



## ARTICLE

### Online learning in a time of COVID disruption? The experiences of principals from New South Wales rural and disadvantaged primary schools

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## **Online learning in a time of COVID disruption? The experiences of principals from New South Wales rural and disadvantaged primary schools**

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### **Abstract**

The New South Wales (Australia) school education response to the Covid-19 pandemic was based on the premise that children would learn from home or school through online learning. This study of the experiences of a group of rural New South Wales primary school principals challenges this premise. Rural schools in the State are mostly small, relatively isolated, and linked closely to small socio-economically-poor communities. They are marginal to the education establishment, and thus offer opportunities to test assumptions of mainstream sector-wide approaches. This paper reports interviews with six rural principals regarding their approaches to learning for their students during the pandemic. We identify five key issues: initial concerns; the importance of communication; access and attitudes to technology; parents' attitudes to home learning; and change on return to school. Presumptions of successful off-site learning and technology implementation are challenged by the experience of these rural schools. This study raises two questions about post-Covid-19 school education: How can pre-existing social disadvantage be better dealt within the education system? What might a future education model post COVID-19 look like?

Keywords: COVID-19; rural schools; New South Wales; learning at home

## **Introduction**

The year 2020 will be remembered as the time when COVID-19 spread across the world and disrupted every aspect of daily life. While the pandemic affected people regardless of their gender, nationality or income, it was disadvantaged groups who were most impacted. This was especially the case in the area of education (OECD, 2020). Six months into the pandemic, UNESCO determined that approximately two thirds of the world's student population (one billion children, youth and adults) were still experiencing severe interruptions to their education (Tawil, 2020). A 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report estimated that globally, the education inequalities for marginalised and disadvantaged students have been exacerbated during this time (UNESCO, 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020). The OECD's Education at a Glance report (Schleicher, 2020) noted the negative impact of COVID-19 on education specifically finding that: the pandemic resulted in school closures with the majority closing for at least ten weeks in most OECD and partner countries; students had to become more resourceful to learn remotely despite efforts by educational communities to maintain the continuum of learning; teachers needed to adopt new modes of delivery and pedagogical concepts which required upskilling in a relatively short time frame; and, the pandemic presented a greater risk for marginalised learners to fall behind. Many governments advocated technology as the main, and often only, means for the continuation of formal learning, regardless of the fact that access to technology is not available to all (Tawil, 2020). This was the case in Australia where, as a consequence of government assumptions that switching to online home-based learning would be a relatively expedient solution (e.g. New South Wales Government, 2020b), school principals became responsible for overseeing the implementation of technology-driven home-based learning by their schools. In addition to this responsibility, Netolicky (2020) also draws attention to school leaders simultaneously having to navigate serious tensions such as accountability and autonomy, equity and excellence, the individual and the collective, and wellbeing and workload.

In the context of schooling during COVID-19, examining the experiences of principals from disadvantaged schools whose 'voices' are seldom heard (Creswell, 2013) provides an opportunity to link the local to the global and offers a valuable resource for future actions during crises. Hearing from such principals is particularly relevant in gaining greater understandings of the challenges of remote learning for students in disadvantaged rural areas. To this end, the research question for this study was: What were the experiences of principals from rural and disadvantaged schools in northern New South Wales, Australia, who delivered online home-based learning to students during a time of unprecedented disruption?

The researchers interviewed principals from six Primary schools (Kindergarten to Year 6) which children attend from age five to 12 years, located in a regional area of northern New South Wales formally recognised as educationally disadvantaged (as per the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, 2014). New South Wales rural schools sit on the margins of the mainstream education system, often within socio-economically disadvantaged areas, and so provide a unique opportunity to examine processes and effects of crises. In New South Wales, the educational performance gap between city and rural students is larger than

the OECD average, and larger than almost any other jurisdiction in Australia (Piccoli, 2014). Writing in 2014, the then New South Wales Minister for Education, the Honourable Adrian Piccoli, declared:

“The disadvantage starts in early childhood and flows through to school outcomes. Fifteen-year-olds in NSW [New South Wales] rural schools are now 1.5 years behind their peers in metropolitan schools, according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment.” (Piccoli, 2014, p. 6)

It has been estimated that the net loss to Australia of declining school performance from 2009-15 is \$118.6 billion, while the loss attributed to the increase in inequality is \$20.3 billion (Hetherington, 2018). This niche study captured a specific moment in time and place when principals, teachers, students and educational systems were faced with an unprecedented challenge, while also exploring both the technical and human sides of the response. In doing so, the study examined who is empowered or disempowered in the use of and access to remote teaching technologies, and revealed how challenges to presumptions of the application of technology are enacted.

### **Review of the Related Literature**

During the pandemic, it was widely assumed that a technology-driven response would support learning from home. The long-term effects of this are as yet unknown, but are likely to be deleterious, especially for students of disadvantage (Sahlberg, 2020). This response was predicated on a largely accepted assumption of the potential and power of technology-based education (Basilaia and Kvavadze, 2020; Baytiyeh, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Duignan, 2020). However, in reviewing such a response after major natural disasters, Baytiyeh (2018) noted the potential for “serious, widespread and lasting negative effects on children whose education is disrupted” (p. 215). Baker (2020) also reported negative effects following relatively short periods of absence from learning during the current pandemic.

