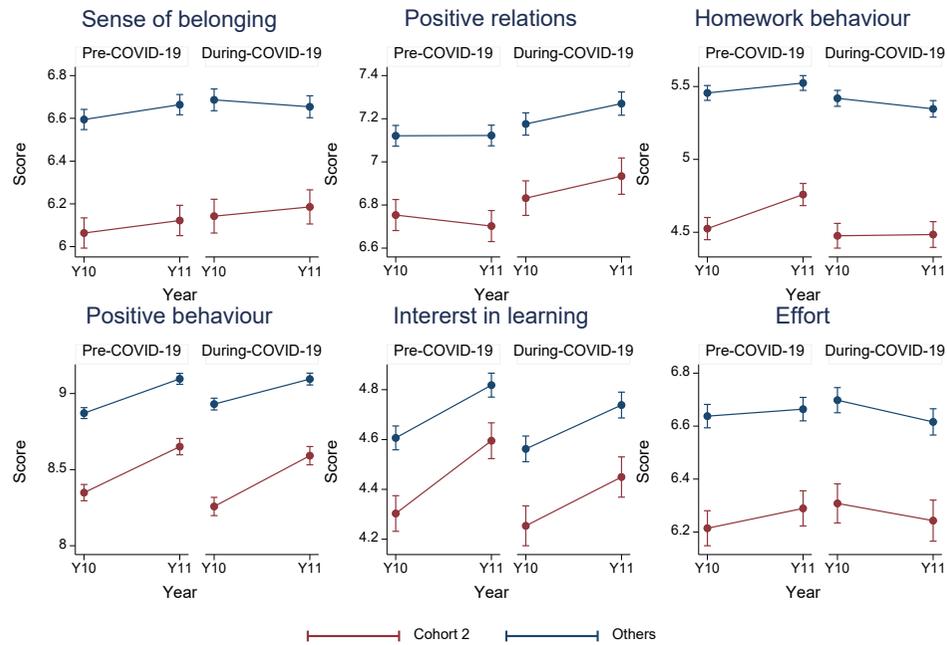
Disadvantage gaps between metropolitan and regional and remote students were examined, and while there are persistent gaps between these on student engagement and conditions for learning indicators (both in the Pre-COVID and During-COVID samples), consistent with the main findings, there was no evidence that the disadvantage gaps between metropolitan and regional and remote students have grown during the pandemic. Geographical information was not available for TAS.



Notes:

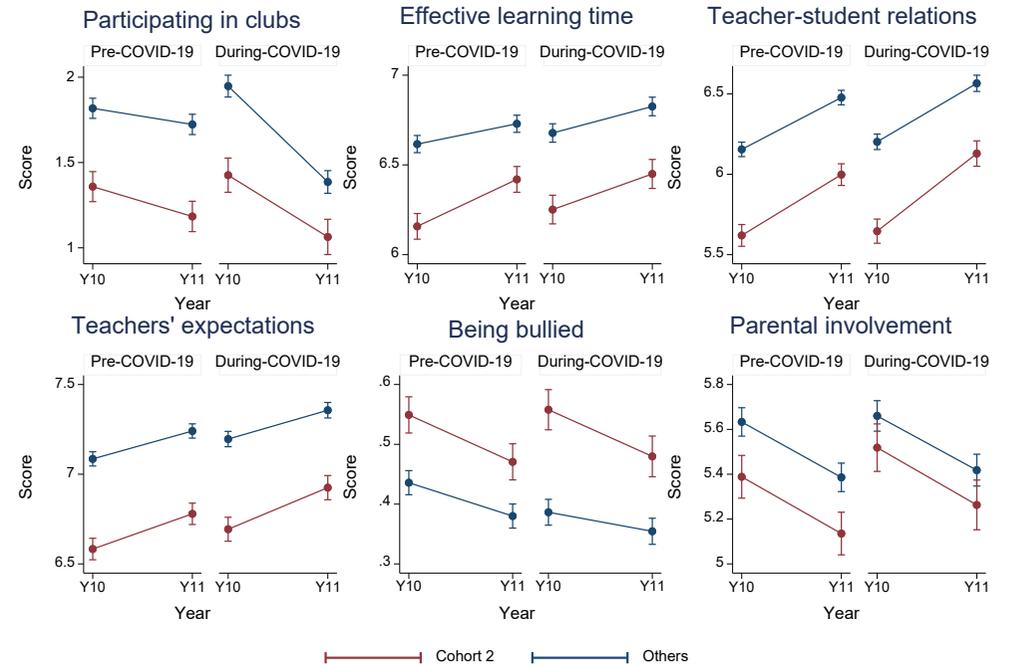
Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

Figure 5. Cohort 2: Predicted attendance rates and the probability of disciplinary sanctions (TAS).



Notes:
 Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

Figure 6. Cohort 2: Predicted values for student engagement indicators (NSW).



Notes:
 Graphs show point estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars).

Figure 7. Cohort 2: Predicted values for conditions for learning indicators (NSW).

The impact of COVID-19 on Cohort 3: Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system

Attendance and disciplinary absences

Unlike Cohorts 1 and 2, Cohort 3 has a diverse age range, and Figure 8 shows trends over time for selected school Years in TAS: Years 1, 6, 10, and 11.

Primary school students in Cohort 3 have the highest attendance rates at each time point, and attendance drops among Cohort 3 students in higher school Years (Figure 8). While primary school attendance rates did not change, secondary school attendance rates declined between 2018 and 2020, but the trend was not exacerbated by COVID-19 (Figure 8).

Disciplinary sanctions also varied by school Year, with Year 6 and Year 10 students more likely to have sanctions compared to Year 1 and Year 11 students (Figure 8) – which is consistent with Cohort 2, which showed very low levels of disciplinary sanctions in Year 11 students. The trend in disciplinary sanctions was not exacerbated by COVID-19 (Figure 8).

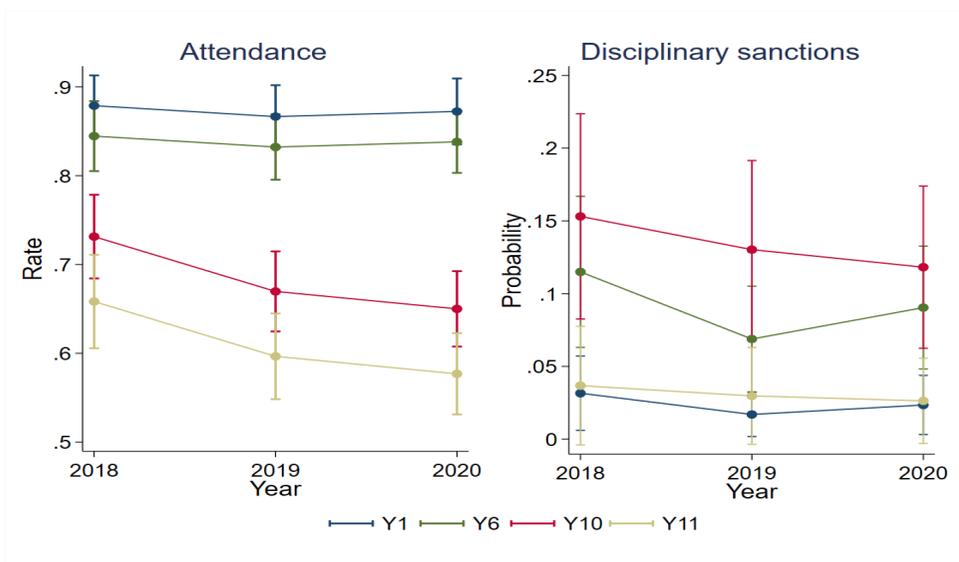


Figure 8. Cohort 3: Predicted attendance rates and the probability of disciplinary sanctions (TAS).

The experiences of children and young people living in disadvantaged circumstances during COVID-19

What does the interview data tell us?

COVID-19 should be understood as an additional factor exacerbating already highly complex life circumstances among children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

Feelings of anxiety were palpable and children and young people talked of the difficulties of feeling 'stuck' in one location, their loss of social, family and peer connections, and important milestones or events, which impacted on their mental health and wellbeing.

The children and young people interviewed struggled with remote learning, but also learned to adapt during lockdown.

Students at flexi-schools described their schools before COVID-19 as very supportive and that support continued throughout lockdown. It may be that this model of schooling, which was already designed to be flexible and responsive to complex needs, was better placed to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

Multiple sources of support during learning from home and the transition back to classroom learning were acknowledged, in particular the role of teachers, schools, and parents/carers.

These findings reflect a relatively short lock-down period, and it is acknowledged that the extended lockdown in VIC is likely to amplify the COVID-19 challenges that children and young people face.

This section draws on qualitative interviews to describe the experiences of the children and young people during COVID-19 – reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 (and lockdown² in particular) on mental health and wellbeing, student engagement, and for potential learning loss (including parent and carer and digital resources within the family, and teacher support). These reflect the emerging themes on the experience of COVID-19 across the ecological life course model, which were noted in Pillar 1.

The sample comprised nine students who were experiencing precarious housing, six with a mental or physical disability (these categories were not exclusive), two students who identified as having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and 10 students were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These risk factors for educational disadvantage were identified amongst those likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 in Pillar 1, and findings specific to these groups are highlighted throughout.

The complexity of the disadvantaged circumstances in which the children and young people interviewed were living was a striking feature of the interviews undertaken – and COVID-19 was just the latest challenge that they had to face.

Making sense of COVID-19 as an additional factor exacerbating already highly complex life circumstances emerged among the students and families interviewed, and direct causal connections between the current experience of hardship and the impact of COVID-19 were not usually made:

“It’s been hectic. [...] one thing after the other was just – we’ve had a lot of build-up to COVID happening. COVID was just the icing on the cake for us, to be honest.” Parent of Interviewees 33 and 34, female, primary school.

Complex needs

Almost half (17 out of 39) of the students interviewed could be categorised as having complex needs. Seventeen students and their families were experiencing economic hardship, either having no independent income, having lost their main income due to COVID-19, experiencing financial difficulties in purchasing food, or housing instability (living in emergency accommodation, refuges, residential care or temporarily with family). Eleven of the students in this study had experienced domestic violence or an unsafe environment. Four students had a physical health condition such as asthma or an immune condition, including one who was not able to access physical health support during the COVID-19 lockdown, while 14 had a mental health condition. One student had a history with the criminal justice system. Six students had a learning disability.

Students with two or more of these needs were categorised as having complex needs.

Mental health and wellbeing: Impacts during lockdown

In this Pillar 2 Report, mental health and wellbeing is defined as *affective states or behaviours, access to social and peer connections, and orientation towards the future*.

A number of the students interviewed had pre-existing (sometimes worsening) mental health conditions, while others spoke about states or behaviours that could be characterised as signs of depression or anxiety (e.g. signs of extreme lethargy, sleep disturbances, or losing interest in things that previously brought joy). Ten students across the school types reported signs of depression or anxiety – most had a history of mental health issues and were identified as having complex needs. It is possible that these experiences of anxiety would impact on the students’ engagement with

² The temporary closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic for approximately half of school Term 1 (in NSW, TAS and QLD, where the interviews took place). Schools remained open for essential workers and vulnerable students.

learning and ultimately their academic performance. These students predominantly lived in metropolitan areas.

The anxiety students were feeling because of COVID-19 was very apparent. Nine students described feeling nervous and scared, while other students used words such as 'shocking' and 'surreal'. One student articulated that she felt like she was stuck with these thoughts and had little to distract her. While these worries eased over time as restrictions eased for most of the students, some have retained a heightened sense of vigilance and fear. This was particularly the case where a family member, or themselves, were in an at-risk category for contracting COVID-19. Even when the COVID-19 lockdown ended, the need to protect the elderly and at-risk family members remained, as explained by this student:

"It was really nice to see [Student's grandfather], but it wasn't the same because you couldn't see them for that long, couldn't get close either, can't hug, and have to make sure I'm not sick or have to sanitise and all this other stuff. It just kind of felt like even though they were there, there was still that invisible barrier to them." Interviewee 37, female, flexi-school.

A student shared the following to describe the anxiety she experienced:

"Yeah, it was quite scary [...] the beginning of the COVID-19 thing. People were unsure and it was quite scary. You go to school and then you see most of your colleagues or friends not coming to school and you wonder whether they're okay or whether – you think about the seriousness of whatever is making them not to come to school, the whole COVID-19 thing." Interviewee 18, female, secondary school.

Students and their parents/carers spoke about three main areas impacting their wellbeing during COVID-19 lockdown: feeling 'stuck' in one location; social, family and peer connections; and loss of important milestones or events. Each is considered in turn below, along with reflection on the hopes and aspirations for the future that the students held. Wellbeing impacts linked to stress around learning online, a perceived lack of teacher support, and falling behind are addressed later in the section.

Feeling 'stuck' in one location

A number of students and parents/carers reported they or their child struggled with feeling confined to one location during lockdown. Parents/carers of primary school children talked of the children's anger, frustration and sadness. The secondary school students spoke emotively about the impacts of being 'stuck', with descriptions ranging from feeling claustrophobic to being stuck in a cage:

"I felt bad. It felt like this cage, you were in it, you can't go out from it [...] I wanted to go out and you can't go out. And if you go out it's dangerous." Interviewee 20, male, secondary school.

Many were vocal about missing sport:

"Well, I really like basketball and like footy, like NRL and stuff [...] the footy season was over and I didn't play footy that much anymore, so I felt like it [COVID-19] kind of impacted that so I don't have the same [...] motivation to go and play anymore as I used to, so I had that big break of not playing [...] I played it all the time and I loved it, but then over the time, I kind of just got sick of it." Interviewee 36, male, flexi-school.

Common strategies used to manage the feeling of being confined to one location were engaging in a creative pursuit (e.g. singing, listening to music), spending time with family members or exercising.

A number of students from all school types found the blurred boundaries between home and school challenging. The home environment became a space that had to fit all needs (social, study and relaxation). Strategies to support this included moving study from the bedroom to other spaces in the house, and support from parents/carers and teachers to encourage healthy boundary setting.

Social, family and peer connections

Most students talked about missing their friends or the limitations placed on their peer interactions during the lockdown period. The sentiments expressed ranged from feeling sad, lost or confused to feeling isolated:

"I talked to some of my friends over the phone [during lockdown], but then everyone kind of just lost touch due to COVID and so forth, because you couldn't do anything anyway [...] I, myself, am a very social person and I get quite lonely when I'm not out socialising with people." Interviewee 37, female, flexi-school.

The primary school students also talked about missing their friends, and three parents/carers spoke about the difficulties of keeping their child in touch with their friends during lockdown, using strategies such as video calls and phone calls to try to keep in touch. Secondary school students addressed their need for peer connection through video or phone calls, social media and text messaging their friends, but many said that this was not the same as seeing their friends in person, so while helpful, there was perhaps a limit to how much contact through devices could fulfil their social needs.

Missing family connections was less often spoken about, possibly because students commonly lived with their families during lockdown. Several primary students spoke about being sad and missing extended family, with the parents/carers providing the context of isolating to keep vulnerable extended family members safe. Flexi-school students more commonly lived independently and some talked of missing family as a result. Two interviewees were international students who found it very hard to be away from their families at such a stressful and uncertain time.

