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Schooling in a time of disruption: the impact of COVID-19 from the perspective of five New South Wales (Australia) secondary principals

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Abstract

This paper examines five principals' insights into leading their schools in a disruptive time. The principals chosen for interview each lead a secondary school in regional New South Wales, Australia, that has been identified as educationally disadvantaged by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage algorithm. While the study's intent was to examine the role of technology in supporting learning from home due to COVID-19 restrictions, only one of the four themes that emerged from the interview analysis was related to technology. The themes were: i) the overarching concern by principals for student, staff and family wellbeing; ii) access to technology, and student online learning; iii) the importance of effective communication; and, iv) principals' post-disruption reflections. In addition to the thematic analysis, five vignettes are presented to provide insight into each principal's unique experiences. In these challenging and disruptive times, all five principals exhibited leadership practices that align to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's "The Role of School Leadership in Challenging Times". While schools successfully adapted to the needs of their communities, especially in meeting the challenges of amplified disadvantage in education access, questions remain around the degree to which the pandemic crisis has triggered fundamental change in educational practice.

Keywords: COVID-19, regional and rural schools, well-being, educational disadvantage, principals

Introduction

COVID-19 emerged in Australia as a looming crisis in mid-March 2020 (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020a), seven weeks after the school year had begun. Although globally the “scale and speed of school closures” (Viner, Russell *et al.*, 2020, p. 402) was unprecedented, the Australian Prime Minister’s March 22nd advice to the nation was that schools should remain open and would be encouraged to provide access to distance and online learning (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b). However, confusion arose when each Australian State and Territory gave differing and somewhat contradictory advice. For instance, the New South Wales State Government (2020) encouraged parents to keep their children at home, unless parents were essential workers and had no option but to send their children to school (Aubusson, 2020). Regardless of whether students were at home or at school, the New South Wales Government’s advice was that schooling would move towards online learning, and that the teaching would be the same irrespective of the location of students (New South Wales Government, 2020). Consequently, schools were expected to adapt quickly to restructure the delivery of student learning to online, even though teachers were not trained in this approach to teaching practice.

Specifically, this study explored the question: What are the experiences of New South Wales regional Secondary school principals regarding their need to develop learning from home opportunities for their students during the COVID-19 pandemic? The choice to interview principals was made because they are the senior leader responsible for the overall operation of a school. In New South Wales, the Government’s *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy (2011), allows local schools, under the leadership of the principal, to make local decisions, within the confines of state legislation “because they are best placed to know about the particular needs of a particular school and community” (p. 3).

This research was conducted at the end of July 2020, four months into the pandemic, by which time all students had returned to school, and so offers snapshots of school actions as the pandemic progressed. The intention of this article is to put on record examples of how individual schools did, and could, respond to a State-wide mandate to adapt learning under conditions of a serious crisis. Furthermore, it is important to record the immediate responses of schools and their principals as they aim to provide the best educational response to extremely uncertain and fluid external influences (Baxter, 2020; Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020). The emerging insights—tentative as they may be—provide a basis for future studies.

Australia’s Education Equity Gap

UNICEF (2018) has previously exposed the inequity in Australia’s education in its *An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children’s Education in Rich Countries* report. Australia was ranked in the bottom third of 41 high income countries in terms of equality of educational outcomes across its education system of pre-school (36/41), Primary (25/41) and Secondary (30/41) education. This is mirrored at a global level as outlined by Schleicher (2020) in his OECD report which found that the pandemic has exposed inequalities and inadequacies in education systems in terms of the availability of computers and broadband access for online learning, learning environments that are supportive for learning, and a lack of alignment between needs and resources. The Gonski Institute for Education in Sydney (Australia)

reported that this sudden requirement for online learning highlighted Australia's education equity gap and made the disparity between schools hard to ignore. They maintained that:

“Those attending a well-resourced, fee-paying school swiftly moved to online learning, but many public students were left floundering as their school did not have the resources or personnel to quickly prepare for such an event.” (2020, para. 10)

Data on educational achievement in Australia records a 20-40% gap in education achievement indicators between students from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Hetherington, 2018; Lamb, *et al.*, 2020). This is “between students living in the cities and rural areas in every year level, and across all subjects tested in national and international assessment” (Piccoli, 2014, p. 6). The gap is greater than the OECD average, and reflects global trends in metropolitan-rural differences (OECD, 2019a; OECD, 2019b).

