

F. The effects of COVID

Given that the current malaise about work conditions, overload, burnout, attrition, and vacancies has been a major topic for many decades, why is it painted so perilously today? What happened during and as a consequence of COVID has brought these forces into alignment and increased angst.

First, the effects of COVID teaching (distance, hybrid) are not nearly as disastrous as many prognosticators and pundits have claimed. There are already four meta-analyses (about 12-16m students) all showing a similar effect size of .12, which is very small. This is despite death, unemployment, sickness, equity and resource issues, and the increased demands on educators to be agile, supportive, and continually changing. The reason primarily is that teachers did a superb job ensuring that learning loss was minimised and that their teaching was optimal. I have written about the early results titled "An Ode to Expertise" (Hattie, 2021). Further, during COVID, teachers reduced distractions, meetings, extra duties, and travelling to and from school. The distance teaching was not 'relentless' as there were breaks for coffee, lunch, reflection, and a major focus was on the act of teaching.

Second, post-COVID many professionals now work part-time from home, whereas teachers were required to return to full-time work in a school. The relentlessness and distractions returned, and for many, this was a major negative to return. A McKinsey (2023) report indicated that those professions with the highest pre-COVID proximity indices (the need for staff to work in proximity to their clients, such as doctors and teachers) were among the most likely to see greater transformation after the pandemic. Doctors now use telemedicine and the advances in AI, but teachers had to return to school and re-adopt the old grammar of schooling. Little has changed for educators while they see others learning much from COVID use of time, technology, and efficiencies.

Third, teaching has rarely been a part-time job, and job sharing is rare. It is hard to achieve the work-life balance that many seem to be seeking. As a result, we may need to consider ways to permit job sharing and part-time employment in schools, challenging as it is.

Fourth, there has been a massive reduction in the number of casual and relief teachers during and now post-COVID (20% of all teachers consider themselves casual teachers and 57% of early career teachers work as relief teachers as they cannot secure permanent employment). Across NSW and Victoria in particular, there were major investments in small group or individual coaching (NSW committed \$337m, and Victoria \$480m over 2021-22). Given that the tutor needed to be a registered teacher, this led to many casual and relief teachers moving to these coaching roles – because there was the offer of regular part-time employment, assured salary, and one-on-one or small group tutoring – which is likely more attractive than taking a class where the students are not known, the preparation provided variable, and there is the ad hoc nature of employment. This has all led to drying up the supply of relief teachers, making it nigh impossible to find them to replace teachers for professional learning, sickness, and other duties. There is no acknowledgement of this problem in the Government responses, and much more is needed to value and recognise their contributions

Fifth, COVID magnified the importance of social and emotional learning. This has increased demands on teachers to be responsible, sometimes expected to handle serious anxiety and depressed students (about 10% of the school population) more than ever before. We need to ask if teachers are now to be asked to become social workers, psychologists, and emotional support of students. The boundary has shifted but maybe too far. If teachers do not have the coping strategies to deal with these students, it will increase burnout. A better answer is the Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS)

MTSS focuses on providing instruction and intervention with the classroom teacher. It deliberately addresses academic, social, behaviour, attendance, and emotional issues and involves curriculum design, positive interventions and support, teacher learning and collaboration, and family involvement. In MTSS, professional learning communities are responsible for examining student data to make decisions about who needs tier 2 and 3 interventions (tier 1 is regular classroom instruction), are engaged in problem-solving protocols for instructional decision-making, and evaluate the effects of these interventions (quality of implementation and student progress), and thus puts primacy of working with teachers to work with students (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Note, the three tiers in MTSS are more about the support the teacher and student receive and not focused so much on the students themselves – students are not classified as Tier 1, 2, or 3 but receiving Tiers 1, 2, and 3 support. Within Tier 1, the universal support to all students is reviewed, improved, and the resources needed for teachers to be successful are a focus. Within Tier 2, resources can be provided to support teachers in working with groups of students who need more opportunities and extra assistance to benefit from the core programs in the class. Finally, within Tier 3, there can be more intensive individualised support plans but still aim to return and work with students in the regular class (see Hattie, 2023 for details on the high effect sizes of this collaborative model of specialist resource teachers working more with teachers). One of our perennial mistakes is adding more adults to work with particular students. In contrast, this support should be to work collaboratively with teachers to reduce their stressors, workload and enhance their coping with the multifaceted nature and multi demands of students in their classes.

Sixth, COVID teaching demonstrated the high levels of resilience of students. Teachers were not only forced to release responsibility gradually but quickly. They learned to teach without the relentless interruptions, the meetings, and their ever-presence as conductor of the class orchestra; they learned they did not need to perform (89% talking) a day, and they were required to teach students to become their own teachers, work alone and with others, and have a greater sense of when good is good enough.

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These six effects of COVID sit along with the ever-increase demands on educators post-COVID. Now educators are even more absence-police, social workers, and psychologists dealing with emotional and social issues, responsible for catching up on two "lost years" while dealing with staff shortages and a profession bathed in the negative press about workload and stress. Further, schools and systems spend a lot of time on issues and policies that have little impact on accelerating school learning. The endless tweaks of the curriculum are rarely implemented and even rarely evaluated for impact, but they are very disruptive. We engage in debates about funding on the premise that more is better, label our students (and too often condemn them to low expectations) because funding follows labels, throw more adults into schools as the myth is then personalised learning can occur (despite it having a very low effect). This is not in any way claiming that these issues are not important but that they dominate the debates; the impact of teaching and schools on the learning lives of the students is rarely highlighted. We love the negative story and find it hard to scale up the many successes.

Other professions look to technology to assist them in making their impact more efficient and effective in education. Instead, we ban it (and thus often guarantee it will be innovative and worthwhile). For example, systems prohibited schools from using slate as it would kill the slate industry, and using ink pens would lead to losing skills like sharpening pencils with a knife. In my primary school days, biros were banned as they would kill writing, slide rules were seen as detrimental to problem-solving, calculators would damn numerical skills, television would lead to slovenliness, computers would replace teachers, WORD would kill the teaching of spelling, and CHATGPT will lead to cheating. Instead, CHATGPT can assist in creating lesson plans, writing and marking essays, provide templates for various writing genres. Our systems should focus on how that can help teach and learn, not banning it (see Hamilton et al., 2023). Yes, with all innovations, there are side effects and ethical issues, but we cannot uninvent these innovations.