Loss of important milestones or events

Planned milestones or events were another area of impact for the students. Often these were events that had been looked forward to for a long time (such as a trip overseas to see family) or were important milestones (such as graduation, 18th birthday or the birth of a new baby). While some of these missed events, such as camps and excursions, could potentially be rescheduled, the sense of disappointment for these students was palpable:

“I feel like COVID kind of just ruined that part [of starting Grade 8] because half of it was in Zoom and stuff like that [...] It took away much of the fun stuff. We could have gone on beach days or some type of stuff like excursions or hanging out with friends in school. It took away that time because we were all at home and we couldn't go anywhere.”
Interviewee 13, female, primary school.

When asked about their worries for the future, both secondary and flexi-school students reported mainly short-term personal concerns, for example being able to celebrate their graduation, or being able to travel.

Hopes and aspirations for the future

Adolescence is an important developmental period for career aspirations and the future occupational and educational goals and pathways students aim for. Students experiencing social disadvantage are more likely to leave school without completing Year 12 and less likely to pursue higher education (McMillan & Marks, 2003), while completion of Year 12 is a significant factor for achieving occupational pathways leading to employment early in work life (Karmel & Liu, 2011). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic brings increased uncertainty regarding employment opportunities for school leavers, and the educational and occupational aspirations of interviewees were explored.

All secondary school students interviewed reported planning to finish school at the time of the interview. Twenty-six adolescent students (13 secondary school and 13 flexi-school) discussed plans beyond graduation, with most reporting to aim for vocational

training or further study. Students expressed various degrees of uncertainty around what they were aspiring to after graduating, or had not yet thought about long-term goals and plans towards accomplishing those. However, a number of students had concrete plans that they were pursuing with the support of their school, family and service providers. While some were conscious that COVID-19 might impact on plans, for the most part they were unperturbed by the pandemic:

“I want to fly. I want to be a pilot [...] I want to get a degree first, like in engineering [...] I'm really hoping I get a good ATAR to do my engineering [...] I'm not a traditional citizen here, so my dad's New Zealander, so it's easy for me to apply for a citizenship in New Zealand so I can join the Air Force [...] My plan was to go to my country and then apply for a permanent residences [sic] in New Zealand and then do my citizenship there [...] So I'm just hoping the borders will open [...] But right now we're not sure. Just hoping this all, coronavirus, goes away.” Interviewee 12, female, flexi-school.

A significant proportion of the students interviewed favoured educational pathways towards any employment over the pursuit of specific careers. For example, they reportedly planned for TAFE but had not yet settled on a specific course, or discussed alternative plans to fall back on if they encountered obstacles on the way to a preferred occupation. The specific impact COVID-19 had on these considerations is exemplified in this quote:

“I'm thinking of getting a job and then like getting myself into a TAFE course. [...] Before the pandemic, I really wanted to be an author because I had a big imagination so like why not just write them down? But after COVID, it's just – I don't know. Like killed the motivation. [...] if I was being an author, I would still need some sort of income while I'm writing, so it would – it just felt a bit difficult.” Interviewee 24, female, flexi-school.

There was clear evidence for the benefits of career advice and support embedded in school for these students.

Unexpected benefits

Unexpected positive benefits of the COVID-19 lockdown were reported for five students. One primary school student strongly disliked loud and noisy environments and enjoyed being at home, although her parent believed it created separation anxiety when school returned. Similarly, a flexi-school student who thrived learning online found her mental and physical health negatively impacted by returning to school and viewed COVID-19 as something that had been very good for her. Another flexi-school student found she could use the extra time to develop her interest in makeup artistry, which aligned with her occupational aspirations. Two culturally and linguistically diverse secondary school students spoke of enjoying more time with their family all together, rather than everyone engaged in their separate activities.

Student engagement

For effective learning to occur, students need to feel like they belong at school and have connections with others (emotional engagement); they need to be interested in what is being taught, motivated to learn and see the purpose of investing time in that activity (cognitive engagement), and they need to participate and take responsibility for their learning (behavioural engagement) (Cooper, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016; Shernoff, 2013; Wang & Degol, 2014; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Figure 9 presents how student engagement with remote learning during lockdown was conceptualised, setting out the components of emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement that were features of the experiences of the children and young people interviewed. Figure 9 therefore illustrates the multidimensional nature of student engagement and how these dimensions are interconnected with each another and the home and school environment (Fan & Williams, 2009). More importantly, it is premised on the assumption that for students to engage and effective learning to occur, their basic needs must be met, and social supports must be in place.

Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement comprises two components: feelings about school and remote learning (school belonging), and connections with others (e.g. peers and teachers) when learning remotely. Twenty-one students said that they disliked learning remotely. Some found it difficult to do their schoolwork remotely with limited support to help them understand what to do. This left them feeling behind because they did not know how to progress the work. The students also mentioned that they missed the social interactions they have when learning at school and the activities and resources that they did not have access to while learning at home:

“It made me a bit sad because I can’t see my friends or my teachers

and I can’t do everything at school. [...] Because I didn’t get to do a lot of things at school. Because there’s art class, there’s library, there’s the pool, and I don’t get to do all that stuff at home.” Interviewee 16, female, primary school.

Most students reported no or limited opportunity to connect with other students while learning remotely during lockdown, which, as noted above, did impact on mental health and wellbeing. Missing their peers and seeing their friends in person was the key reason they looked forward to returning to school.

Four students reported liking school and remote learning during COVID-19 lockdown. One said she preferred remote learning because the people from school who made her anxious were not online. For this student, remote learning lessened the bullying she was experiencing at school:

“COVID was actually great for me. I loved having online school. It actually like – when we went back to school, I actually had like a panic attack because I was like, ‘I don’t want to go back to school and deal with these people in real life’ because online is so much better because a lot of people can’t join, so the people that like – the people that like get on my nerves or make me anxious, like they’re not there so it’s like so chill and like the chill people are online, so it’s like really good.” Interviewee 35, female, flexi-school.

Five students struggled to reconnect with school after the COVID-19 lockdown (four flexi-school students and one secondary student), but conversely, 21 students indicated that they were excited to return to school after the COVID-19 lockdown:

“I just couldn’t wait to come back to school. I even emailed my teachers and I told them, ‘I really need to come back to school because I’m way behind’ [...] It was also good to see my friends again each day. [...] It felt so good. Finally, I get to breathe fresh air. It was awesome. [...] I just jumped up and down. And I saw my friends. Even though they said ‘social distancing’ I did not distance.” Interviewee 12, female, secondary school.

There seemed to be a sense of relief and renewed appreciation for school, with one student reporting:

“I understand now how like lucky I am to come to school and, you know, be with my friends.” Interviewee 14, female, secondary school.

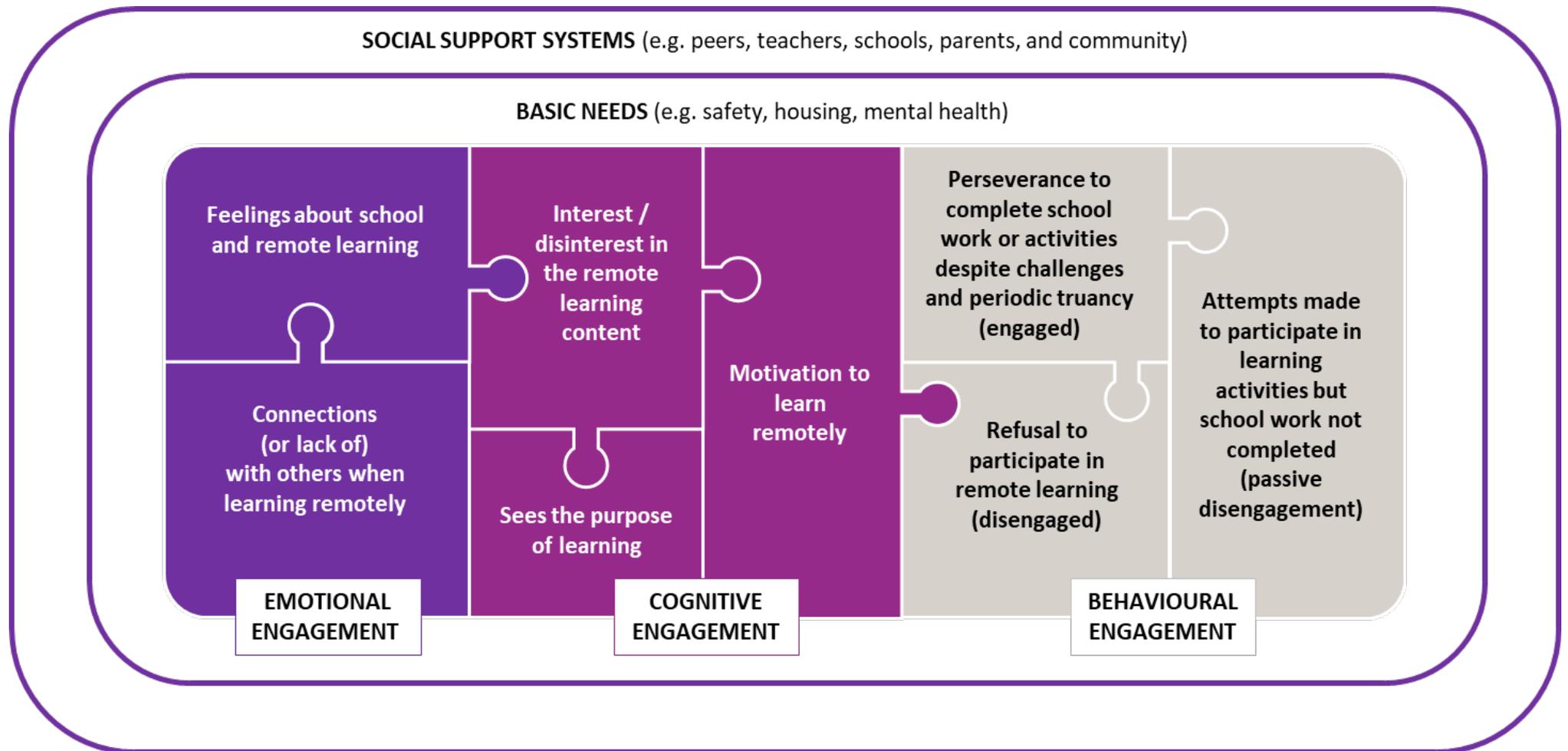


Figure 9. Student engagement with remote learning during lockdown.

For some students, connecting with their teacher again and getting support to understand their schoolwork was another incentive to returning to school. Students who lived in regional areas spoke more frequently about being keen to return to school.

Cognitive engagement

Students need to be interested in what is being taught, see the purpose of investing time in that activity, and be motivated to learn. None of the students interviewed reported feeling challenged or stimulated by the learning content provided during the COVID-19 lockdown. Nine students were uninterested in what was being taught and expressed feeling bored during remote learning, and a few students expressed missing practical subjects like art classes, physical education, and woodwork. Just one student reported feeling motivated to learn during the COVID-19 lockdown, while nine students lacked motivation. For some students the lack of motivation appeared linked to not 'caring' about schoolwork or feeling 'lazy' or feeling depressed and stressed due to being in lockdown:

"But I don't know why, I just feel I'm not motivated to do it. No motivation to do it. [...] because you just wake up and you know about tomorrow that you can't go out. It's just the issues, just you're sad because you've got to stick around your room, your house all day. [...] We couldn't go out, outside. I think it sucks." Interviewee 28, female, secondary school.

Many of these students said that they did not see the purpose of investing time completing the schoolwork during the COVID-19 lockdown, when, as one student put it, *"the world was kind of put on pause"* (Interviewee 29, female, flexi-school). For others it was due to not understanding the work, feeling easily distracted in the remote environment, and not having someone encouraging them to complete the schoolwork:

"Yeah. As I said before, I feel more motivated when there's people studying around me and there's a teacher actually telling me what to do and watching you and stuff. But that wasn't the case at home. [...] I would just sit there and read. End up doing something else that's not even part of the study." Interviewee 27, female, secondary school.

Behavioural engagement

There are three forms of behavioural engagement: engaged, passive, and disengaged. Twenty-two students appeared to be *engaged* with learning during the COVID-19 lockdown as demonstrated through their perseverance to complete their schoolwork

or activities despite challenges and periodic truancy. This included students who were attending school during the COVID-19 lockdown. One senior student chose to attend school and provided the following rationale:

"I knew that at home, I probably wouldn't be doing much and knew that I wouldn't be able to cope with everything. And so that's why I came to school." Interviewee 19, male, secondary school.

The interviewees across mainstream and flexi-schools described a number of intrinsic challenges to learning during lockdown, such as a lack of concentration and motivation, which lead to procrastination. The anxiety and depression many of these students were experiencing often coupled with complex needs could have been a major contributing factor. Eleven students from all school types described extrinsic challenges such as noisy home environments, working in their bedroom, or easy access to gaming consoles and phones that they found distracting when trying to complete their schoolwork. Concentration issues were more frequently reported by students who lived in regional areas.

One mother who was living with five children in a motel room funded by an organisation, described how her daughter persisted with her schoolwork in a noisy and chaotic environment. Nine students described not doing schoolwork on some of the school days because they were feeling disengaged and then catching up at night or on other days:

"I would probably do like an hour of work and then I'd get unmotivated and then I think it's the fact that being at home and didn't really have to have it done at a certain time, I'd end up doing it at night." Interviewee 32, female, flexi-school.

These students demonstrated perseverance despite the challenges they faced. Structure and flexibility had a role in schoolwork completion, which is further discussed in the next section on learning loss.

Ten students appeared to be *passively engaged* with learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. Nine of these students reported experiencing comprehension difficulties, which prevented them from completing their schoolwork and made them more prone to distractions. This may partially explain their procrastination and task avoidance. Many students did not have the support they usually received in the classroom, which made it harder to engage with learning activities during lockdown. Others reported concentration difficulties and were easily distracted while participating in schoolwork activities:

“Sometimes in maths class when I don’t really get it. I just put up the computer on mute and I don’t really listen. [...] Just turn the volume down and I really don’t listen. If I just try listening, then I don’t really get anything. [...] You can get distraction. [...] I pay more attention when I’m in class than online classes. ... Things like my brothers, they get really annoying as well. [...] When they are finished their classes they just run around the house and I can’t really focus. [...] And since I was home, when my mum is cooking, I feel bad sitting in my room and doing my work, so I sometimes go and help her with some stuff.” Interviewee 27, female, secondary school.

As previously discussed, the anxiety and depression experienced by these students during lockdown, often coupled with complex needs, could have contributed to the concentration difficulties many of these students were experiencing:

“We had online classes, like video classes, but even then, like my mind would wander because I’m just sitting there and I couldn’t get my books and stuff, so I have to like do it like in a spare book at home or type it, but it just wouldn’t get through to me because there will be many other distractions. [...] It was difficult because, you know, bedrooms are like a place for relaxation and stuff like that and since my mental health wasn’t all that good, you know, I just would lay down and want to go to sleep.” Interviewee 24, female, flexi-school.