Against this background of an inequity gap in Australian education, all schools chosen for this study are formally recognised as educationally disadvantaged (ACARA, 2015). Four were public (that is, state-run), while the other was an Independent school located on the rural fringe of a small regional city. The Gonski Institute for Education (2020a) notes that, in Australia:

“Public schools educate more than 80 percent of students in the lowest rank of socioeconomic status, many of whom are Indigenous students, students in remote and rural areas, students with a funded disability and the vast majority of students with English as a second language.” (p. 6)

These educational outcome patterns reflect a geography of highly differentiated core and periphery in the State of New South Wales. The State government defines its metropolitan area as comprising the cities of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong, cities located in close proximity on the east coast, and home to over 70% of the State's 8 million residents, within 1.7% of the State's area (New South Wales Government, 2019). Most importantly, the metropolitan area is the centre for government, commerce and industry. The rest of the State is regional, typically comprising small country towns (up to 10,000 residents, and usually many fewer), often 50 to 100 km apart, surrounded by dispersed rural settlement. The State is some 800 million km² in size, its coast being some 2,000 km long (NSW Government, n.d.), with the study area reported in this article is located some 750km distance north from the State's capital, Sydney. Socio-economic indicators tend towards social disadvantage in the regions compared with the metropolitan areas, with lower workforce participation and income rates. Regional New South Wales is, therefore, typically peripheral to State government and decision-making, and rural schools in particular are most often located on the periphery of the mainstream education system in areas with high socio-economic disadvantage. Regional school communities are therefore worthy of specific examination within the wider education system. They can highlight issues which might otherwise be subsumed in metropolitan areas. For example, the Federal government has rolled out a national broadband network and connectivity is sound and ubiquitous in the metropolitan areas, yet coverage remains patchy and unreliable in regional and rural areas. Furthermore, while both the State and Federal governments' expectation was that technology would drive learning, this study found that in

order to facilitate online learning, the well-being of staff and students took precedence with principals' decisions.

Willis and Grainger's (2020) study of teacher well-being in remote schools (those isolated because of their distance from a regional centre) not only considered the logistical challenges of distance from central services and support, but also canvassed a range of other issues. Interestingly, the focus on remoteness provides some parallels with the experiences of less remote regional schools during periods of social lockdown and restricted travel. Isolation impacted on teachers' capacity for preparation and readiness. Living in a small close community restricted separation between social and work life. The social relationships between teachers and communities, given that teachers are usually outsiders, may be fraught. This is especially important given the well-documented relationships between education, health, and well-being amongst students in small or remote communities, where teachers are not just educators in such communities. Willis and Grainger also found that student and community well-being and teacher well-being is intimately linked, in ways that are less common in other schooling situations. Teachers in such situations are often required to "find the motivation/initiative/drive/resilience/persistence to take initiative and reach out for help in remote locations", and thus "teacher reflexivity, proactivity and resilience are critical in remote communities (a) for their own well-being and (b) to meet the needs of their students" (p. 32). The implication for regional schools is that central- and metropolitan-based mandated responses to a crisis such as the pandemic may require local solutions to be put into practice. Educators need the capacity to articulate this. In regard to these findings, Willis and Grainger make a stark observation—that teachers placed students before the curriculum, ensuring student well-being and health was paramount, and that not doing so compromised successful delivery of learning. Teachers noted tensions in the relevance of a centralised curriculum to remote communities, along with the limitations of a technology mandate and standardised testing of student progress. In summary, Willis and Grainger's study identifies specific triggers of teacher and principal stress upon well-being arising from isolation. In the case of this study of five regional principals, the isolation flows from pandemic restrictions in an already marginalised regional setting.

As mentioned above, there was an assumption by Australian governments that technology would ensure schools' capacity to deliver student learning. This reflected a largely accepted assumption of the educational power of computer- and Internet-based technology (e.g. Arozín, 2020; Basilaia and Kvavadze, 2020; Baytiyeh, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Duignan, 2020; Baker, 2020), and indeed is typical of responses elsewhere globally (Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020; Tawil, 2020). While technology may be described as "the vital link with education" (Tawil, 2020, p. 2), the effects are unknown. Commentators such as Sahlberg (2020) suggest that they are likely to be negative for students of disadvantage. Baytiyeh (2018) notes that when children's schooling is interrupted due to a crisis, the negative effects can be "serious, widespread and lasting" (p. 215). Implementing technology-driven responses can present significant challenges requiring reliable Internet connection, instant communication capability, data storage, and learning materials (Baytiyeh, 2018).

Many of these concerns have recently been highlighted by bodies such as the OECD (Tawil, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). In reviewing the global reaction to a technology-driven educational response as part of what is called “an abrupt and unresolved disruption to learning” (Tawil, 2020, p. 2), Tawil highlights significant challenges. These include the disruption of access to formal learning opportunities, the amplification of existing divides, the insufficient reach of technologies, technology dependence, relevance to different age groups, and dependence on families.

Recently, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership provided a spotlight on the role of school leadership in times of crisis (AITSL, 2020). It identified six key messages for effective leaders that emphasise the importance of: (i) drawing on both proactive and reactive skills and approaches; (ii) prioritising open communication; (iii) proactively triaging and managing threats to their community; (iv) leveraging expertise and experience from across the board to support transition out of the crisis; (v) working collaboratively; (vi) supporting the well-being of their school community and their own well-being. To achieve this, AITSL (2020) reminds leaders that they need to overcome natural instincts when faced with the uncertainties a crisis brings. This requires acting with urgency, communicating openly, taking responsibility, focusing on problem solving, and continually updating.