Proponents of a technology-based response point to its educational benefits (Baytiyeh, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Duignan, 2020). Yet the implementation of such a response presents challenges. Baytiyeh (2018) notes four technological necessities: reliable Internet connection; instant communication capability; data storage; and, learning materials. Online learning material availability does not seem to be limiting (Van Allen and Katz, 2020), except where Internet connections are problematic. Beyond these, however, is the importance of human and social processes: communication between staff, students, teachers and communities; teacher up-take of technology; in-class and student group communication; parental role; and, assurance of child safety and mental health. Baytiyeh (2018) also draws attention to the importance of teacher skills, IT support, communication, and parental involvement. Vicars (2020) puts a human face on these challenges with the stories of students and teachers alike struggling to engage new ways of learning at short notice and under the pressure of school lockdowns. Duignan (2020) also brings to attention the human face of technology adaptation finding that: introducing technology for its own sake does not work; pedagogy counts more than technology; transformation requires a “culture of dynamic leadership, continuous self-reflection, professional assessment and feedback for and among [local] leaders and teachers”; students and teachers need to be IT ready; teacher training, and peer and professional learning are crucial; students need to be “critical and

reflective, open to a lifetime of learning and re-learning, ... [be] comfortable with change, and have empathy and a global outlook"; and, a schooling paradigm shift is needed, "better suited for times when students are creators and co-creators of their futures and active partners in reform initiatives" (pp. 136-7). Given these needs under normal times of change, the rapid, immediate and short-term technological approach necessary for crisis response will be especially challenging (Hutchings and Quinney, 2015). This was particularly the case for remote and rural schools in New South Wales.

A striking example is the isolated, rural Aboriginal school on Cabbage Tree Island in Northern New South Wales, where there were no reliable computers in the community, and no one had Internet access. In March, the Department of Education announced loans of computers to students, and so the principal placed an order. Yet after two months, only nine iPads and no modems had arrived. In metropolitan and other regional areas, students were able to access Internet-based learning, while this school resorted to printing and delivering hard copies of lessons (Greenbank and Marcaniak, 2020). Education expert Pasi Sahlberg noted that the pandemic had unearthed the "unpleasant truth" (Greenbank and Marcaniak, 2020, para. 21) of inherent unequal structures in the education system whereby up to 10% of students have no reliable home Internet, with this increasing to around 30% in lower socio-economic areas. Sahlberg (2020) also reports that "the COVID-19 pandemic has not created any new inequalities, but it has certainly made existing ones more recognisable to many more of us" (p. 2).

### **Context of the Study**

In Australia, the Federal department of education establishes national policies and programs for students in early childcare centres, Primary and Secondary schools, and higher education settings (Australian Government, 2020). Despite this, school education in Australia is the responsibility of the six states and two territories which make their own decisions about all aspects of schooling. For example, in the state of New South Wales, schooling is mandatory for students from six years to 17 years (AustLII, n.d.), and is organised into Primary (Kindergarten to Year 6) and Secondary (Years 7 to 12). Parents can choose to send their children to a public (state), Catholic, or an Independent school (New South Wales Government, 2020a). In all New South Wales schools, the principal is the senior leader responsible for the overall operation of the school. Principals in public schools are accountable to the New South Wales Department of Education, while the principals in Independent and most Catholic schools are normally accountable to a school board. Nevertheless, the New South Wales Government's *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy document (2011) allows schools 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).

When the pandemic impacted Australian schools seven weeks into the 2020 school year, principals received confusing media releases because communication from the Federal government did not align with those of the states/territories. Notably, on March 22, 2020, the National Cabinet advised that schools would remain open, and children should attend (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020). Yet, the following day, the New South Wales Government encouraged parents to keep their children at home and advised that for students there would be "one unit of work" (New South Wales Government, 2020b,

para. 11). This ambiguous directive indicated that the intended teaching and learning would be the same whether students were at school or home. A press release, "Restrictions Begin as Schools Move Towards Online Learning" (New South Wales Government, 2020b), suggested the mode of learning that teachers would develop would be online but the directive was put forward without any consideration that teachers had not previously used online content for the majority of their teaching. As a result, New South Wales teachers were required to rapidly adapt face-to-face teaching to cater for students who were learning at home, as well as the small number of students, mostly children of *essential workers*, who continued to attend school. Essential workers were somewhat confusingly defined as "everyone who has a job" (Fraser, 2020, para. 13). It should be noted that in New South Wales, the COVID-19 lockdown was relatively short-lived and students returned to face-to-face learning in school on May 25, some seven weeks after parents were asked to keep their children at home (Smith and Baker, 2020; Duffy, 2020).