Seven students (including secondary and flexi-school students) were *disengaged* with learning during the COVID-19 lockdown, exhibiting disinterest in school and choosing not to participate in remote learning:

“But during online school, it’s only me in the room. I can do anything I want. But there’s a lot of distraction and I can’t stay focused. Yeah. Yeah. And no one’s telling me to put my phone away. [...] because my phone is just right next to me. And the class, I don’t pay much attention during online class. [...] You can get distraction. Because going to Zoom meetings, you don’t have to open camera. So I tell my friends, other students, just to turn it on for attendance and then turn the camera off to go back to sleep.” Interviewee 28, female, secondary school.

Some students who had previously engaged in school and liked school, gave up during lockdown because they felt it became too hard and stressful:

“In all honesty, I just gave up on it because it was just so stressful and

I was just getting so worked up over it and overwhelmed. Because the whole thing, I just would just be like, Yeah, nah, I’m not doing it.” Interviewee 37, female, secondary school.

It is important to note that, in the midst of COVID-19, learning was not always a priority for the students interviewed. Many had complex needs, as described earlier, and these often appeared to take priority over learning. Many students persevered and re-engaged during and after lockdown. There were only a few who preferred remote learning and struggled to re-engage when schools reopened to all students. Difficulties in accessing teacher, parent/carer and peer support during lockdown were also important and appeared related to a perceived learning loss, as will be discussed next.

Perceptions of student learning loss

Learning loss is a multifaceted and dynamic experience, comprising the perceptions of students and their families of feeling unable to keep up, falling behind, and catching up with learning. While these are highly subjective concepts, they were salient and meaningful in the lived experience of the students who took part in this study. This section presents the reasons the students gave for experiencing learning loss, the salient factors for their ability to ‘catch up’ and notable preferences for flexibility or structured learning strategies that were perceived as enabling or hindering engagement with learning – highlighting the supportive roles of parents/carers, teachers and community in mitigating the risk of learning loss.

Perceptions of drivers and mitigating factors for learning loss

Twenty-five primary, secondary and flexi-school students talked about a sense of falling behind (e.g. indicated by a drop in grades or attendance or the inability to complete tasks) or needing to catch up (i.e. indicated by needing to complete accumulated or additional work). These experiences of learning loss were attributed to various reasons, including having started learning from home earlier or having returned to in-class learning later than classmates:

“I’m a bit behind at homework and library [...] It was because I went on holidays early [...] It’s making me feel good when I catch up to all the other people. But it doesn’t feel good when I get left behind.” Interviewee 16, female, primary school.

“[I]t was just confusing because they were doing way ahead of me then [...] most people got to school before me, so they were doing, well, similar to at school, so they were getting through it all because they had

better help.” Interviewee 15, female, primary school.

These student accounts are indicative of the broader tendency to attribute learning loss to not having the usual access to teachers as during face-to-face classes.

Other reasons given for learning loss were perceived inconsistencies in the curriculum (e.g. being given learning materials that were at an inappropriate level of difficulty or did not follow any apparent coherent learning trajectory):

“I think I had harder work because everyone I asked, they said no, that they weren’t doing the work that I was doing. They were doing an easier one. So I just asked the teacher if she could change it and she changed it to the normal one and it was hard, but it was like at my level.” Interviewee 15, female, primary school.

There were also issues related to accessing appropriate digital devices for learning at home and connectivity:

“I couldn’t really catch up with the classes, because I missed a few. Because of the wi-fi I couldn’t really access to the online learning, online content, material stuff, and then I was behind.” Interviewee 17, female, secondary school.

Preventing or mitigating learning loss during online learning necessitated adequate resources, which were not accessible for all students interviewed. Most of the students reported having a device and access to the internet (29 out of 39). For the remainder, they either had a device and limited internet (n=3), no device but had internet (n=4) or no device and no internet (n=2), with one whose information was unknown. Students from regional areas were more likely to report these connectivity issues (n=6).

Schools provided borrowed devices for seven students and two parents/carers bought devices specifically during lockdown for home schooling. Eight students did without (two secondary and six primary school students). Overall, six students felt impacted in their learning by limited device or internet access, including lagging Zoom calls. One secondary school student mentioned having to return the laptop and Wi-Fi device to the school after lockdown, leaving them with just a phone and personal data.

The students interviewed also commonly suggested that their learning was affected by the difficulties they experienced in making sense of instructions during home learning:

“Just feeling very isolated, stressed because I couldn’t get the work done on time. Very alone [...] it was a little bit hard for me to understand by

the way that they were wording it and therefore I was struggling to like complete the work and struggling to hand in the task” Interviewee 24, female, flexi-school.

Others struggled with staying motivated to learn against the background of a global pandemic and the anxieties caused by it, as discussed in the previous section.

The students interviewed appeared to be aware of the potential impact that learning from home during COVID-19 restrictions could have on their progress, and this affected their wellbeing. In particular, secondary school students reported indicators such as a drop in grades or attendance or feelings of being overwhelmed by tasks as evidence that they were falling behind expectations or falling behind their classmates. This in turn affected their engagement with learning, with the potential to further exacerbate learning loss.

Adaptive learning strategies

There was a general sense from the students interviewed that they struggled to adapt to different ways of learning during COVID-19 restrictions:

“The learning style that didn’t suit me since pretty much my whole life I’ve been in the classroom. So it was just a new thing that I just couldn’t adapt to.” Interviewee 24, female, flexi-school.

However, two broad adaptation strategies were evident in the students’ accounts: establishing and maintaining structured learning, and embracing flexibility in learning. These strategies appeared to reflect the different degrees of choice students wanted, or felt comfortable with, in when and how to learn. They also reflected the differential experiences of students in the mainstream and flexi-school systems. This was evident in how they experienced self-paced learning, independent learning and the learning modalities they were offered.

Self-paced learning: The structured learning approach was mainly aligned with the expectations of mainstream secondary school. That is, students had the understanding that everyone had the same workload to complete in the same amount of time. Returning to school after lockdown and realising that students were at different points in their learning was reported as hard:

“Another hard thing. We were all at different points because we’d all done it on our own and hadn’t done it together. So we were all at different chapters of this book that we were reading, so we all had to catch up to get to the same chapter.” Interviewee 9, female, secondary school.

In contrast, flexi-school students were more aligned with the flexible approach. Many of them talked extensively about how 'going at your own pace' was embedded into their flexi-school model prior to, and helped them cope during, the COVID-19 lockdown:

"The best thing is we just do it at our own pace. Everyone does their own work. We finish when we finish as long as, you know, we try and get it right. [...] Just do your work." Interviewee 7, female, flexi-school.

These students appeared reassured by the affordance of self-paced learning to re-engage with school when they were ready. Possibly, having the social license to go at their own pace was internalised among flexi-school students during their experiences with school prior to the pandemic, providing a means to manage anxieties around learning:

"[A]t my [previous mainstream secondary school] there was a lot of pressure to be the best, to be the smartest. Little achievements weren't recognised. It was all about getting the highest marks. I know that, me in particular, I was so ready to drop out last year in Year 10 and just do whatever apprenticeship I could get. Not because I wanted to, but because I was just so desperate to get out of school. [...] I was ready to kind of give up my future just so I could leave school." Interviewee 29, female, flexi-school.

Independent learning: It was predominantly mainstream secondary school students who reported lacking guidance in their learning routines while learning from home and seeking ways to structure their days around learning. In particular, some of these students reported that supervision and prompts from teachers to learn were not as effective online as they would have been in a classroom, and that they experienced difficulties in engaging with learning independently. Flexi-school students had very similar experiences, but suggested it allowed them to freely allocate their time. Some found online learning suited them very well, allowing them to improve in their mental and physical health and keep on top of household chores:

"If I wanted to play games, I'd have games [...] So long as I have my work done on time. [...] It was kind of nice too, because you kind of have the leisure to do it [...] It's your fault if you didn't do it. [...] You didn't have any excuses. [...] I did all my work way later in the day [...] I always wait because I had so much time to do it. I'd just do a little bit, a little bit and by the time I got close to it, I'd already finished it." Interviewee 30, male, flexi-school.

This was particularly pertinent for the young parents in the sample who also had to prioritise commitments to their families and had to fit learning into a given daily structure (e.g. when baby is asleep). However, both flexi- and secondary school students acknowledged the potential for procrastination:

"My grades weren't that good during the lockdown because [...] I procrastinated a lot. So it would build-up and I wouldn't do the work, so marks would be worse. ... I didn't really care about that that much, about the marks and stuff [...]. That's a normal thing for me. But when it's in school I do more work because you have to." Interviewee 13, female, secondary school.

Learning modalities: All students interviewed expressed preferences between either learning online or offline. However, this was an area where students were largely dependent on the options offered by their respective schools, and the educational resources available in their households. The students attending flexi-schools had been offered comprehensive choices and provided online learning platforms (with the option to print off materials on demand), delivery of hardcopy workbooks, and provision of learning materials such as laptops, stationary or connectivity devices. Interviewee 30 mused that their flexible school to some extent relied on an outreach approach that was already in place for students. Some students suggested that mainstream schools had similar strategies in place, but often these were triggered in response to specific requests by parents/carers or students. In some cases, students reported that even after voicing their preferences, schools did not accommodate these choices, or did so in a perfunctory manner (e.g. providing worksheets that were not suitable):

"Dad went up to the high school [...] spoke to them about, like, not having wi-fi and everything and they said that they would give him paper stuff. But they only gave him like a booklet for English and a booklet for Maths. I didn't understand any of that, so I couldn't do any of that." Interviewee 1, female, secondary school.

Online learning was mostly delivered through a combination of live video calls (usually through Zoom) and an online platform such as Google Classroom, Canvas or OneNote. One secondary school student reported learning through Facebook – this worked well for them, as the Wi-Fi was unreliable and they could use their phone and data to play the videos and message their teachers. Overall, there were ten students who expressed a dislike for online learning. The live video calls, in particular, had different reactions from students:

"A lot of other schools did the Zoom calls. We didn't really do that. And I think a lot of us preferred that because a lot of us do have anxiety,

and so being on a computer, and a lot of people just didn't feel quite comfortable with that... the teachers would put all the content onto this site that we were all using, which was Google Classroom. Yeah, and so we could all access that." Interviewee 29, female, flexi-school.

Another student reported difficulties with everyone having their cameras off as requested, because it made it harder for her to follow the class because of her English skills – an example of how children and young people for whom English is not their first language (a risk factor noted as likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 in Pillar 1) could experience additional challenges. It appeared that having choices was experienced as important, given diverse needs affecting the capacity to participate in online classes.

The primary school students and their families also suggested that they struggled to adapt to new ways of learning during COVID-19 restrictions, and there were similarities and differences to the adjustment strategies outlined above for secondary school students. Families of primary school students too articulated a desire for flexibility and being given choices in teaching modalities. There appeared to be a preference for offline or paper-based learning, expressed by parents/carers as well as some of the children:

"Probably worksheets more. [...] I didn't like going on Seesaw and doing all these different activities. [...] there was all different buttons and I didn't know how to get really into it." Interviewee 31, female, primary school.

With respect to how to time their learning, these children and families expressed a clear preference for structure over flexibility:

"I did them at the normal school times, so I would look at them – the schedule on the computer and see what times I've got – I had to do this part of the work and I just did it from there. So I would start at 9 like usual and just look at the timetable or I would look at my emails to see if the teacher said anything that might need to be changed and then I'd start doing my work until the teacher would send an email to tell us to stop doing the work. [...] Yeah [I liked that], because then I know like when to stop and when to start." Interviewee 15, female, primary school.

However, primary school students and their families often struggled with imposing this structure in their daily routines, especially when multiple children were learning at home.

Notably, only three students (one from each school type) described strategically engaging in behaviours aimed at mitigating learning loss *during* the lockdown. These

students explained their resolve as intrinsically driven by the wish to avoid additional stress and work in the future, or feeling motivated when goals were in reach (i.e. progress towards accomplishing goals could be tracked). The majority of students framed the time *after* their immediate return to school as a transition period in which they sought to make up for lost learning. This catching up was contextualised in terms of having to do extra schoolwork and missing out on recreational activities, as by this student:

"I didn't really want to play [sport] this year. It was just too hard. [...] Because of COVID and also like to try and get my grades back up." Interviewee 1, female, secondary school.

Another factor was the time schools and teachers allowed for the transition back to school routine before returning to a standard curriculum and testing, but this varied across the students interviewed. The majority of students suggested that they were back on track with schoolwork and engagement in their learning at the time of the interview, often after a transition period in which they committed extra effort and resources to schoolwork, improving their attendance, grades or exam preparation. Students here reported seeking teacher support, or being given material by teachers:

"[I]t was a little extra, but it was good. [...] So [teachers] gave us past exam papers to practice and, yeah, just gave us a lot of questions to just practise and practise. And if we have questions we just ask. They did really help us." Interviewee 12, female, secondary school.

However, for a small number of students (one primary and four secondary school) learning loss continued to be salient. The secondary school students perceived being behind relative to their classmates, with respect to their assessment and homework tasks or struggling with lower grades. As this senior student from a culturally and linguistically diverse background reported:

"I still have homeworks behind from last term or during the COVID-19. But I'm still working on them to finish them off to get my mark high to get passed for my course, my subject." Interviewee 20, female, secondary school.

It was not always clear against which criteria students assessed their progress or learning loss, or if they equated difficulties in adapting to different ways of learning with a sense of falling behind in the curriculum or in comparison to other students. Given the allowances in flexi-school models for self-paced learning, there might be different perceptions among secondary and flexi-school students with respect to what it means to be on track, or to experience learning loss. For instance, one flexi-

school student reported that, she was going to need an additional year to be ready to graduate, but did not interpret this as learning loss, commenting:

“...because this COVID stuff and my attendance didn’t show up and, you know, not finishing in time [...] So I have to finish [school] now next year. Which I’m okay. It’s fine.” Interviewee 7, female, flexi-school.

Support for learning from teachers, parents/carers, and community

Multiple sources of support during learning from home and the transition back to classroom learning were acknowledged in the students’ accounts. This section focuses in particular on the role of teachers, schools, parents/carers, and where reported, the broader community, although it was less commonly mentioned as a source of support.

Teacher support

Teacher support was extensively discussed among students across all school types. These experiences were closely linked to the teaching modalities schools offered and the learning strategies (i.e. degrees of flexibility and structure) students and families favoured. Missing out on, coping without, or adapting to different ways of teacher support was among the most prevalent themes in the data. As this student reflected:

“Normally the students were really quiet [during the zoom class]. He [the teacher] would just explain what we were going to do, this is what you need to have done, and submit it on Canvas. It’s an app where you submit your homework stuff. You can’t really ask them for help. You just had to deal with it.” Interviewee 20, female, secondary school.

For the one primary school student who attended school during lockdown, her parents felt that she was disadvantaged in favour of the students learning from home.

“Sometimes we got to see [child’s teacher], but she didn’t really teach us much [...] I didn’t really feel like I was learning much.” Interviewee 31, female, primary school.