Methods

The study is positioned in a constructivist worldview where meaning is constructed and individuals make their own meaning in different ways even in respect to the same occurrence (Crotty, 1998). This worldview allowed a problem to be explored, and a detailed understanding of an issue to be developed by talking directly with participants so they could tell their story (Creswell, 2012). Naturalistic inquiry was the lens for this study. As such, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) characteristics were utilised: the researchers collected the data from participants in a natural setting in which explicit as well as tacit knowledge was probed through qualitative interviews; purposive sampling was used to recruit principals from a range of information-rich regional settings; the inductive data analysis method of constant comparative (Johnson and Christensen, 2017) was used to identify multiple realities in the data; no *a priori* theories impacted the collection and analysis of the data; the researchers sought to negotiate the research outcomes with their participants; conversations between the researchers helped ameliorate preconceptions; and, a trustworthiness audit of the research was undertaken—member checking for credibility, thick description for transferability, consistency of the research for dependability, and management of subjectivity for confirmability.

The study’s data was collected using semi-structured interviews. These were designed to provide immediate responses during times of fluctuation, with a “light touch, for an immediate sense of what is happening” (Baxter, 2020, p.1). The approach mirrors current and emerging studies globally (Baxter, 2020; Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to select school principals across the range of factors (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine and Walker, 2019) of gender, school size and locality. Each school in the study is identified as educationally disadvantaged when measured by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority’s (ACARA) Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) algorithm (ACARA, 2015). The ICSEA is based on four factors: the school’s geographical

location; the proportion of Indigenous students; parental reporting of their occupation; and, parental education level (ACARA, 2015). To de-identify participants, the principals were identified P1 to P5 (Table 1). Prior to the interviews, each participant was emailed an information sheet, interview questions, and a consent form. Three types of interview questions were asked (Fraenkel *et al.*, 2015) (Appendix A). Data analysis used the constant comparative method which involved the researchers in a constant interplay of comparing units of data with each other, then creating provisional categories, which were reduced to themes (Table 2).

Table 1. The principals involved in this study and their schools

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Principal pseudonym	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Principal gender	male	female	female	male	male
School locality	In a rural site on the outskirts of a small regional city	In a small country town. Many students travel long distances to attend	In a coastal town by the Pacific Ocean	In a small regional city located on a river	In a tiny isolated village in the mountains
No. of students	80	313	1000	831	80
Full-time equivalent teaching staff	15	34	69	68	20
Interviews conducted July 2020					

The findings from the interviews are reported as: (i) five vignettes, an illustrative story from each interviewed principal to furnish a larger understanding of the phenomena being examined (Creswell, 2012; Towers and Maguire, 2017); and (ii) emergent themes.

Findings

Vignettes of Five Principals During COVID-19

P1 is principal of an independent K-12 school with 80 secondary students. During the of learning-from-home period, approximately 11% of students attended school. At the pandemic onset, P1 surveyed families to determine how best to support students and found that 11% did not have Internet, computers or enough data to support online learning. Consequently, the school fixed old computers and distributed

them to families with greatest need. Nevertheless, the school needed to produce hard copy material for some students.

Communication was key for P1 in addressing the challenges of the learning from home. Staff briefings were held every afternoon to handle “staff frustrations, what additional support or software they needed. That helped us to determine and iron out issues.” While the decision was made to use *Google Classroom*, only a handful of staff had experience using this, so P1 organised training. “We made notes of the government directives and combined this with our own information which we shared with parents. We also talked to students, because parents didn’t always share with their kids the information we sent them. So, we found that the kids got very stressed because they didn’t know what was happening. It was quite a process to make sure we had effective communication across all the different levels.”

P1 also needed to support those parents who could not afford to connect to the Internet “so we organised Internet with dongles so these students could access the Internet and their curriculum, and we were able to help most students. Later on, though, we found a number of our senior students took paid work because their parents had lost their jobs and relied on their kids to bring in some money. This caused some issues in terms of these senior students’ limited engagement with their learning during the pandemic.”

Reflecting, P1 recognised that “what we certainly achieved in a short time would have taken me much longer. To move staff members into that online arena was challenging but they just had no choice. They had to jump in and learn how to do things. From that perspective, we all had to work together as a team to get the best for our students.”

P2 is principal of a school in a hinterland town where unemployment is high and only 50% of parents have been educated beyond Year 9. Five thousand people live in the town and its surrounding tiny villages, with many students travelling long distances on rural roads to attend school. During COVID-19 restrictions, approximately 2% of students regularly attended school. To support their senior students, P2 created a sterile learning centre in the school library for senior students who came to school at least one day a week to download learning material and meet face-to-face with their teachers. P2 drew attention to the extremely supportive parent and town community who are very proud of the school. The senior students posted a “Thank You” video to the Community Facebook site saying, “We’re thinking of those who’ve lost their jobs, and thanking essential workers”, which the community really appreciated.

