

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has surfaced a number of educational issues in New Zealand schools and universities. Many schools and universities were able to move all teaching online within a short time. However, this flexibility was not shared by all educational institutions, or all students. Students from vulnerable communities did not enjoy the same access to learning as those from more affluent schools. The mental and emotional health of many learners, their families and teachers suffered from feelings of isolation. When the national borders closed to international students, departments set up to support their academic language learning have closed. This leaves emergent bilinguals without the linguistic support promised in the New Zealand Curriculum. This in turn endangers the academic success of another vulnerable community.

Keywords: digital technology; international students; English language learners; student well-being

INTRODUCTION

This conceptual paper explores the impact of Covid-19 on aspects of education in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Specifically, we will report on how New Zealand schools and universities have responded to the urgent need to move classes online, the growing concern for students' well-being, the flow-on effect of closing our borders to international students, and finally the reduced ability of teachers to support learners from non-English language backgrounds. We draw on literature to suggest that these issues are likely to influence New Zealand education for many years to come.

INCREASING USE OF ONLINE TEACHING PLATFORMS

Even before the global pandemic, there was an exponential rise in the use of digital technologies in schools and universities. This has meant that teachers were already working to develop appropriate and sufficiently flexible skills to keep abreast of these continual innovations. Education has always been about preparing new teachers

for an unimaginable future, but never more so than during these past fifteen to twenty years, when new digital tools appear almost daily. The pandemic accelerated technological change to new heights as schools and universities were expected to set up learning that was fully online within weeks.

Research suggests that both teachers and school systems have both widely varying digital skills and uneven access to a range of diverse digital platforms (König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020; Starkey, 2020). This meant that New Zealand schools were prepared for this dramatic change to varying degrees. Australasian educators reported concerns about their ability to suddenly deliver an online curriculum. They also remarked on the inequitable access to technological tools and/or reliable internet connections for their students in rural or lower socio-economic areas (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, Earle, & Margetts, 2020)- which is something that is still causing concern in 2021. Furthermore, at the beginning of the lock-down period, almost half the educators

in Flack et al.'s study harboured doubts that online learning had the potential to be as effective as learning in the classroom, and worried that they would not be able to meet their students' needs.

While many teachers in New Zealand schools and universities have been growing their expertise for integrating digital technology into their teaching, and this includes encouraging students to use their cell-phones as a learning tool, schools and universities have been expanding their offerings of digital learning platforms. For example, many schools in the Wellington region use Moodles, Google Classrooms or Microsoft Teams to communicate with their school communities. The university uses Blackboard as a teaching platform, Zoom and and Microsoft Teams for communication, and audio-visual software such as Zoom and Panopto for pre-recording or recording lectures and tutorials.

This uneven set of digital skills and resources was the technological scene when Covid-19 hit last year (Yates et al., 2020). In many respects, the Faculty of Education was able to respond in an agile manner because we have delivered online versions of our programmes for more than fifteen years and already had the systems in place. We also had many of the essential skills to move online very quickly. A number of our student teachers, who were at this time out in schools, joined their school associate teachers virtually, and co-taught classes online using the school's system.

New Zealand has been fortunate in that the most intensive lock-down was for seven weeks last year and since then there have only been localized and less stringent lockdowns. Nonetheless, schools and universities have learnt from this experience and extended their systems to prepare for future lockdowns. For example, all staff at this university must be contactable via Microsoft Teams. All staff must record their on-campus lectures and be prepared to change their mode of delivery to exclusively

online overnight. Zoom staff meetings and Zoom tutorials are used far more commonly than before. So, for schools and universities alike, instead of viewing digital technologies as a shiny add-on to our core business, many of us now appreciate that they enable us to continue the process of teaching and learning regardless of the Covid situation.

NEED TO FOCUS ON STUDENT WELL-BEING

There are obvious opportunities available to students learning online if they are encouraged to seize them. For example, Yates et al., (2020) found that students reported more agency over their engagement with subject matter and they enjoyed having greater flexibility over their time management. In addition, they found that they could collaborate productively with classmates and their teacher. However, alongside these potential benefits of digitally enabled distance teaching and learning, there are downsides. The most obvious has been the negative impact on the health and well-being of students in particular. When businesses closed for lock-down, families were restricted to working and studying at home. Some households did not own computers (Drane, Vernon, & O'Shea, 2020) and schools and the Ministry of Education worked to provide them with devices and internet connection so that they could continue to learn. Many families enjoyed the opportunity to study and spend time together but vulnerable students felt isolated from school friends and loved ones.

In a survey of nearly 5000 educators in Australia and New Zealand at the start of the pandemic, the teacher participants agreed that social isolation and social disconnection of students were the two areas of most concern (Flack et al., 2020). This placed a new expectation of pastoral care on already burdened teachers who were struggling with their own families and new professional expectations.

CLOSED INTERNATIONAL BORDERS

Like every other country in the world, New Zealand closed its international border when Covid hit. This has exposed “education providers’ financial dependence on international student fees, precipitated job losses and created sector-wide uncertainty” (Beard, 2020, p.1384). The flow-on impact in schools has been to cut back on departments that cater specifically to international students. In secondary schools, fees from international students have often been used to subsidise English (classes) for speakers of other languages (ESOL). These classes not only serve international students, but also support migrant students and New Zealand born students of migrant parents, whose first language is a language other than English. These departments and the specialist teachers who staff them have been (anecdotally) the first to close. This leaves a gap in linguistic support for local emergent bilingual students. Theoretically, this should not be a problem given the expectations set out in the New Zealand Curriculum Ministry of Education, (2007) that all teachers should be aware of and prepared to explicitly teach the language forms of their discipline. In practice, this objective has not been achieved (Gleeson, 2015; Gleeson & Davison, 2019), leaving this vulnerable group of learners without expert support.

CONCLUSION

This paper shares some of the issues that Covid-19 has surfaced in New Zealand schools and universities. We have found that even though many schools and universities were able to move all teaching online with reasonable ease, this flexibility was not shared by all educational institutions, or all students with equal ease. Students from vulnerable communities did not enjoy the same access to learning as those from more affluent schools. The mental and emotional health of many learners, their families and teachers suffered during the periods of

isolation. As the borders closed to international students, departments set up to support their academic language learning have closed. This has left emergent bilinguals without the additional linguistic resources promised in the New Zealand Curriculum. This in turn endangers the academic success of another vulnerable community.

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