Communication with, and access to, teachers during lockdown was one of the main issues parents/carers and students spoke about. There was a sense that the teacher support was less available than during face-to-face learning, that communication through online modalities would result in long delays for replies, and that there was not the same ability to access informal one on one teacher support, as would usually be had at lunch breaks or after class:

“So all the support networks simply really disappeared [...] you can’t just

go up to a teacher and say, ‘Okay, I really don’t understand what this one will I answer – show me’ and the teacher will help you out immediately. But it’s not the case when you’re learning from home.” Interviewee 18, female, secondary school.

Some students reported feeling an increased sense of shyness or embarrassment at asking questions in video call classes. Six of the nine secondary school students who spoke about communication issues were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. For two secondary school students (one with a disability and another one from a culturally and linguistically diverse background), no individual accommodations were made by teachers or schools during lockdown despite their lack of ability to access pre-COVID-19 supports. This again highlights the ways in which these risk factors for educational disadvantage could be exacerbated by COVID-19. Such community organisation support was received by three students (2 secondary school, 1 flexi-school), which was interrupted for two of these students during lockdown:

“[Study clubs] like run by [Service Provider]. And we go every [week-day] after school for like an hour-and-a-half and they help you with any subject you want... [during lockdown] it just made it harder because I couldn’t get more homework.” Interviewee 27, female, secondary school.

An additional source of support was mental health professionals, provided by the school or service providers. Those who did receive this support often mentioned that, while useful, an increased frequency would have been more helpful, or that receiving it online was somewhat of a barrier:

“[N]ot having that social interaction, that face-to-face communication, I was [...] speaking to counsellors that [...] I couldn’t even tell you what they look like and that was challenging because it was such a raw and intense moment of my life [...] They would do that [deliver counselling to the children] over the phone, sometimes video link, but it was quite intense for them. My children [...] haven’t really had to do quite a lot of counselling and the counselling that they’ve done, again being face-to-face [...] it’s a little bit less intimidating.” Parent Interviewee 15, female, primary school.

However, almost all students and parents/carers reported having some communication from, and access to, teacher support. This was in addition to pre-set instructions that accompanied the online or offline work. This support was usually only accessible when asked for (n=23), with nine students reporting that support was also offered to them directly (six flexi-school, two secondary school and one primary school student). Relying on student or parent/carer initiative could result in students’ disengaging as

their motivation waned, or in the case of one parent, breaking down in front of the teachers due to the difficulty of her situation. While support was available to these students and parents/carers, having to ask for it could act as a barrier to receiving it. Some teachers (and schools) were reported to be very supportive, giving daily personalised check-ins, dropping supplies off, providing one on one support, giving feedback on work and supporting wellbeing. Three of the primary school students' parents/carers indicated they felt like teachers were doing the best they could under trying circumstances:

"I think everyone would have liked a bit more, you know, more support sort of from the teachers, but you know that when they're – they're doing the best that they can." Parent Interviewee 4, male, primary school.

Teachers would also occasionally provide support around setting healthy boundaries with start and finish times for schoolwork or encourage students to take breaks and get fresh air – in turn helping students to structure their learning.

Across all school types, support from teachers, schools, and service providers (i.e. in the case of CALD students) was highlighted as crucial *after* returning to school to allow students to reduce learning loss:

"It was extremely hard to come back and do a full day at school, so we came around an idea to do half days. And then we would slowly graduate back up to the full day. And now I'm doing full days back at school. But definitely doing the half day was definitely a big, massive help for me. It was probably the best support that I was probably given during that time, was the support of knowing that I am going to still get the same help as everyone else." Interviewee 39, female, flexi-school.

Teacher support was helpful when it was available, but as this account highlights, the experience of needing extra support was common and students perceived that teachers could not help everyone individually:

"I was a bit behind and I have to ask more questions. The teacher helped me a lot though. [...] we only had three lessons of maths. [...] I wanted more help, like from teachers at lunch. There were a lot of students that needed help, so they couldn't support me all the time." Interviewee 27, female, secondary school.

This student's experience alludes to the expectation placed on teachers to be approachable for informal support at all times, whereas formal support processes embedded into school organisational routines after the end of lockdown, as exemplified in the student describing a gradual return to full time schooling,

Support from parents/carers

All of the primary students' parents/carers talked about supporting their child's learning, despite most feeling they lacked capacity (the mental or physical resources necessary to assist with their child's learning) or capabilities (to be able to understand and help deliver the teaching material to their child/ren) to manage these additional responsibilities.

Of the nine primary school children in the sample, one attended school because the parents felt they would be better off. As has been shown elsewhere, being in paid employment while home schooling during COVID-19 restrictions resulted in challenges for families and reduced work hours, especially for female parents/carers (Collins et al. 2020; Garbe et al. 2020). A number of challenges with home schooling for the parents/carers were observed, even though these were overwhelmingly stay-at-home parents/carers. These families in the sample were identified as having complex needs.

Parents/carers spoke about having to reteach themselves concepts their child was learning, lacking digital literacy or up-to-date knowledge about how things were taught:

"There was paperwork on what to do at home if you're learning from a computer, for the people staying home. That was sent home [...] [t]his is what, "Look up www and do this, do this, do that." And all that's gibberish to us because, like I said, we're not tech savvy people." Parent Interviewee 31, female, primary school.

Two of the parents of primary school students spoke about their child's frustrations with trying to do the work, or trying to learn in the study environment. A small number of children spoke about the stress of having to manage schoolwork and other family expectations (e.g. visiting family, taking time away to manage a sibling's violent behaviour) that could clash with school responsibilities. One parent stated their child was scared and had no confidence with maths, and burst into tears after another child at school said maths was easy when everyone was back at school. This parent advocated to the school for extra maths support and the child is now receiving this.

Parent/carer support was not always salient to the adolescent students in this study, as some of them lived independently or had other living arrangements than with parents/carers (e.g. in a refuge). However, those adolescents who did live with their parents/carers talked about how their parents/carers were involved in their learning from home. About half of secondary and flexi-school students spoke about parental/carer support including help with content, managing stress, and providing practical support such as bringing in food. They also acknowledged help from carers or siblings. While this support mostly seemed supplementary to other sources of support, students spoke of it with a sense of appreciation:

“I know from my dad, he was like really supportive about it, like telling me not to stress, like just try and do as much as I can.” Interviewee 1, female, secondary school.

Five secondary students (four of which were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) spoke about their parents/carers lacking capabilities to support them:

“My mum doesn’t understand English, my dad’s [and] my brothers, their English is really, really poor, and my oldest brother, I did ask him for my maths help, but he’s terrible at his maths.” Interviewee 20, female, secondary school.

These accounts demonstrate the range of experiences of learning support in the home environment across the school types, and the potential held by targeting and strengthening these support systems.

Flexi-school support

Flexi-schools are a form of alternative schooling in Australia, which provide schooling for, often marginalised, young people who have struggled in the mainstream schooling system. Flexi-school students described their schools before COVID-19 as very supportive, and that support continued to be provided throughout lockdown. They were also the most likely to talk about the support they received as being something they could both ask for and have offered directly to them.

Flexi-schools are also smaller, and already have systems in place to provide intensive, timely and multifaceted support to their students. They often include counselling support in their model as well as personalised access to teachers (such as having the phone number for the head of school):

“Well, the principal, we all have her phone number so if we need to call her if we’re feeling stressed or whatever, we can call her and she can just talk to us and calm us down. But also if we need anything, we just call her or message her and she can organise for the counsellor to ring us or sometimes I would go in and just, I guess, touch base with how I was going with the teachers.” Interviewee 32, female, secondary school.

It may be that this model of schooling, which was already designed to be flexible and responsive to students’ complex needs, was better placed to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

Stakeholder and service provider perspectives and responses to the needs of children, young people and families during COVID-19

What do the stakeholders say?

Stakeholders reported that during lockdown and remote learning, there was increased demand for services among students and families. In response, service providers bolstered outreach to effectively engage with students and families, including those who had been traditionally hard-to-reach. This approach was resource intense and placed a high burden on service provider staff.

Stakeholders thought that online learning was beneficial for students who preferred self-driven and self-paced learning and for students who experienced social anxiety or bullying.

Stakeholders suggested online learning was less effective for students who did not have access to the devices, connectivity and skills required and for those with less supportive home learning environments.

Online learning was also perceived to be less effective for students for whom school was the sole safe place, which they no longer had access to during lockdown.

Stakeholders reflected on students' general sense of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation. The impacts of loss of peer and social connections, changes to household finances and familial dynamics, and fear and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 were noted.

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health was also observed among parents and carers, teachers and school staff, and the staff of service providers.

Social connection and sense of belonging were presented as critical ingredients for keeping students engaged in school.

The general consensus from the stakeholder interviews was that COVID-19 has not created new problems – rather, it has exacerbated existing risk factors for educational attainment:

“All COVID has done is throw a spotlight on the extraordinary [educational] inequality and disadvantage that existed in Australia pre-COVID.” Stakeholder interview 12.

COVID-19 was seen as amplifying existing risk factors around educational disadvantage. Some risk factors were viewed as being more likely (e.g. increasing the experience

of domestic and family violence), while others (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, low socio-economic background), were seen as likely to increase the probability of educational disadvantage, or to widen the disadvantage gap relative to the pre-COVID-19 situation. The stakeholder interviews also suggested that the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 could result in additional students, who would previously not have been considered as vulnerable, now being exposed to experiences of disadvantage.

There was strong recognition among stakeholders that addressing the challenges of educational disadvantage in Australia, which have been amplified by COVID-19, requires system approaches and appropriate and early interventions targeted across the life course. Individual and disconnected programs may not deliver the intended outcomes if they do not address the systematic issues:

“The programmatic confetti that rains down on a community like [redacted] is a huge problem...we need to control the money that comes into the community in a much more strategic way [...] you could put it [government/social funding] on a schedule and bring that schedule to some local expert decision making, and by what I mean by expert is include local people, and then start to mould that spend in a much more strategic way.” Stakeholder interview 10.

Early intervention was identified as important, not for just addressing issues with educational attainment (e.g. numeracy and literacy skills), but also as critical for addressing issues with student mental health and young people entering out-of-home care:

“We are still trying to bring too many ambulances to the bottom of the cliff instead of building fences at the top.” Stakeholder interview 10.

Drawing on the understanding of educational disadvantage in the context of the ecological system and the life course, the perceptions and responses of how the stakeholders responded to the needs of children, young people and families they supported during COVID-19 were explored. The following sections present some broad trends and examples from the stakeholders on their perceptions of what worked, for whom, and in what circumstances.



Student

The stakeholders interviewed reported that they knew of students who had completely disengaged during remote learning and that some students who had low attendance rates prior to COVID-19 had not returned to the classroom when schools reopened. In understanding this, and the impact of educational disadvantage, stakeholders reflected on student mental health and wellbeing, uncertain futures and connection with school.

Student mental health and wellbeing

Stakeholders noted there have been some benefits around mental health for students during COVID-19. For example, it was suggested that some students with social anxiety preferred home learning, some older students preferred the increased autonomy with self-driven and self-paced learning, and others who were behind their peers felt reduced embarrassment or social pressure from learning in the classroom setting. Some stakeholders noted that, in some cases, home learning had been more accessible for students with social anxiety. Online learning was potentially beneficial for students who struggle with social anxiety and find classroom settings difficult, or if they experience bullying at school:

“Some young people appreciated greater flexibility and fewer distractions, although most needed some time to adjust to new ways of working. Services told us that some young people reported feeling safer and more settled at home, particularly if they experienced bullying at school.” Stakeholder survey respondent 38.

However, stakeholders also suggested that the time away from the classroom routine might have made it harder for these students to re-engage:

“And of course when you start looking at grade 6, 7 and the early years of high school, a lot of kids in our sites, and indeed in other sites too, that the department and others and us have worked really hard to get kids to come to school to attend, they have gone into the ether and some of those kids we’ll never get back and that is our worry – and that is particularly with the secondary [school] kids.” Stakeholder interview 5.

Overwhelmingly, there were observations of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation among students, with accompanying increases in risk-taking behaviour (e.g. alcohol and drug use). These were reported to be more pronounced during

remote learning periods, particularly in jurisdictions with prolonged lockdowns (e.g. Melbourne):

“All young people have been impacted this year, with hopes and dreams changed or dashed. Ideas of the future have had to be adapted or discarded. Young people experience anxiety, depression and self-harm and in some cases, suicide. It is hard for them to put into words why they are feeling the way that they are. This is the same for students in the child protection system – they will be dealing with job losses, economic impacts, resource limitations and mental health issues of those around them. This will be causing them anxiety and depression and I have seen evidence of this in my students.” Stakeholder survey respondent 29, teacher.

Returning to the classroom after home schooling also presented challenges for student mental health and wellbeing, with some students requiring a ‘settling in’ period to readapt to the context of classroom learning:

“Engagement with learning has been affected for some students with impacts on mental health and wellbeing and needing to resettle into the school environment.” Stakeholder survey respondent 29.

Social connection

Stakeholders noted that remote learning impacted the social connections and sense of belonging that students have among their peers, which could negatively affect motivations and engagement with education:

“Social and emotional disconnection from peers causes challenges in maintaining social skills and emotional resilience.” Stakeholder survey respondent 16.

Conversely, it was highlighted that students who had high levels of social connections and sense of belonging at school were highly motivated to return and re-engage with the classroom setting:

“I observed a great deal of resilience from many of the children in my context. Students returned to school mostly in high spirits and appeared to actually miss one another as well as the context of school.” Stakeholder survey respondent 36.

Many stakeholders highlighted that schools and education are a key contributing factor to student mental health and wellbeing and that schools should play a central

role in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of students:

“Need to rethink schools as being points of social connection that have an education function for sure - but that they also have to have a strong wellbeing and social connection function.” Stakeholder interview 1.

Uncertain futures

Stakeholders identified that ongoing impacts from COVID-19 can be seen in concerns over uncertain futures, changing and volatile job markets, and sense of purpose for young people. They expressed particular concern for older students who are transitioning out of secondary school and trying to navigate future education, training and employment pathways in volatile and uncertain labour and education markets:

“There has been kind of a misdiagnosis of some of the problem in COVID as a mental health issue, but we see it more as a crisis of hopelessness.” Stakeholder interview 17.

Stakeholders suggested these concerns were particularly pronounced for students who rely on industry training or placements (e.g. graduate programs, traineeships, apprenticeships) as part of future career paths.

Stakeholder feedback further suggests that COVID-19 has negatively impacted students who are currently navigating education transition points in particular, for example young students starting primary school, primary students transitioning to secondary schools, and senior students transitioning into further education, training or employment. Stakeholders suggested that lost learning during COVID-19 lockdowns will affect student ‘readiness’ for advancing to the next educational stage:

“There are a whole lot of kids that are going to turn up to school not equipped for school, and then there is all the kids that should have been at first year of school this year that will go up a grade next year and they won’t have the foundation skills -so it [COVID-19 impacts on education] is going to play out in all those transition points through the school sector.” Stakeholder interview 5.