Recognising the potential disruption well ahead of its impact held P2’s school in good stead. “Before people started thinking about buying computers”, P2 purchased 45 Chrome Books which were distributed to students without computers. Moreover, as part of the school improvement initiative, a change had been introduced whereby roll call groups became Mentor Groups with each teacher a mentor for 6-8 students. This system operated successfully throughout the restriction as mentor teachers maintained contact with their students. Effective communication also helped the school’s successful negotiation of COVID-19 restrictions: “staff communication within Faculties, and staff sharing

and caring overall was the best it's ever been". Six weeks into the restrictions, P2 and her deputy phoned every family for "touch base" conversations to help parents understand that "home is not school". It was really important to give parents the permission to do what worked for them as a family. If that meant that kids only did an hour's work a day, then that was ok".

Overall, P2 was very satisfied with her school's response: "In terms of providing equity so learning could continue, we did that really well". Furthermore, P2 recognised that "for some students, school was the safest place to be". When school re-opened for all students, P2 made a point of "honouring each Faculty, and had faculties brainstorm what worked really well, what we would do differently next time, and what we didn't want to let back in. It was an opportunity to get rid of some bad habits".

P3 is principal of the largest school in this study, with 1,000 students. She reported that the school has many single-parent families with domestic violence being one of the biggest variables impacting student learning. There are seven support classes for students with diagnosed disabilities, moderate intellectual, high intellectual needs, physical needs, and multi-categorical needs which include autism and mental health.

During restrictions, student attendance was 7% on most days. A few were children of essential workers, while others just needed to be at school "to get a meal, to get some love and attention, for us to keep helping with their learning, and to give them a safe place to be for the day. That was really important for us. Having the school obviously open all the time, worked well for our students." The part-time cafeteria staff were retained and cooked for students and for families in need in the school community.

For this school, the switch to learning from home was "seamless" because a number of initiatives had already been introduced to support students' well-being and learning. First, two years ago, a Learning Coach support structure was created whereby each teacher has a Learning Hub of 15-20 students who meet, for 25 minutes each day, for learning and well-being. This provides the opportunity for teachers to build close relationships with students and their families. When students were off-site, the Learning Coach communicated daily with students and their families via *Facebook*, email and SMS. In addition, this school was the only one in the study with a Bring Your Own Device policy which was introduced to ensure students have 21st century capabilities (OECD, 2017). *Google Classroom* was also already in use, allowing students to learn at their own pace which aligns with national disability standards. P3 commented, "*Google Classroom* worked beautifully in a climate such as this."

Another factor which worked well was that the head teacher of each Faculty held meetings every week to "ensure students were on track, staff knew what they were delivering, and to touch base with staff about their well-being". Overall, the school's approach was about "staff trusting our kids, supporting our kids, catching our kids and our staff when things didn't go well."

P4 is principal of an 831-student school where approximately 30 students attended school consistently throughout the restrictions—"some were children of essential workers, some were vulnerable students".

The school has a support unit with seven classes for students with a range of cognitive and physical disabilities.

Before COVID-19 impacted, P4 sensed there would be disruption to schools. He, therefore, pre-emptively organised online training for staff and distributed 300 Chrome Books to students for home use. When learning from home commenced, he advised staff “to put assessments on hold and focus on bedding down the teaching”. While there was “incredible engagement”, it was not altogether consistent, and ten students required hard copy material as they had no Internet. P4 reported two unexpected outcomes during the period of home-based learning: first, “students who often misbehaved and didn’t do well at school were regularly completing their work, whereas others, who worked well at school, often struggled with unsupervised, unstructured independent learning at home”; second, it was observed that English engaged the students more than any other subject. “Students seemed to love the immediate one-on-one online feedback from their English teachers.”

Communication was a major concern for P4: “We were big on communication and got really good feedback on it from families. We over communicated, but no one complained. Parents wanted information. At the time, there was so much communication in the media and from politicians, it was confusing. If there was a void, people would fill it with misinformation. I reassured parents that I would let them know what was happening and how that would impact our kids.”

Many systems were put in place to support students. Those who had not registered daily with *Google Classroom* were contacted. Well-being material was also sent home. Furthermore, the online learning site had a link where students and teachers could report any mental health concerns, and these emails went directly to the Well-being Team.

As a result of COVID-19 strategies, every student now has a computer and equal access to the same technology. A system has been established where all assignment submissions are made online through *Google Classroom*. All this has “levelled the playing field. Now we’ve raised the bar, the lowest common denominator has moved up.” P4 noted that when students were allowed to return to school, the attendance rate was 20% higher than pre-COVID-19. “Our students told us they missed school so much they couldn’t wait to get back”.

Since returning to school-based learning (July 2020), many faculties are now transferring more work to the school’s online platform. “Staff have realised it works really well.” P4 is aware that “if students could have the best of both worlds, many prefer online learning—and so we’ve kept a lot more online learning since we’ve come back”.

P4’s reflection on the disruption acknowledges the difficulties: “I lost my holidays, increased my workload incredibly, so that impacted me personally. It was very stressful and difficult times. But it was also very reaffirming. At the end of it all I felt very good about myself and my job and my school and my staff and my kids ... We were doing what was best for our kids.”

P5 is principal of a 190-student K-12 (kindergarten aged 5, to Year 12 aged 18) school with 80 students in secondary. Located in an isolated rural village, the school is in an area with one of the poorest incomes Australia-wide. Both the population and employment opportunities in the community have steadily declined over the past two decades.

In late 2019, the area was impacted by bush fires with some families experiencing damage to property and the loss of the family home. P5 realised that “There were a lot of fragile people around the town. Students were also a bit fragile, as well as staff”. Hence, at the end of 2019, P5 organised a staff well-being day which included a psychologist to help people deal with stress and anxiety. “We were looking at the well-being of the staff because of what had happened at that time”.

In March, it became obvious to P5 that, due to COVID-19, changes to teaching would be required. “We needed to support our teachers by upskilling them on how to use different platforms. Because we are a K-12 school, we ended up with several different modes of delivery because of the different needs of kindergarten to secondary students.”

The school already had a one-to-one laptop (on-site) program in place. Consequently, when school attendance was restricted, devices were available for students to take home. We made the decision to use *Microsoft Teams* because students were familiar with *Microsoft Word* and *PowerPoint*. However, teachers needed training to become familiar with *Microsoft Teams* and how to teach online. The school provided dongles to help with connectivity, although not all families had reliable Internet. P5 noted that quite a few students came to school. These were “children of essential workers. As well, most of Year 9 decided they wanted to be at school because they missed each other—they missed the social aspect of learning”.

P5 recognised that staff were integral to the school’s handling of the crisis. “Having the trust of staff during this time of uncertainty was invaluable. We could take staff to places that they felt were uncomfortable, but then they had enough trust to go through it. Fortunately, most things worked out—and if they didn’t, I’d apologise, move on and try and work out something else, because we were all in that quick turnaround learning phase”. P5 also noted the importance of having several staff as “go-to” people for those who needed software support. “Staff were learning that they could be flexible and were able to support others in making changes”.

When reflecting on the challenges of his isolated school’s situation, P5 commented:

“Some people make the mistake of thinking school size is the indicator of complexity but country [non-metropolitan] schools are also complex places. During COVID-19, I probably spent more time talking with staff, listening to staff, working through their concerns in small groups and individually, but it’s the support of the staff which has been a big thing. If we’ve got their well-being handled, then they can handle the well-being of the students because they’re in a calmer space to do that.”

Emergent Themes

Through the constant comparative analysis method (Johnson and Christensen, 2017), four overarching, emergent themes were identified from the interview data. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Emergent themes from principal interviews

Themes	
i.	Focus on student, staff and family well-being
ii.	Access to computers, Internet and hard copy material; and, student online learning
iii.	The importance of effective communication
iv.	Post-disruption reflections

i. Focus on student, staff and family well-being

Student well-being was the primary focus for the principals regardless of whether their students were learning from home or at school. While both state and federal governments wanted schools to stay open for students of essential workers, principals recognised that school was a safe place for vulnerable and at-risk students. Hence, such students were encouraged to come to school. P3 reflected: “In our support unit, we had teachers collect [vulnerable] students from their home and transport them to school”. Principals communicated effectively to parents that the learning content would be the same for all students, whether they were at home or at school. Special arrangements were made for students in the final years of schooling to attend during the restrictions (P1, P2, P3). What also helped student well-being in two schools (P2, P3) was the prior establishment of teacher-led student mentor groups which continued to meet throughout the disruption, albeit by phone or online. This meant that these schools already had systems in place to continue to support student well-being and to quickly address any concerns.

The well-being of their staff was also a focus for principals. Principals rostered their staff for work-at-school days, and work-from-home days. Staff who felt vulnerable were allowed to work from home. All principals provided their staff with professional learning to quickly upskill them to use online meeting tools, such as *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams*, and online platforms that students would use for learning. Additionally, principals reported that they needed to devote extra time during the pandemic to the well-being of their staff. For example, P1 held staff briefings every afternoon. P4’s approach was to set up an open *Google Meet* for an hour every morning at which staff would drop in just to talk. P5 commented that he spent more time talking with and listening to his staff to help them work through their concerns.

The well-being of the schools’ families was also a focus for the principals. Each principal volunteered that the volume of parent emails escalated during the off-site learning time as parents relied on them to provide accurate information given the often-conflicting messages that were coming from government and media outlets. One of P3’s strategies was to provide meals for vulnerable students, their families and the community. “Our cafeteria staff prepared meals for the students to take home when we knew that students weren’t being fed well. These staff also cooked daily and froze meals for the school families should they need it. And the community have needed them.” This initiative was also P3’s deliberate effort to allow casual staff to retain their jobs.

ii. Access to computers, Internet and hard copy material; and student online learning

The principals reported that not all of their students had ready access to computers to use at home—for example, 11% of P1's and 40% of P2's students did not have devices or reliable Internet. For the four schools which did not have a Bring-Your-Own Device policy, students were dependent on the family computer or a parent's device for daily access to home learning material. This became problematic if siblings were competing for limited devices. As a result, principals ensured all students requiring a computer at home were provided with one. In anticipation of the impact COVID-19 would have, two principals (P2, P4) bought additional Chrome Books while P1 had old computers repaired, and P4 and P5 sent school devices home. In the cases where Internet connectivity was problematic, students were provided with dongles. Alternatively, principals and teachers would deliver hard copy material to their students' home until a system was organised for families to collect material from school.