The stakeholders interviewed noted that COVID-19 has caused increased financial stress for many families and that supporting home learning brought challenges.

Access to online and digital resources

During remote learning periods, it was revealed that a high proportion of students did not have access to appropriate home learning devices. For example, Clontarf Foundation surveyed 3,834 students revealing that 41% reported not having a computer or computer access. Concern about lack of access to digital devices was repeated frequently:

“Roughly 60% of them [students] had internet at home but of that 60% there was a portion that didn’t have enough to support Zoom workshops or that sort of thing. Quite a lot of them didn’t have credit on their phones, didn’t have iPad or Laptops that they could utilise. They had an iPad at the school, but they weren’t allowed to take them home.” Stakeholder interview 18.

Supporting home learning

Stakeholders also commented that families have felt pressure to support home learning with increased stress where parents/carers felt ill-equipped to do so. Stakeholders suggested that parents/carers who had negative experiences or attitudes to education could be less likely to provide a supportive learning environment for students during home schooling and less likely to encourage the student and foster motivation for returning to school post closures:

“Parents who are already struggling with their own trauma and thus not able to meet their children’s needs as effectively were not able to provide adequate educational, emotional and safety provisions at home whilst the children were with them.” Stakeholder survey respondent 15.

However, other stakeholders suggested that assisting with home learning raised awareness of their child’s education among some parents/carers, and helped identify areas for self-improvement to support their child’s education:

“I have seen parents acknowledge their educational downfalls and ask for help or seek help in improving their knowledge to help their child.” Stakeholder survey respondent 25.

Stakeholders suggested that often older students from large households bore the responsibility for supporting home learning. Students providing caring roles for other family members were also reported to have experienced increased pressure during COVID-19:

“Young people who are carers for ill or disabled family members because they try to balance their own needs for learning with the need to care for loved ones who are at a higher risk if they contract the disease.”
Stakeholder survey respondent 10, service provider.

Stakeholders also suggested that COVID-19 restrictions had led to students spending more time in the home setting, which has increased exposure to unsupportive and unsafe environments for some (e.g. domestic family violence, alcohol and drug taking behaviour):

“For a child from these unstable environments, school can be the ONLY safe place in their lives.” Stakeholder survey 28.

Stakeholder survey respondents noted that stay-home orders and increased financial and family stress caused by COVID-19 would likely increase the occurrence of domestic and family violence. They talked of how the ‘line of sight’ for vulnerable children and young people had diminished, not just in school, but also within extended families, across broader community, recreational activities, and support services.

Placement instability

There was a sense among the stakeholders interviewed that increased pressure and stress was placed on foster and kinship carers during remote learning periods where children were home full-time and respite services were not operating. Some suggested that this led to an increase in placement break-downs and young people having to enter residential care. There could be an impact on engagement when this required a change in schools:

“So many young people have told me at some point their placement broke down and they decided that was it for school, I couldn’t face another new school [...] [The focus should be on] whatever it takes to keep kids stable and at the same school.” Stakeholder interview 10.

Parental/carer mental health and wellbeing

Stakeholders suggested that pressures on mental health were also experienced by the parents/carers of students who felt disconnected and struggled with the demands of online learning:

“When the local community values education and a sense of school as ‘family’ they are more likely to support and assist the needs of the school, and by extension, the students. However, COVID restrictions did not foster a sense of community and in fact, engendered the opposite effect. Parents, although generally accepting of the situation, were unhappy at the loss of community. I had parents crying during our interactions for a variety of reasons; some lamented the loss of face-to-face contact that allowed them to discuss issues arising, others were distraught by their inability to cope with the demands of online learning and the extra stress the restrictions placed on familial relationships.” Stakeholder survey respondent 28.

Opportunities for engagement

Stakeholders noted that home schooling presented opportunities for increased engagement of parents/carers with their child’s education. Certain service providers increased communication, outreach and support to parents/carers which helped with their child’s engagement in education, particularly with primary aged students. For example, The Former Origin Greats (FOGS) ARTIE (Achieving Results Through Indigenous Education) Academy in QLD set academic goals (personalised to the student’s context) with students in school, then called home and explained the goal and received parents/carers’ support and buy-in, explaining that the child receives a reward (football, jersey, hoody, footy ticket) upon goal completion. They suggested that this new practice of communication and verbal buy-in from parents/carers has seen an increase in the number of individual goals achieved.



The Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020) noted that most of the immediate response to COVID-19 were directed at schools (and mainly at teachers). The stakeholders interviewed reflected on the demands and stresses placed on schools and school staff, particularly during remote learning where a lot of support services for students could not run as normal, resulting in schools being the main contact point and support source for families and students:

“...everything fell back to schools.” Stakeholder interview 16.

Furthermore, stakeholders noted that the expectations and demands placed on teachers was high, with little or no extra support or resources provided to help teachers meet these intensified demands:

“It was an extremely difficult year for the teachers of the world, who received little support but were expected to take on almost all of the responsibility.” Stakeholder survey respondent 36.

The stakeholders interviewed reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on engagement with school, access to digital resources and online learning, and the potential learning loss.

Engagement with school

As noted above, stakeholders considered the routine and social connectedness of the classroom as critical for engagement, particularly for younger students. Disruptions to routines were highlighted as particularly distressing for students with experiences of trauma, additional learning needs, or disabilities:

“I consider students with special needs who have just begun their school life to be most at risk, because the disruption of COVID-19 changes all the regular and anticipated routines that the student has been supported to participate in. Changes that are unpredictable and frequent in timing are so disruptive that these students find it very difficult to accept the home environment as the new learning environment. Parents provided feedback to this effect.” Stakeholder survey respondent 37.

How to encourage re-engagement with school was a common theme and the stakeholders highlighted the importance of communicating and engaging with students and families. This engagement needs to be intrinsically motivating to students to ensure that they are not just attending class because they have to, but are also engaging with education and school life. However, crowded curriculums and school timetables seem to limit the ability of teachers and schools to include engaging, hands-on lessons that are flexible to students' needs and motivations:

“I think the word attendance needs to go with engagement...I think the one thing you want to learn is that you [students] have actually got to be engaged in school, and you know how do you actually engage kids in school, if we put more things in place to engage students then the attendance will be higher. I think the world of going to school to get an education, yes that is your main thing, but a kid sitting at home who doesn't like school isn't going to be like 'oh I'm gonna go to school to get a good education' it doesn't sound very engaging in one way if you are not academically trained...and the way you teach now is so process driven, the curriculum and everything like that, it's gone, I wouldn't say completely, but it has gone away from engaging, hands-on lessons as

now teachers are sticking to a script – what we learned from that period [remote learning] was that engagement was the number one thing and that needs to come back into schools.” Stakeholder interview 19.

Access to digital resources and online learning

During remote learning periods, many schools and support programs lent devices out to students to support home learning, or provided data packages. However, these were short-term responses with no sustainable funding models in place to support this provision of data and devices going forward:

“Aspirational announcements by the Premier about computers for all, for example, were not able to be realised in reality. It was soon shown that there were too many restrictions and too few computers [...] And even if they could be lent out they were not compatible for home use.” Stakeholder survey respondent 28.

The switch to online learning introduced new opportunities for re-engaging students who had already disengaged from schools. This served as a useful way to build young people's confidence and skills so they could ready themselves for re-engaging with schools and classrooms:

“We can take learning to a kid's bedroom, when we know that kid is not confident to come out of the bedroom, and we could provide them with education and develop their confidence in learning and their success in learning so that the classroom becomes possible eventually.” Stakeholder interview 16.

Online video calls allowed increased opportunities for one-on-one tutoring and mentoring. This was noted as particularly beneficial for students who in a classroom setting would feel too embarrassed to admit they were struggling, or identify for the teacher how they were struggling. Stakeholders suggested that during one-on-one online sessions students might feel more comfortable to be honest about their real ability meaning the tutor could better address their needs.

Similarly, online approaches were noted as a useful way to connect demand and supply between rural and remote based students with tutors in urban areas (e.g. university education undergraduates attending university in cities). Online approaches were also seen as useful for connecting young people to beneficial networks, for example conducting mock interviews online with key industry mentors (such as in The Smith Family Mentoring Program).

While online education and professional development have certain identified benefits,

overwhelmingly the consensus of stakeholders was that online learning cannot be considered as the only solution. Online learning is not effective or appropriate for everyone, and indeed, in certain cases it was suggested that it simply did not work:

“If anyone tells you they had a positive teaching (or learning) experience during the online experience, they are either lying, trying to ingratiate themselves, or incompetent. It is almost impossible to teach online to 20–25 students, particularly in the early childhood years. Families with more than one year level often had just one computer. Here’s a thought exercise for you: Imagine you have three children – one in junior school, one in senior school and one in high school – you only have one computer. There are four (wisely, cut from seven) learning areas to be covered. Your internet connection is patchy at best and theirs is not much better. You need to co-ordinate access to lessons between the three sectors. You find out that, each lesson should last about 20 minutes but in fact, lasts closer to an hour; that means, 3 x 3 x 4 hours are needed each day to cover the content for the three students. Any thoughts? And you may have guessed... yes, this actually happen here.” Stakeholder survey respondent 28.

Furthermore, stakeholders noted that the evidence base on the effectiveness of online learning or the guidance for designing effective online education is limited. Stakeholders stressed that the benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning cannot be overlooked especially for students experiencing disadvantage:

“Maintain face-to-face learning for ALL students as normal. Online learning is pointless for children who can’t be online, hard copy learning packages are useful for children who do not have access to a safe space and basics (e.g. a pencil or pen) and parent/carer support. Children cannot self-guide learning, especially in contexts of stress, poverty and cumulative trauma.” Stakeholder survey respondent 17.

During home learning, stakeholders identified the lack of face-to-face engagement with teachers and peers as a challenge to the students’ learning:

“Many children and young people felt distracted and struggled to maintain motivation and learn away from their peers and teachers. Many told us that they needed more structure and face-to-face explanation and support with their learning.” Stakeholder survey respondent 38.

Teachers’ perspectives on learning loss

A number of stakeholder survey responses came from primary and secondary school teachers. All described challenges with delivering education during remote learning, with most also reporting learning loss among their students upon return to the classroom. This related to delays in academic progress and worsened behaviour (lower attendance) and attitudes (poor motivation).

“Most students regardless of ability struggled to maintain their school work during lock down. Students who were already behind failed to complete much or any of the allocated work requiring re-teaching of concepts when school returned. Students with low level of computer literacy and living in families without reliable internet and computers are now further behind.” Stakeholder survey respondent 22.

“I have students who previously were not an absentee issue now no longer coming to school as often. Across our grade/cohort we have had several students drop out of school (however possibly attending elsewhere). There has been a huge increase in disengaged students, I would estimate 50–80% of my class. It can be difficult to tell because it was during the beginning of the year, and also there seems to be a flow on effect, if half the class are disengaged the others begin to follow suit. I have noticed a drop in grades for students in my class from previous years, despite deliberately adjusting their report grades with a little more lenience due to the nature of the COVID-19 situation.” Stakeholder survey respondent 36.

“Educationally, what was attempted (i.e. online learning) was a waste of time. Most families were not interested in the online experience. Learning simply ceased for those children. This meant that when students did return to class, they were at different stages of the curriculum – some had attempted one subject but not other subjects. In the end we wiped the entire term. I can’t offer one helpful action or response from staff, parents, or students. Does this mean that students have been ‘left behind’ in their learning? Apart from the literacy development of our prep year students, there has been no discernible qualitative or quantitative educational delay. In large part this is because the curriculum is not developmentally based it is an arbitrary selection of concepts that those who compile subject area content and assessment believe is important students know.” Stakeholder survey respondent 28.

“[The students] at most risk [are] preparatory year students, particularly those that have not been to kindergarten or a similar child care education centre. I am a P-3 teacher and I’ve noticed that my prep students are about a term ‘behind’ in their education development, particularly in their literacy studies. There is no corresponding ‘loss’ in the other years.” Stakeholder survey respondent 28.

“Engagement with learning has been affected for some students with impacts on mental health and wellbeing and needing to resettle into the school environment. Some students but not all have had a difficult year and prolonged absence from school exacerbated this.”

Learning has also been impacted for the majority of students with gaps in knowledge that teachers need to work very hard to fill. School expectations that learning has not been disrupted has not helped this. Students missed out on more than a term of instruction not very long after the start of the school year. Many teaching and learning opportunities were lost during this time even though teachers tried really hard with home learning. Because student engagement could not be guaranteed and because the model of delivery was not instructionally based in the classroom, gaps in learning have appeared.” Survey respondent 29, teacher.

An example of the school’s role in shaping the outcome of an approach can be seen in these individual school approaches to having students on campus during COVID-19 lockdowns. During these times, schools remained open for students experiencing disadvantage or children of essential workers, which led to mixed educational experiences and outcomes for students going onto campus. Some schools approached this from a supervising role:

“Those at school were punished for being there. Not allowed to have access to own teachers or classrooms, not allowed help, supervised only. Additional stress due to parent(s) being essential workers, less access to internet due to schools not being set up for so many kids on devices.” Stakeholder survey respondent 34.

Other schools used having students on campus as an opportunity to attend to the educational needs of disadvantage students leading to educational gains for students who otherwise would not have had access to online learning at home:

“The children most at risk in my school were asked to still attend [during lockdown] and most parents were happy for this to occur as they were refugee children with no access to ICT at home. Those students in my class, have moved in leaps and bounds from having my sole attention for 5 weeks to focus on their basic skills.” Stakeholder survey respondent 5.

Community

During COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, service providers faced the challenge of wanting to increase their support for students experiencing disadvantage, while also ensuring the safety of staff and the people they serve. Overcoming this challenge required quick, flexible and innovative responses from service providers.

The service providers interviewed reported that they adapted existing, or implemented new approaches during lockdowns to respond to the increased need among children, young people and their families. These new and adapted approaches took many different shapes, from converting existing programs to online platforms (e.g. study groups or tutoring sessions moving online), setting up hotlines or local Facebook pages for parents/carers and students to access locally relevant information and support, text message check-in systems with students, establishing peer-support groups for parents/carers, socially distanced home visits to drop off education or support materials (e.g. dropping food packs to students’ homes and then running an online cooking class), to online gaming competitions. Given the increased demand, service providers felt that ‘shutting up shop’ wasn’t an option during COVID-19 lockdowns, that they still needed to reach and support young people:

“Our motto was ‘business as usual, but it’s going to be different’ – it doesn’t mean we stop.” Stakeholder interview 4.

The ability to be nimble, responsive and adaptive, and to tailor responses across locations and jurisdictions experiencing different restrictions, was noted as a real strength by service providers during the changing COVID-19 restrictions. Having clear, decisive leadership and supporting and empowering staff was seen as key to facilitating efficient and effective changes within organisations:

“...it was all about empowerment and really giving our leaders an opportunity to shine at a time when really the need was very high because people were going through a lot of change.” Stakeholder interview 13.