With the establishment of online learning, many teachers felt bound to keep their normal teaching timetable. However, three principals (P2, P3, P4) noted that both students and their parents were feeling overwhelmed with the volume of online teaching and learning. Consequently, the online learning material was modified. P1 was disappointed realising that several senior students were not engaging in online learning. Due to COVID-19-related job losses of their parents, these students were working full-time in jobs, such as night shelf stacking in supermarkets, to help support their families.

iii. The importance of effective communication

For all principals, effective communication with staff, students and families became even more important during this disruption. Principals' communication with their staff expanded to include online briefings (P1), morning drop-in sessions (P4), meetings in the school's theatre with staff socially distancing (P3), and one-on-one and small group meetings (P5). P1 reflected: "Communication had to be very good, because staff were under stress." The social isolation of some of his staff was highlighted by P4: "I've got staff who are older and living alone. They would drop into the online morning sessions just to talk. They were lonely." Principals used multiple formats to communicate with students and their families to keep in touch and make sure messages would get through: letters, emails, texts, *Facebook*/social media, and school-developed video clips.

Throughout the school restrictions, parents were reported to be very supportive of their school and the efforts the school was making for them and their children. Principals attributed that support to their comprehensive and extensive communication. P1 provided an example of the appreciation of his families: "During the lockdown, the pizza shop brought pizzas for all our staff. Another day, a parent who owns an Asian restaurant also brought lunch for staff."

iv. Post-disruption reflections

P4 voiced a sentiment, expressed by all five principals, that what was achieved in schools in a short time under COVID-19 restrictions, would have taken much longer under pre-COVID-19 circumstances:

"It's hard to understand but, when you reflect on it, so much happened. We did so much in a short period, that if you tried to really unpack it, it would take hours, because we made so many decisions, changed so much."

All principals acknowledged that implementing changes due to COVID-19 was stressful, requiring a lot of upskilling, organisation and coordination which had to be achieved in a short time frame. Yet all principals were very satisfied with their decisions and expressed that they would make the same decisions again. They each believed that they had done their best for their students and their students' families, and reported that their schools had been recognised through positive feedback from parents and the greater school community.

Two elements regarding the academic impact of online learning became apparent within the interviews. First, principals reported that, overall, their students did not appear to have been negatively impacted. As P1 explained: "Students may have missed some content but other than year 11 and 12, I don't believe academically that there was an issue at all. We saw students becoming more self-regulatory, more au fait with online learning. We saw some students really shining who we hadn't picked up before. I don't think Years 7-10 were a problem at all." Second, the disruption to face-to-face teaching meant principals chose to put assessment targets on hold. In retrospect, principals were confident that students were not severely disadvantaged by this decision. P4, the principal of the most isolated school explained: "By abandoning some of our assessment, we could focus on our core learning. Also, because of our isolation, we need to travel long distances for excursions and sport activities which disrupts learning, and cuts into teaching time. Because of the pandemic, this hasn't happened."

In terms of the social impact, principals recognised that social media had gone some way to keeping students connected. P2 explained: "There were five weeks when some students had no physical contact with any friends, but they were certainly social on social media". When school restrictions were lifted, attendance was notably high. Beyond the social aspect of learning, the long-term social impact of the disruption is not known. For senior students, there is already a sense of disappointment with the realisation that they will miss many iconic end-of-schooling events. P5 reflected that such ceremonies "are the equivalent of a rite of passage for young people. Missing these is going to impact students who already feel ripped off."

New strategies were developed as a direct result of transforming school learning to online. Principals saw the experience as an opportunity to reflect on practices and processes. For P1, "It showed us our weaknesses and what we needed to do to strengthen those weaknesses. We certainly learned a whole bunch of new things to improve our school", while P2 saw it as an opportunity to address "bad habits." Strategies principals adopted included: the uptake of online platforms for student learning at schools (P1, P4); a well-being and engagement curriculum Tracking Sheet for every student (P3); "more well-being check-ins to see how the students have been travelling, with the inclusion of access to an external counsellor for some families and for students and tele-consultations" (P5); and, P4 who lent 300 Chrome Books at the beginning of the online learning time, has now re-issued those to students permanently which has facilitated a transition to ongoing online learning.