Policy

COVID-19 and associated lockdowns and home learning has brought national attention to the already existing divide in digital equity in Australia:

“One of the positives, if there is a positive out of COVID, is that it has put on the national agenda the digital divide issue – we have been talking about digital divide for about ten years and everyone kept saying, when looking at the aggregate data, that there isn’t a digital divide issue in Australia.” Stakeholder interview 3.

Stakeholders proposed that adequately addressing the digital divide requires more

than providing devices (such as laptops) to students. Rather, it was identified that a holistic approach is needed that addresses barriers to sustainable and affordable data plans and devices (e.g. modems), builds capacity among students, parents/carers and teachers/schools for the safe and effective use of online services (e.g. building digital literacy and IT skills, access to IT support) and addresses issues around access to home environments that are conducive to online home learning.

Perspectives from Victoria (VIC)

During the course of the consultation, a small number of the stakeholders were from VIC when they were still in the second lockdown. The 'Teachers' Perspectives' described in the previous box were based on just a few weeks of remote learning and it is expected that the longer lockdown in VIC will have a greater impact on students and potentially greater learning loss. There was a sense that lockdown was difficult and stakeholders described how they, students and families were in crisis mode on all fronts.

While many of the challenges noted above were also present, impacts were broader and context specific. For example, stories of students not having access to masks and getting in trouble with the police for not wearing a mask, which can then escalate when they do not have the language or social skills for those types of interactions with the police. There were also concerns about how to ensure students had masks when they did come back to school. The government response was also more intense (e.g. changed school assessments for this year, extra funding for student mental health). However, there was also concern about the impact of reduced visibility of vulnerable children and young people, and unmet service needs and the longer term impacts on educational engagement and broader wellbeing that could result from this.

"So probably for all of our staff and students the first lockdown period in Melbourne was a bit of a novelty and you know it was a bit new and it was a bit exciting and our students all got laptops cause they didn't have those before and they all had internet connection and they didn't have that before and it appeared to be short term, and you know we all thought oh we can do this, we can do this for a short period of time and I feel like we did, we did an amazing job as a staff group and the student group to remain connected and to continue to provide the wellbeing supports and wellbeing sessions online for our students and continue the learning... and then of course in Melbourne, Victoria we came back to school for a very short period of time and then we were back to ten weeks of lockdown and ten weeks of remote learning and it obviously wore off pretty quickly, so the first time around our incidents of heightened wellbeing supports were fairly limited but second lockdown period we have had significant mental health, depression, fatigue and I'm talking staff and students." Stakeholder interview 6.

Emerging areas for action

This Pillar 2 Report provides a complex picture of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic among Australia's children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Some of the findings confirm expectations set by Pillar 1, but others are surprising. This section presents possible interpretations for these findings, with reference to relevant literature, the data limitations, and the ecological and life course model for children and young people in the *Learning through COVID-19* project.

Impact of COVID-19 on attendance, disciplinary absences, conditions of learning and learning loss

Pillar 1 established that the three pre-defined cohorts of children and young people were already at risk of poorer educational outcomes, and that their educational disadvantage could potentially worsen as a direct result of COVID-19. Internationally, there is concern about learning loss, and that educational achievement gaps by socio-economic status could widen (Kuhfeld et al., 2020), but evidence so far is mixed, inconsistent across measures of educational attainment, limited by variable study quality, and predominantly based on data gathered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Grewenig et al., 2020; Education Endowment Foundation, 2020a; Ofsted, 2020). In Australia, the New South Wales Department of Education (2020) have reported that students in August to October 2020 were performing at the same levels in Year 3 reading, Year 5 reading and numeracy and Year 9 numeracy as 2019 students were achieving in May, suggesting an approximate learning loss of 2–4 months.

The quantitative analyses of the Education Department data suggest that COVID-19 has had an impact on some of the education outcomes measured, but effects were small and similar across the cohort members and their more advantaged peers, so gaps in educational disadvantage did not appear to widen. The analyses showed that children starting school behind (Cohort 1) and older students at risk of disengagement (Cohort 2) had lower attendance rates than non-cohort members, and the growth in attendance gaps for older students at risk of disengagement is consistent with COVID-19 increasing disadvantage in student attendance. The impact on this growth in attendance gap on educational attainment remains to be seen.

Drawing from a second review of remote learning (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020b), the EEF noted that if online teaching was available and effective, the projection for learning loss could be overstated. However, as noted in Pillar 1, students have been reported to learn less when home schooling, and have varied levels of engagement with online learning. The students interviewed here struggled with remote learning, but importantly, also learned to adapt during lockdown. Learning loss was a multifaceted and dynamic experience. Students and their families talked of feeling unable to keep

up, falling behind, and then, in some cases, catching up with learning.

The most consistent findings in the quantitative analyses were for some conditions for learning. For participation in clubs, COVID-19 appears to have closed gaps, largely by causing club participation to fall for all students in 2020. In our student interviews, many were vocal about missing sport. It is likely that this experience was universal, rather than specific to students experiencing disadvantage. Some research suggests that participating in extra-curricular activities like sport, music, clubs and the performing arts, enhances student achievement in learning, while variations in such participation between advantaged and disadvantaged students partly explains achievement gaps (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010). This finding shows that COVID-19 restrictions potentially have contradictory effects because of the different ways the pandemic interacts with the underlying system of educational disadvantage.

There was also a drop in the rate of bullying in 2020 that was steeper for non-disadvantaged students, which led to a widening of gaps in the During-COVID-19 sample compared to the Pre-COVID-19 sample. For Cohort 1, the disadvantage gap in bullying grew more During-COVID-19 than Pre-COVID-19, largely because non-cohort members reported much less bullying during the pandemic, and the rate of bullying of Cohort 1 students did not fall to the same extent. That said, it is important to note that the experience of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns was not necessarily universal. Unexpected positive benefits of the COVID-19 lockdown were also reported – for example for young people with sensory needs and mental health issues, for whom home schooling was less stressful than being at school (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020a).

Differential experiences of students at mainstream and flexi-schools, and preferences for flexibility or structured learning strategies that were perceived as enabling or hindering engagement with learning were uncovered. The flexi-schools systems, which provides intensive and multifaceted support to students, may be more responsive to students' complex needs, making it better placed to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

The supportive roles of parents/carers, teachers and community in mitigating the risk of learning loss is important to note and should not be underestimated. More broadly, the immediate government response to the transition to home learning across Australian jurisdictions, through the development of online information, tools and resources, provision of funding and resource support, could have been effective in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on learning.

In this context, it is important to note that the stakeholder consultation suggested that an effective approach for supporting educational attainment for one student may not be effective for another, while an approach that may be supported by and work well in

one school may not be supported by or work in another school. It is perhaps critical to note that the stakeholder consultation suggests that 'what works' is highly dependent on the individual student and the individual school. This variation at student and school level could be why we see some inconsistent effects on educational outcomes here.

However, perhaps the length of lockdown was simply too short to have a significant impact on learning. The longer lockdown in Victoria may have a greater impact on students there and differential impact on learning loss across jurisdictions requires monitoring.

Data limitations also make it harder to identify pandemic effects, particularly when there are more complete data for some cohorts and measures of disadvantage than for others.

Impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and wellbeing

In the quantitative analyses, there was little evidence that COVID-19 was associated with significant growth in disadvantage gaps for different types of student engagement. While students in Cohorts 1 and 2 were less engaged than non-cohort members for all forms of student engagement, the changes in engagement gaps over time were not larger for students experiencing the COVID-19 disruptions. However, several Year 5 engagement indicators (sense of belonging, homework behaviour, interest in learning and effort) were at lower levels generally in the During-COVID-19 sample than the Pre-COVID-19 sample, implying that student engagement was lower on average for both advantaged and disadvantaged students during COVID-19 than for comparable students who did not experience the pandemic. This universal impact on engagement could limit the effects seen on educational disadvantage. However, elsewhere it has been noted that the extended lockdown in VIC has increased the risk of disengagement from school (Smith Family, 2020), with some services reporting that some children and young people who were less engaged in school had in fact completely disengaged (Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, 2020 a, b, c).

Adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing among children and young people are being reported (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Ofsted, 2020; Smith Family, 2020), and while the adverse impact of COVID-19 on mental health is important in of itself, it also has implications for student engagement and, ultimately, educational outcomes. Social isolation, lack of social connections and the experience of fatigue were all reported in the above studies.

Among the students interviewed, feelings of anxiety were palpable and students talked of the difficulties of feeling 'stuck' in one location, their loss of social, family and peer connections, and important milestones or events, which impacted on their

mental health and wellbeing. While it was suggested that there have been some benefits around mental health for students during COVID-19, stakeholders reflected on a more general sense of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation among students. Social connection and sense of belonging were presented as critical ingredients for keeping students engaged in school.

While the pressures placed on families, teachers and schools during home schooling were considered acute, immediate, and often compounded by long-standing issues of digital inequities by the stakeholders who participated in consultations, they also presented new opportunities for increased engagement, increased flexibility and to step back and do things differently in the future – and how to encourage re-engagement with school will be fundamental.

Again, the findings uncovered in this Pillar 2 Report mainly reflect the experiences of a relatively short lockdown, and it is expected that longer lockdowns will have a greater impact on students' mental health and wellbeing, and engagement with school. This in turn could lead to potentially greater learning loss.

Strengths and resilience among children and young people experiencing disadvantage

The stakeholders interviewed feared that volatile transitions into further education, training or employment might generate a *crisis of hopelessness*. In Victoria, young people in their final year of high school were reported to be worried about the impact that the disruption in schooling would have on their future education, training and employment plans (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020a).

Yet, even with increased uncertainty regarding futures for school leavers, all students interviewed in the *Learning through COVID-19* project talked about how they planned to finish school and move on to vocational training or further study. The COVID-19 lockdown also provided an opportunity to take stock, but highlights that COVID-19 is only one factor in forming and articulating educational and occupational aspirations. This could represent the point in time, prior to actual transitions, at which the students were interviewed. An interview in a year's time might paint a different picture. Again, it could point to the differential experience of a relatively short lockdown.

Overall, the children and young people interviews point to the many challenges that children, young people and their families experiencing disadvantage face, and how COVID-19 was the latest challenge exacerbating already complex life circumstances. The stakeholder consultations paralleled the views of the children and young people, whereby COVID-19 exacerbated, rather than created, problems. This has also been reported in other recent research in the Australian context (Smith Family, 2020).

The *Learning through COVID-19* Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020) noted that the

immediate response to the pandemic had been rightly focused on the immediate consequences of the transition to home learning, through the development of online information, tools and resources, provision of funding and resource support, and adaptation of school reporting and assessment. However, there was limited evidence of co-design with students and their families, or targeted and tailored actions that recognised the lived experience of COVID-19 among students experiencing disadvantage. Understanding COVID-19 as simply the latest challenge that children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage have had to face, and the strengths and resilience within families and communities that they draw on to survive these, should be considered in the ongoing response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whether these strengths and resilience among children and young people experiencing disadvantage are specific to them, or reflective of all children and young people is unknown and worthy of further research.

Understanding educational disadvantage during COVID-19

Moving forward, it will be important to consider experiences of educational disadvantage as occurring along a continuum (Figure 10). In this context, there are students who are newly identified as experiencing disadvantage as a result of COVID-19; students who were already experiencing disadvantage and for whom it is likely to continue and heighten as a result of COVID-19; and finally students and families who are 'lost to the system', with COVID-19 likely to further diminish opportunities for re-engagement and moving out of long-term educational disadvantage.

This suggests that the experiences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic can increase educational disadvantage in several ways. For students who already experience educational disadvantage (recalling that educational disadvantage is a failure to achieve a learning outcome or milestone necessary for onward progression in school), COVID-19 could:

- *Raise the level of a disadvantage risk factor, thereby increasing probability of an adverse outcome.* Student attendance was considered as an outcome in this report, but it is also a predictive factor for later educational achievement and attainment. If COVID-19 is linked to disproportionately declining attendance that is not reversed, other things being equal, the probability of not meeting later educational milestones will be higher.
- *Change the 'conversion factor' that translates a given level of a risk factor to an adverse outcome.* Student engagement in learning is also linked to meeting educational milestones. COVID-19 might not disproportionately increase gaps in student engagement, but it might change how much student engagement influences educational

outcomes. If, for instance, online learning and home schooling produce learning loss so students need to be more engaged than previously to achieve similar educational outcomes, then even small drops in disengagement during the pandemic might have more severe consequences for educational disadvantage, than they would have had before COVID-19.

- *COVID-19 also potentially worsens disadvantage by exposing other students, who were not previously at risk.* The pandemic could, for instance, challenge students' mental health or produce social isolation, raising the levels of these risk factors and their 'conversion factors' for later educational outcomes, bringing new students into the risk set.
- *COVID-19 might improve circumstances for some students in a way that exacerbates disadvantage.* The results for bullying in Cohort 1 were of this kind, where the disadvantage gap in bullying grew during the pandemic because levels of bullying among non-members were so much lower than they had been for the Pre-COVID-19 sample.

Under these processes, educational disadvantage has potentially increased, either because individual students who were already at risk have had probabilities of levels of adverse outcomes increased; because formerly non-disadvantaged students now also have elevated probabilities of adverse outcomes; or because circumstances for some advantaged students improved. However, the Pillar 2 data also suggest that restrictions on extra-curricular activities might have shrunk educational disadvantage for some cohorts.

More generally, our results show that the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions are multifaceted. Pandemic disruptions are also experienced differently by students and schools, and pandemic responses are implemented and received in variable ways. Some, such as clubs and participation, are equalising, while others, such as the digital divide and home learning are disequalising, on average. The responses and solutions are also likely multifaceted and varied in their effectiveness and implementation, and students receive different doses and have different receptiveness. In the presence of these complex and interlinked relationships, the pandemic does not seem to have had a uniform impact on all forms of educational disadvantage, especially in the short term. Unpacking this impact in detail will require ongoing research into the way different forms of COVID-19 disruption interact with the underlying system of educational disadvantage.

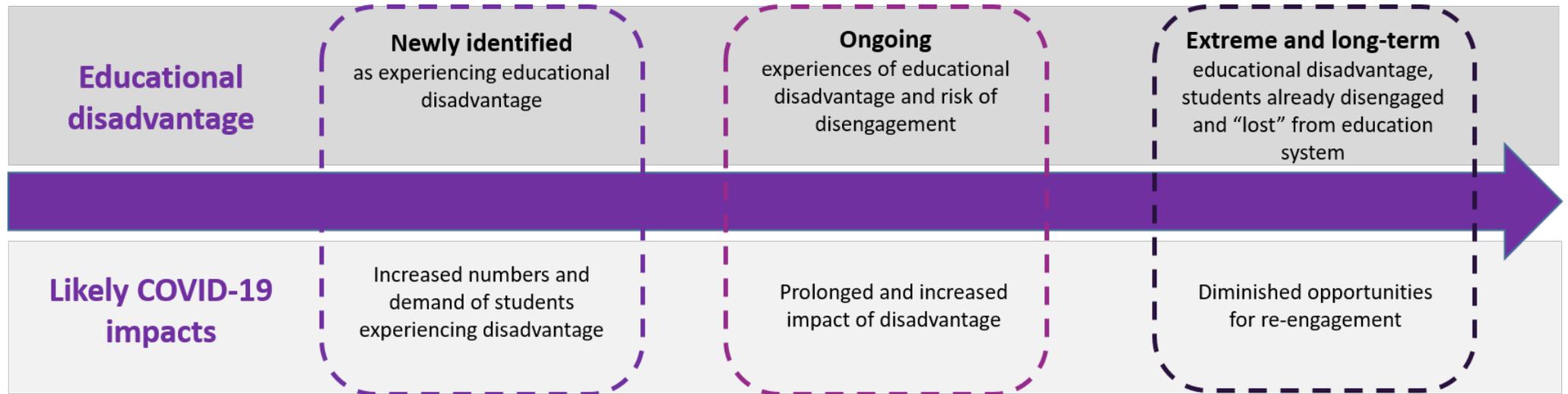


Figure 10. Continuum of educational disadvantage.