All principals noted greatly improved collaboration amongst their staff with better teamwork and cooperation between individuals, faculties, executives and teachers: principals are confident that this will continue into the future. P4 reflected, "Staff were incredible. We worked as a team. No resistance

at all. They were absolutely professional and realised that it just had to be done.” P3 confirmed this observation, “The staff lived up to what I had thought of them. They were exceptional.” P2 commented on the increase in teamwork, “We are different now—our faculties are much more collaborative. As a whole staff, we’re much more appreciative of how everybody worked and pulled together.” P1 credited teamwork for moving technology-resistant staff to having the skills and confidence to teach online. He explained that:

“Some staff, especially those who were not really technology savvy and were trying to avoid that at all cost, had no choice. They had to jump in and learn how to do things. From that perspective, we all had to work together as a team to get the best for our students.”

Online learning will continue to be a component of teaching and learning in all schools. However, P2’s staff made the decision to “wean” students off online lessons for the current school term and move students back to teacher-directed learning: “It is teacher led, face-to-face, pen and paper, discussion, group work now. For the rest of this school term, there will be no taking the students to the computer room for *Google Classroom*.”

Discussion

While this study is unapologetically regional, qualitative, and small scale, it provides insights into the impact of the COVID-19 disruption from the perspective of five regional secondary New South Wales principals, whose schools are 750 km distant from the metropolitan hub of the State. The original intent of the study was to examine the role of technology in supporting learning from home due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The technology focus, it turned out, was only part of the story the principals wanted to tell. While Bergdahl and Nouri (2020) noted a significant gap in pedagogical strategies to support home-based learning, the most comprehensive theme to emerge was that student well-being was the dominant focus for all principals, followed by concerns for the well-being of their staff, and for their students’ families. Given principals’ main concern was for their students’ well-being, it is not surprising to learn that the study’s second theme related to the different pragmatic approaches principals instigated to ensure their students had access to computers and online learning during the pandemic. The third main theme was the importance principals placed on effective communication with their staff, their students’ families and their students during the pandemic. The final theme to emerge centred on the principal’s post-disruption reflections whereby they each talked passionately about their practice, what they had learnt, and what positive changes they had been able to instigate in their schools as a result of experiencing such an unprecedented disruption.

These observations resonate strongly with the wider global experience. Harris and Jones (2020), in reflecting on the changing nature of school leadership under the pandemic, make significant observations. With school leadership practices having changed significantly and irrevocably, Harris and Jones suggest that prior training now appears to be sufficient to prepare school leaders. Furthermore, crisis management has become a core component of school leadership. Reflecting the study’s findings, however, Harris and Jones indicate four other key elements influencing the nature of school leadership

as self-care, connection, community, and distributed leadership. They link self-care and connection—these, they say “must be the main priority and prime concern for all school leaders” (p. 245)—with school leaders’ ability to help others. The principals interviewed here all talked of connectivity—Harris and Jones’ “connect to learn, learn to connect” (p. 245)—with staff, students and community, all emphasising the importance of communication. Under such circumstances, distributed leadership—not a phrase used by the principals interviewed here, but hinted at by several—provides a practical way of enhancing the other three elements, as does “forging stronger links with the parent/community groups to support families, young people and children” (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 246). Student wellbeing, community connectedness, support for the most vulnerable, and building system resilience all feature highly in a recent OECD assessment of getting back to school (OECD, 2020).

The importance of forging links with communities becomes very apparent when issues of inclusion, access and equity are examined. The principals in these five schools, already identified by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority as educationally disadvantaged (2015), grappled with the daily practicalities of ensuring all students maintained their learning. In retrospect, should the interviews have probed more deeply into what Tawil (2020) calls “the elephants in the room: Inclusion and equity”? (p. 6). From an OECD perspective (2020), the technology-dependent response to distance education was expected to have provided continuity of learning, yet the global majority were left behind. It is clear that some students in this Australian study fall into this category. Sahlberg (2020) and others (e.g. OECD, 2020) also observe that the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated pre-existing social and educational inequalities, and that fixing these would be an important consequence of the pandemic. In contradiction to this observation, though, this study found that inequality in terms of access to technology was countered by the actions of the principals. Realising that problems accessing technology would exacerbate learning inequality, all five principals developed creative solutions for students’ home-based learning needs, and organised professional development for their staff so they were upskilled to teach online. This mitigated against an increase in the learning gap inequality for their students. This, however, still begs questions of the capacity of a technology-driven education to deliver equitable learning outcomes. Whether this is examined at a local or global scale, Tawil’s (2020) questions remain pertinent—is there an approach that would improve inclusion and equity which relies less on technology, and, if not, whether digital connectivity becomes a right and, if so, how it can be controlled and regulated?

An assessment of such a future demands a consideration of significant change in education. Sahlberg (2020)—writing about the effect of COVID-19 on schools, teaching and learning—questions whether schools will change as a result of the pandemic given the differing experiences of those already deemed disadvantaged. He makes several important observations that resonate with this study’s findings. First, he claims that, “there is only a little chance schools will change as a consequence of this pandemic without bold and brave shifts in mindset in how that change happens” (para. 2). This study found the opposite to be, at least in part, true: the five principals and their staff have reflected on their actions and experiences and, as a result, have made changes to improve their teaching and learning into the future. For example: online learning platforms have been implemented more comprehensively; collaboration

between faculties and staff has become significantly more effective; and, communication between the schools and their parent community have been enhanced.