Identified gaps

Pillar 2 has strengthened the understanding of the experience of educational disadvantage among Australia's children and young people, but a number of knowledge gaps remain. Future research in these areas would enhance understanding and help to build the evidence base for solutions to address educational disadvantage.

Recommendations include:

- Further longitudinal tracking of student outcomes across multiple samples, which would help to establish whether observed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have longer-term implications beyond the proximal effects identified.
- Identification and analysis of other indices of educational outcomes, including student achievement, which is needed to provide a richer understanding of the diversity of impacts on learners resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Future investigations should consider in more detail the variability in student outcomes across schools and the relationship between student outcomes and school-level strategies to support students during COVID-19.
- While all students across Australia experienced at least some period of remote learning, extended remote learning in response to the 'second wave' of COVID-19 restrictions means that students in VIC may be at increased risk of pandemic-related effects. Access to VIC Education Department data and analysis of other data sets that include children from VIC may provide important insights into the unique impacts of repeated and extended remote learning for students.
- A key finding of the current data analysis was the reduced attendance of senior school students during the COVID-19 pandemic period. This finding raises important questions about the future trajectories of these students, including post-school destinations, tertiary training, and employment. Future studies should consider linkage to post-school destinations datasets, such as the Next Steps (QLD) or On-track (VIC) surveys, to see if COVID-19 might have affected educational decisions young people in the short and longer-term.
- Research is also needed to examine the mechanisms that may have led to drops in attendance rates of Cohort 1 and 2 students, including ongoing monitoring to ensure that rates return to pre-COVID-19 levels as restrictions are lifted.
- Further research should explore the areas of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement and how these were affected by COVID-19. There were a variety of approaches to remote learning and mixed opinions from students. Additional research is needed to understand what works and for whom.
- Understanding how students assess their academic performance and the meaning of learning loss in this context is an important avenue for further research. The COVID-19 lockdown may have affected expectations towards students' academic performance and how this is to be assessed ('shifting goal posts'). For example, some schools and teachers might have enacted leniency in grading student assessments by taking into account the impact of home learning on students' ability to progress in the curriculum, whereas this might not have been the case in other schools. Students experiencing social disadvantage are potentially adversely affected by changes in such expectations and practices.
- Broadly reflecting on their overall experience of COVID-19, participants in the qualitative interviews made sense of COVID-19 as an additional factor exacerbating already highly complex life circumstances. Direct causal connections between the current experience of hardship, educational and occupational aspirations, and the impact of COVID-19 were not usually made. Students' future aspirations might have been already derived within a social context marked by deprivation to which the COVID-19 pandemic did not add salience. Further longitudinal research should investigate if, to what extent, and in what ways disadvantaged school leavers' educational and occupational aspirations evolve as the mid-term repercussions of the pandemic become clearer.
- Research on the experience of hope and uncertainty is required to understand whether this is a general phenomenon or specific to particular cohorts. Is it hopelessness because there is no desirable future foreseeable, or because there is, but it is not perceived as attainable?

Emerging priority areas for action

Pillar 2 has demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions are multifaceted and experienced differentially. There is a need to understand solutions within the broader system of educational disadvantage across the life course. This report has highlighted that COVID-19 was simply the latest challenge impacting the already complex life circumstances that many children, young people and their families experiencing disadvantage face. Addressing the challenges of educational disadvantage in Australia that have been amplified by COVID-19 requires a systems-based³ approach. This approach is more likely to provide solutions that can be successfully applied to address multilevel, context-driven problems and ultimately achieve sustainable reductions in educational disadvantage.

Addressing the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the educational outcomes of students experiencing disadvantage requires appropriate and early interventions which aim to prevent, as well as treat problems, targeted across the life course, and a holistic orientation that addresses more than just the individual student experience. It requires working with students, families, schools, and communities to co-develop solutions. COVID-19 support will need to be ongoing, not short-term, and needs to be accompanied by effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure that evidence-based options for action are grounded in an understanding of, not just what works, but what works, for whom, in what circumstances.

Based on the insights presented in this Pillar 2 Report, and building on the findings from Pillar 1, four priority focused action areas have been identified:

- Student mental health, wellbeing and hope.
- Future role of teachers, schools and communities.
- Digital equity.
- Protections for the most vulnerable students.

These priority areas were sense-checked during the academic roundtable, with consensus reached that these action areas are valid.

Priority action area 1: Student mental health, wellbeing and hope

The need for early, preventative intervention that includes upskilling of schools and teachers in mental health and trauma informed care; co-location of services at schools; partnership models between schools, teachers, parents/carers, students and service providers that co-develop tailored education and support plans for students and one-on-one mentoring/tutoring; and mental health support were all highlighted as potential solutions. Further work is required to understand the long-lasting mental health and wellbeing impacts COVID-19 will have on learning outcomes and what mechanisms can be enhanced to mitigate these.

Increased mental health support should be made available at schools, but work is also required to develop efforts to improve protective factors and children and young people's resilience, family support, and approaches to risk taking to prevent mental health issues developing in the first place. Some students described states and behaviours indicative of mental health disturbance but did not seem to recognise these as such, so efforts to increase mental health literacy should also be considered. Resources and strategies to understand and manage feelings of anxiety in the context of COVID-19 were reported as helpful and could be further developed. Effective supports need to be put in place to help relieve the stress and anxiety associated with isolation during potential future pandemics.

The importance of social connection cannot be underestimated. Meeting peer connection needs with digital devices was helpful, but face-to-face social contact was still needed to alleviate the sense of isolation many students felt during the COVID-19 lockdown. Social connections and sense of belonging that students have among their peers affect motivations and engagement with education and schools should play a central role in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of students.

Priority action area 2: The future role of teachers, schools and communities

Learning loss will potentially persist beyond the lifting of the COVID-19 lockdown and time and resources need to be dedicated to allow students, teachers and schools to transition back to curriculum-based learning. The responsibility for this cannot rest solely with the individual support offered by teachers. School processes and routines need to accommodate the diversity and complexity of student needs laid bare during the COVID-19 disruptions.

Potential actionable insights included ideas around co-location and integration of services at schools coupled with partnership education models between schools,

³ A systems-based approach suggests that there are multiple interrelated factors operating within a connected whole that impact on a perceived problem. Rather than focusing at the individual level alone, it proposes a focus on how to change aspects of the system to promote positive change within it (Rutter et al., 2017).

teachers, parents/carers, students and communities, and even reimagining schools as community learning hubs that serve as the heart and focal points of communities. Relationship-based models and community-led approaches were highlighted as key. The need to empower students to take control of their learning with educators providing support but not taking control was also seen as important. There were suggestions for reform of suspension, expulsion and managed attendance frameworks so that the most vulnerable students are not exited from education. Attention should also be paid to what happens beyond school. Job or training opportunities should also be part of the package, especially since COVID-19 has hit sections of the youth labour market hard.

In implementation, it is important to work with families and communities, rather than working on them. Acknowledging the importance of parent/carer engagement in learning, and that this is an underutilised resource, schools can actively encourage or discourage parents/carers, and particularly parents/carers from disadvantaged backgrounds. If schools are to encourage parents/carers to support their children's learning, parents/carers will need to be provided with the digital literacy skills and learning strategies the schools use so that they can adequately support their child's learning, and these need to be implemented in ways that are effective with parents/carers whose own relationships with school and learning may have been difficult. Schools also need to recognise, value and draw upon the different resources and strengths that parents/carers from diverse backgrounds bring.

A key strength that should be built on going forward was the need to be nimble, flexible and adaptive, with recognition that non-government organisations tend to be better equipped to do this compared to government organisations. Adequate resourcing, support and capacity building of school staff was also seen as critical, with a real concern over staff burn-out and risk of teachers leaving the profession. There are lessons for mainstream schools from flexi-schools about flexible models and support for disadvantaged students, and knowing their circumstances. This raises a bigger question – what would mainstream schooling look like if flexi-school lessons were adopted more broadly to support students experiencing disadvantage in mainstream schooling?

Priority action area 3: Digital equity

Harnessing the benefits of online learning going forward through blended approaches was seen as important, but also recognising that online approaches will not work for everyone, and understanding that holistic approaches are needed to address the barriers to digital equity. Sustained access to digital devices and connectivity is required. Providing support to build parents/carers' and students' digital and technical literacy is also necessary. Choices in teaching modalities and learning preferences depend on

learning resources made available to students and their households. Teachers need to be supported to develop and implement appropriate blended learning approaches.

Currently government funding is only provided for online learning in cases where schools have distance education schooling accreditation. Acquiring such accreditation is a lengthy process, which inhibits schools that do not have this accreditation from using online learning as a means to re-engage students who no longer attend school, as well as provide an accessible option for students who for health or behavioural reasons cannot attend classrooms. Similarly, flexible funding support for online learning that allows students to stay enrolled at their current school even when that have to move interstate for personal reasons may help provide stability and address the issue of students disengaging from education when they have to change schools.

Priority action area 4: Protections for the most vulnerable students

The *Learning through COVID-19* project focuses on educational disadvantage that is exacerbated by COVID-19. While broader factors, such as the policy and institutional design of the education system, and societal patterns such as socio-economic inequality, housing inequality, or residential segregation between social and demographic groups, are outside the scope of this work, a system response does require that they are acknowledged. JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments were reported to have been helpful for some families experiencing economic hardship, and continuing efforts are required to ensure adequate economic provisions are made for people.

Considering educational disadvantage as occurring along a continuum, there are students and families who are 'lost to the system', with COVID-19 likely to further diminish opportunities for re-engagement and moving out of long-term educational disadvantage. It is unclear how many students may be 'slipping through the cracks' in regards to meeting their basic needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reduced visibility of vulnerable children and young people and unmet service needs could have longer term impacts on educational engagement and broader wellbeing. Targeted and tailored responses across locations and jurisdictions, which are nimble, responsive, and adaptive to individual circumstances are required.

The Pillar 1 Report (McDaid et al., 2020) also highlighted placement and school instability as disruptive, and likely to adversely impact on educational attainment if exacerbated by COVID-19. Increased pressure and stress on foster and kinship carers were reported and there was some suggestion of placement break-downs and young people having to enter residential care. Efforts are required to stabilise placements and schooling for children and young people at risk and to broaden and strengthen their support networks.

Next steps and acknowledgments

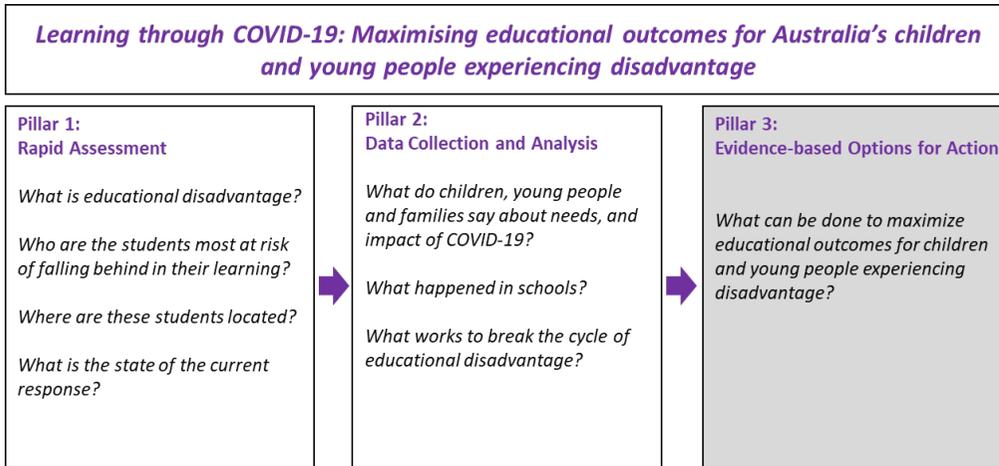
Next Steps

This Pillar 2 Report highlights the complexity of educational disadvantage among Australia’s children and young people. It has validated, but also challenged, some of the assumptions made about the impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage.

The information presented has informed the understanding of the system of educational disadvantage and the focused priority areas, which will be taken forward to inform evidence-based options for action, and the systems required to monitor and evaluate not just *what works*, but *what works, for whom, in what circumstances*, to maximise educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage as part of the Pillar 3 activities.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to Melindy Bellotti, Hannah (Zeb) Inch, Shannon Dias, Emma Cooke, Azhar Potia, Tony Beatton, Sally Staton, Emily Rudling, and Kitty te Riele for contribution to the data collection and analyses. Thanks are also extended to the service providers who supported recruitment of children, young people and their families to participate in Pillar 2 activities; the TAS and NSW Departments of Education for the provision of data; the service providers and stakeholders who took part in consultations; and the academic experts who have contributed to the study.



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Appendix 1: Quantitative analyses

Overview of data and outcomes

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 outline the data available, operational definitions, and outcomes used in the analyses – noting that Cohort 3 data were not available for NSW.⁴

Table 1.1. Data available, definition, prevalence and outcomes used in quantitative analyses.

Cohort	Data	Operational definition	Prevalence (2019)	Outcomes
Cohort 1	TAS	Children who scored below 21 points on the Kindergarten Development Check (KDC), which is an official threshold below which children are marked 'at risk'.	30% of students in Year 1	Year 1; Year 2
	NSW	Students whose Year 3 NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy results are in the bottom quartile of the sample.	19% of students in Year 4	Year 4; Year 5
Cohort 2	TAS	Average annual attendance rate in Year 10 below 90%.	55% of students in Year 10	Year 10; Year 11 [#]
	NSW	Average annual attendance rate in Year 10 below 90%.	30% of students in Year 10	Year 10; Year 11 [#]
Cohort 3	TAS	Students flagged in the data as having had contact with child protection services.	2% of students in Year 1 (2019); 1% of students in Year 10 (2019)	Prep to Year 12 [^]

Notes:

[#] Additional analyses for Cohort 2 were also run on Year 11 and Year 12 outcomes using NSW data.

[^] TAS Cohort 3 data is in a different format than data for other Cohorts from TAS.

Investigating the impact of COVID-19

The identification of the early effects of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage required information on cohort and non-cohort members, and students who experienced the pandemic and those who did not, to compare outcomes to see if the educational disadvantage occurring during COVID-19 is greater than that before the pandemic. Specifically, the analyses attempted to uncover whether the 'disadvantage gap' in educational outcomes between cohort and non-cohort members grew more for students who experienced COVID-19 school interruptions compared to those who did not.

The quasi-experimental design for Cohorts 1 and 2 in NSW and Cohort 2 in TAS is shown in Figure 1.1. At each time point, the disadvantage gap is the difference in an outcome between members and non-members of a cohort – and if the disadvantage gap from Time 1 (T1) to Time 2 (T2) increases more for the During-COVID-19 sample than it does for a similar control group, it may indicate that this is caused by COVID-19 (but it could also potentially be due to development across time).

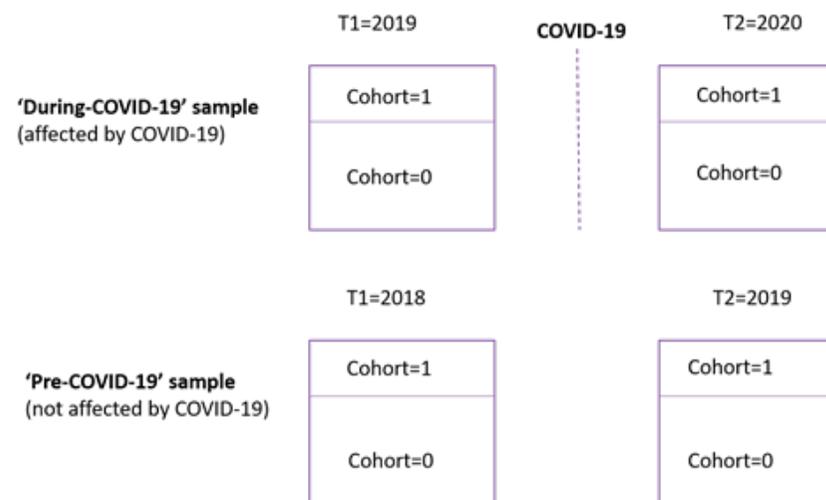


Figure 1.1. Schematic quasi-experimental study design.

Cohort 1 in the NSW data is approximated using Year 3 achievement (NAPLAN) data and, as such, might not accurately capture students who were developmentally behind at the start of the school.

⁴ Cohort members in Cohorts 1 and 2 are more likely than non-members to be from Indigenous and low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, attend low-SES schools, and/or be those located in rural or remote areas.

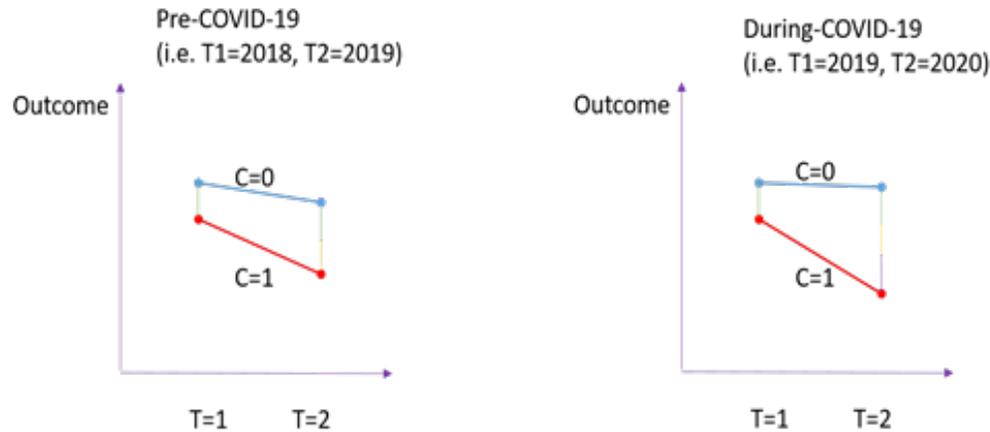
Table 1.2. Outcomes captured in the quantitative data analyses.

Outcome domain	Data source (State)	Outcome variables
School attendance and sanctions	TAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attendance rate</i>: defined as the number of days students were marked as present, over the total number of days captured over the period from the schools reopening (25 May 2020 for Year 1 students and 9 June 2020 for Year 10 students),⁵ until the end of Term 2 in 2020 (3 July 2020)⁶ (rate 0–100%). • <i>Disciplinary sanctions</i>: comprising suspension, further suspension, and exclusion, captured between the schools reopening (25 May 2020 for Year 1 students and 9 June 2020 for Year 10 students), until the end August which was the latest that data was captured for this outcome (Yes/No).
Student engagement	NSW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sense of belonging</i>: included (1) feeling part of the school community, (2) accepted and liked by others and (3) feeling connected to them (scale 0–10; averaged). • <i>Positive relations</i>: included (1) having close friends and (2) sharing feelings with them (scale 0–10; averaged). • <i>Homework behaviour</i>: included (1) enjoy homework and (2) hands in homework on time (scale 0–10; averaged). • <i>Positive behaviour at school</i>: included (1) engaging in class and (2) following school rules (scale 0–10; averaged). • <i>Interest in learning</i>: included (1) enjoy learning new concepts and (2) class assignments (scale 0–10; averaged). • <i>Effort</i>: working hard to succeed in school (scale 0–10).
Conditions for learning	NSW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Participating in clubs</i>: engaging in school clubs (scale 0–10). • <i>Effective learning time</i>: perception of teacher using class time effectively (scale 0–10). • <i>Teacher–student relations</i>: feeling that their teachers are fair, supportive and helpful (scale 0–10). • <i>Teachers’ expectation for success</i>: feeling that their teachers expect them to work hard and try their best (scale 0–10). • <i>Experience of being bullied</i>: intensity of bullying, captured as the number of domains that student experienced bullying on (physical, verbal, social, cyber) (scale 0–4). • <i>Parental involvement</i>: perception of parents/carers showing interests in their schoolwork (scale 0–10).

⁵ All students in Tasmania started learning at home at the same time, but the date of return to learning at school varied depending on the school level. Children up to Year 6 as well as those in Years 11 and 12 went back to school on the 25 May 2020, while other students returned to school on the 9 June 2020.

⁶ When comparing 2020 with previous years, attendance is measured within the same window defined in terms of school weeks of Term 2 – e.g. between 27 May–5 July to capture attendance in 2019.

Figure 1.2 provides an illustrative example of what such growth in the disadvantage gap from T1 to T2 might look like.



Notes:

The disadvantage gap between the cohort and other students is one unit at T1 (green dotted line).

In the Pre-COVID-19 sample the disadvantage gap grows by one unit from T1 to T2 (orange dotted line).

In the During-COVID-19 sample the disadvantage gap grows by 2 units over the same amount of time (orange dotted line, plus purple dotted line), so COVID-19 is associated with a larger growth in educational disadvantage, than the Pre-COVID-19 period.

Figure 1.2. Example of expected outcome if COVID-19 increased educational disadvantage.

The analyses of Cohorts 1 and 2 in NSW and Cohort 2 in TAS follow this approach (Figure 1.3). The Cohort 1 data for TAS did not allow for a suitable control group, and a comparison of the disadvantage gaps to a Pre-COVID-19 sample was therefore not possible. Cohort 3 data was only available for TAS, but the data were only available for cohort members, meaning that only trends in outcomes over time were possible for these cohort members. All analyses control for background student and school characteristics.

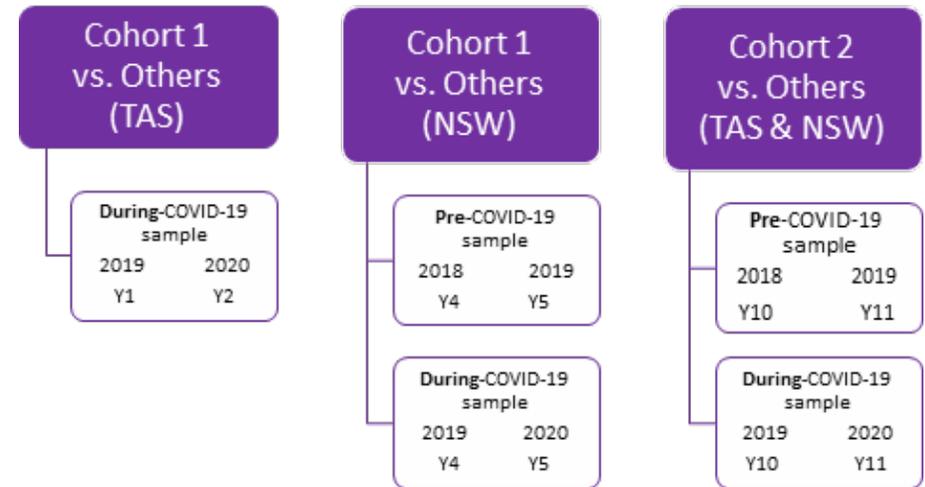


Figure 1.3. Data available for analysis of Cohort 1 and 2 outcomes.

Appendix 2: Qualitative sample

The research team worked closely with seven service providers (Table 2.1) to selectively invite students who met specified criteria for each cohort (described in more detail below) and located in one of the three states (NSW, TAS, QLD) to participate in the interviews. In addition to these seven service providers, a number of other service providers agreed to assist with the recruitment and for various reasons such as families choosing not to participate or service providers finding it difficult to identify families who met the criteria, interviews with clients from these service providers were not undertaken. There were four interviews with primary students and their families that did not take place after the family received the interview pack, despite multiple attempts made to reach these families.

Table 2.1. List of referral organisations.

Organisation that referred participants for interviews	Number of participants
MICAH QLD	3
Brave Foundation	6
Smith Family	6
Warakirri College	6
Youth off the Streets	5
CatholicCare Tasmania	11
Youth, Family & Community	2

The majority of the interviews were conducted by telephone or video conference, with the exception of one face-to-face interview. On average interview duration was 58 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics such as family, learning before, during and after COVID-19 lockdown, and aspirations for the future. For primary school students, a parent/carer was interviewed first to gain insights into the family context of the child's experience with learning, and followed up with an interview with the student. Consent was obtained from all participants able to give consent (18 years or older, or a responsible adult) either verbally or in writing. For minors, parent/carer consent was sought and obtained, and underage participants gave assent through age appropriate means. That is, children assented by means of a social story that explained expectations and choices in the interview context. Interviews were either audio recorded with permission from participants or notes were taken instead for those who did not wish to be recorded. Interviews were transcribed, de-identified for analysis and coded in NVivo 12 according to themes emerging from the data. This process was refined across the collection period, to capture the range of experiences in the data. A classification sheet was compiled in

NVivo to capture attributes such as participant demographics, school type or learning type during COVID-19 to allow for more targeted analyses.

Sample characteristics

Thirty-nine (39) interviews were conducted, between 18 September and 17 November 2020, with students from three distinct cohorts – lower primary school students who started school developmentally behind (n=7), senior students in their last three years of high school who were struggling at school and at risk of disengaging from school (n=22) and school-aged students who have had contact with the child protection system (n=10). Senior secondary school students included students who were enrolled in mainstream and flexi-school schools. For primary school students, interviews were undertaken with the student and their parent/carer. Although recruitment focused on these three cohorts, in terms of differentiating between the learning experiences of these students, the analysis of these interviews focused on primary and secondary students and where appropriate differentiated between a mainstream and flexi-school environment for secondary students. These groups are referred to as school type.

Table 2.2 presents the key sample characteristics by school type. The sample comprised 30 females and nine males, six young parents, nine students who were experiencing precarious housing, 17 with a mental or physical health problems (these categories were not exclusive), two students who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 10 students were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There were no rural or remote participants and only two non-TAS participants who were in regional locations. For the child protection cohort, two were in primary school and eight in secondary school. Most of the students (n=28) interviewed learned from home during the lockdown period (March 2020–May 2020), with nine attending school part of the time and two students the entire period.

Table 2.2. Characteristics of student participants by school type.

	School type – primary	School type – secondary (mainstream)	School type – secondary (flexi-school)
Total number by school type	9	14	16
Contact with child protection	Y=2 / N=7	Y=2 / N=12	Y=5 / N=11
Gender	3 M / 6 F	3 M / 11 F	3 M / 13 F
CALD	-	10	-
Young parent	-	1	5
Learning environment during COVID-19	7 home 1 home & school 1 school	9 home 5 home & school	12 home 3 home & school 1 school
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	1	-	1

Appendix 3: Stakeholder consultations

Table 3.1. List of stakeholder organisations interviewed.

Organisation	Area	Scope
Life without Barriers	National	Supporting children and young people in out of home care
Create Foundation	National	Consumer body speaking on behalf of children with care experience
The Smith Family	National	Helping disadvantaged Australians to get the most out of their education
Clontarf Foundation	National	Improve the education, discipline, life skills, self-esteem and employment prospects of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men
Our Place	Victoria	Works with schools to expand the opportunities open to children and families in highly disadvantaged communities
Melbourne City Mission	Victoria	Support organisation in Homelessness, Early Years, Justice, Disability, Palliative Care, Early Childhood Intervention Services and Education
Brotherhood of St Laurence	Victoria	Social justice organisation working to prevent and alleviate poverty
LoganTogether	Queensland	Collective impact organisation to get more Logan kids school ready
FOGS ARTIE	Queensland	Supporting educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
Anglicare SQ	Queensland	Supporting, assessing, training and recruiting foster and kinship carers and families working towards reunification or family preservation

Black Dog Institute	New South Wales	Medical research institute in Australia to investigate mental health across the lifespan
Warakirri College	New South Wales	Independent high schools located across three campus locations

Youth off the Streets	New South Wales	Independent high schools located across six campus locations
Social Action and Research Centre (SARC) Anglicare Tas	Tasmania	Research focusing on social justice issues faced by low income Tasmanians
Beacon Foundation	Tasmania	Support young people in disadvantaged communities to transition to meaningful work
Child Advocate of Tasmania	Tasmania	Represent the needs of Tasmanian children in out of home care
Colony 47	Tasmania	Identifying and addressing the needs of socially isolated and vulnerable Tasmanians
CatholicCare	Tasmania	Provide a range of services for individual, family, and community wellbeing supporting children, families, housing, multicultural services, counselling and emergency relief
Migrant Resource Centre	Tasmania	Supporting people from CALD backgrounds to settle in Tasmania
Bighart	Tasmania	Nationwide arts and social change organisation
Advocate for Children with Disability Tasmania	Tasmania	Advocates for the implementation of needs-based funding models in schools

Table 3.2. Academic roundtable attendance list.

Name	Organisation
Professor Helen Cahill	The Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne
Dr Jennifer Skattebol	Arts and Social Sciences, University of New South Wales
Associate Professor Jess Harris	School of Education, University of Newcastle
Dr Kim Beasy	School of Education, University of Tasmania
Dr Lesley-Anne Ey	Education Futures, University of South Australia
Professor Lucas Walsh	Education Policy and Practice, Youth Studies, Monash University
Associate Professor Mark Rickinson	Faculty of Education, Monash University
Dr Nina Van Dyke	Mitchell Institute, Victoria University
Professor Steve Zubrick	Centre for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia



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