How significant, however, are such changes in practice? Continuing with Sahlberg's (2020) reflections, he noted that, "during school closures, learning from home has been mostly based on the old logic of consuming information and knowledge rather than creating or co-creating new ideas and solutions to real-life problems" (Abstract). This observation reflects the reality for these five principals that their response to COVID-19, by necessity, tended toward a utilitarian approach to home learning—the continued consumption of information and knowledge. Given these principals each led a school identified as disadvantaged, it was beyond a reasonable expectation that learning from home would provide an opportunity for Sahlberg's proposed curriculum change. However, all these principals certainly demonstrated a shift towards the creation of new ideas and problem solving to suit their individual context. This highlighted the efficacy of the New South Wales Government's (2011) *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy that enabled principals to quickly address their students' and community's particular needs.

The principals interviewed in this study all reported that they believe their students have not been impacted academically by learning from home. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see, echoing Sahlberg (2020), whether a longer-term change does emerge once learning and teaching settles down. Others share this curiosity (Baxter, 2020; Tawil, 2020; Zhao, 2020), while the OECD (2020) puts a timeline—18 to 24 months—on systems to "build resilience and adaptability for the future" (p. 2), a future in which "disruption is the new normal" (p. 2). In recognition that the pandemic has been disruptive for students in New South Wales, the State Government has announced two additional programs for the 2021 school year: AU\$337 million has been allocated for the employment of additional staff to deliver small-group tutoring which will focus on those students experiencing the greatest need (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020; Great Lakes Advocate, 2020a); and, AU\$120 million will enable the continuance of free preschool programs for the State's children throughout 2021 (Great Lakes Advocate, 2020b). This additional State funding should go some way to mitigate further inequity in Australia's education as reported by UNICEF (2018).

It is important to note that, even though the principals in this study lead schools that are identified as challenging with socio-economic disadvantage (Piccoli, 2014, p. 6; Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015), all principals demonstrated practices that align with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's six key messages (AITSL, 2020)—that is, principals drew on both proactive and reactive skills and approaches, prioritised open communication, proactively triaged and managed threats to their community, leveraged expertise and experience to support transition out of the crisis, and worked collaboratively. But first and foremost, all principals were committed to doing the best for their staff and students' well-being.

Conclusions

In closing, it is acknowledged that this study had the limited remit—faced by other researchers globally (e.g. Baxter, 2020; Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020)—of seeking some insight into how schools responded to

the rapidly emerging circumstances of a global pandemic and to government policy on the run. Documenting the experiences of five principals in regional Australian secondary schools, using the peripheral nature of such schools as a mirror on the wider education system, has, nevertheless, provided valuable reflection on the relative merits of a technology-driven mode of learning, the crucial role schools play in community wellbeing, and the importance of communication. Furthermore, the record, albeit gained as the pandemic continues, raises issues of whether such a crisis provides opportunity for critical changes in approaches to education, and whether there is possibility that significant change could emerge in the future.

While these conclusions are based only on interviews with five principals and so provide only a single lens on the experiences and thus may have limited transferability to other educational systems, the emerging themes do appear to be robust enough to warrant further study. Both Harris and Jones's (2020) reflection on school leadership in Britain and the OECD's (2020) global overviews, for example, provided strong parallels with these findings, giving confidence that this study's insights have a wider validity and applicability. All the principals' commentary reflects complex engagement with entire school communities—again a significant conclusion by Harris and Jones (2020)—which suggests the value of further research that records parallel perspectives of students, parents and communities. Such research may provide further insight into the efficacy of technology, wellbeing support, and communication. It may also shine a light on the possibility that, as community leaders, principals may have felt a need, or been naturally inclined, to portray a positive image of these events; this study focussed on what the principals said, and so there remains an interesting study on what may not have been said. The effect of a viral pandemic on education, at whichever scale considered, raises serious questions of social process— wellbeing, community, communication, technology, inclusion and equity. The insights offered here contribute in their own small way to these global discussions.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions	Type of Questions
• Can you please describe your school?	Knowledge
• When Covid-19 hit, as the principal what actions did you take?	Knowledge
• What worked well and what did not? Your thoughts on why?	Opinion
• What percentage of your students do you believe had access to effective technology in their home environment? (rural vs village-based)	Knowledge
• How did the parents of your children react to the Covid-19 restrictions?	Opinion
• How do you think your students were impacted academically by their time away from the classroom (face-to-face learning; social interaction with peers)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Academically? ▪ Socially 	Knowledge Opinion
• What different strategies, if any, are you implementing since your students' return in terms of their learning?	Knowledge
• What percentage of your students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ attended school throughout the disruption? ○ have returned now that restrictions have lifted? 	Knowledge Knowledge
• What impact, if any, did this Covid-19 experience have on you as a principal?	Feelings
• Now that restrictions have lifted, in what ways is your school different to how it was pre-Covid-19?	Opinion
• Your reflections? Lessons for the future?	Opinion