## Methods

This study addresses a gap in the emerging literature examining a brief moment in time specifically from the perspective of New South Wales rural principals who, during the first phase of COVID-19, were required to implement the same approach to teaching and learning for their students at home and at school. Qualitative research for this study was chosen because it allowed diversity to be explored, and emphasised the description and narration of the principals' experiences (Kumar, 2014). Furthermore, a methodology of naturalistic inquiry enabled real-world situations to be explored as they unfolded naturally (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun 2015). The decision to use semi-structured interviews linked to the nature of the study, as interviews enabled the researchers to ask open-ended questions and then the participants to voice their experiences unconstrained by the researchers' perspectives (Creswell, 2012).

Principals were chosen for interview as they are the highest authority in a school and therefore, were charged with decision-making in alignment with State requirements. Three types of questions were asked (Appendix A): knowledge questions to obtain factual details; opinion questions to elicit what participants thought; and, a feeling question to understand how participants felt about an issue (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2015). Study participants were selected through purposive sampling from the rural and isolated Primary principal population involved in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement project (Chaseling et al., 2017). An information sheet, interview questions and informed consent form were sent to the participants who agreed to be interviewed. In accordance with pandemic social-isolation restrictions, interviews took place by *Zoom*, in July 2020. To de-identify participants, the principal-participants were identified P1 to P6 (see Table 1).

Table 1. The principals involved in this study and their rural primary schools\*

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4**	School 5	School 6 Chris
<b>Principal pseudonym</b>	Teaching Principal 1 (P1)	Principal 2 (P2)	Teaching Principal 3 (P3)	Principal 4 (P4)	Teaching Principal 5 (P5)	Teaching Principal 6 (P6)
<b>Principal gender</b>	female	male	female	male	female	male
<b>School locality</b>	Amongst trees, 10 km from the nearest town	In a sleepy beachside village, 12 km from a small regional city	In an isolated farming community, 50 km from the nearest town	In a rural campus on the outskirts of a small regional city	In farmland amongst trees, 6km from the nearest village	In an isolated village, one-hour drive from the nearest town
<b>No. of students</b>	11***	330	22	140	87	10
<b>Full-time equivalent teaching staff</b>	2.5	19	1.5	8	5	1.4
<b>Interview</b>	July 2020					

\* New South Wales (Australia) primary schools educate children for seven years from Kindergarten to 6th Class which most children complete at the age of 12 years.

\*\* Within a small K-12 school

\*\*\* Enrolments recently decreased from close to 40 to 11 after a National Broadband Network tower was erected 200 m from the playground.

The constant comparative data analysis method was used to juxtapose units of data to generate tentative categories, then any related categories were joined. From there, themes were developed (Ary et al. 2019). Throughout the analysis, the researchers continually asked questions of the data to develop a deeper understanding of what the data might indicate (Johnson and Christensen 2017).

The findings of this study were reported in two ways: first, as vignettes—a narrative where events, actions, and experiences were moved through time (Kramp, 2004); and second, through a discussion of main themes generated by the interviews.

### Findings: i) Vignettes of Six Principals' Experiences

P1's school had an enrolment of 11 children. Families of the children live on farms and land, often off-grid, in areas with little or no Internet access. This is a low socio-economic area and many parents do not have regular employment.

Initial confusion occurred when it became apparent that COVID-19 would impact the school. It was not clear if, or when, the school might close. Further, while the news broadcasts were saying that students would engage in online learning at home, this was not an option as parents did not want their children using computers either at school or at home. Therefore, the school prepared home-learning kits with lesson materials and stationery. Initially, staff delivered these lesson kits to families, together with

supplies of toilet paper and tissues which they knew some families did not have. Once social distancing came into effect, parents needed to collect kits of learning materials and lessons from school, and return their children's completed work on a Friday. This collection-and-return process waned after some weeks, with parents tending not to return or collect schoolwork. Realising that every parent had a mobile phone, the principal used the *Seesaw* app to keep track of schoolwork, attendance and participation as parents could upload photos of their children's work which could be marked by teachers. However, for the four families who lived out of phone network coverage, the *Seesaw* app was not practical. Hence, for most children, the principal noted that there was little evidence of schoolwork being completed. In an effort to keep parents and students engaged, parents were phoned or texted three times a week to check on student and parent welfare. The principal praised her staff, who were "amazing ... going above and beyond". Yet she was disheartened that children were only doing a small amount of the work sent home, observing that "for many children, it was just an extended holiday."

Following students' return to school, new strategies are being implemented. Most notably, schoolwork has been organised into shorter time frames as children were initially exhausted after a normal school day and were often absent the following day. Consequently, an early morning fitness program with chart-and-sticker rewards, as well as motivational activities, now encourage attendance and greater learning participation.

**P2**, the principal of a 330-student school in a sleepy beachside town, reflected that "COVID hit like, 'Bang'. All of a sudden, on a Sunday I realised, 'this is getting serious'. I was fortunate to have four teachers off class on the Monday for a professional development event. I said, "Guys, handbrake—we're going to move to online learning. I need you to get the whole team up, so we can deliver *Google Classroom* from Wednesday." In those two days, with already 80% of the children at home, the school engaged in a concentrated period of professional learning and wellbeing around staff, students and families, as well as focused resource development. Acknowledging the great effort involved, P2 reflected "I can't speak highly enough of my staff."

Some initiatives P2 instigated included: implementing *Google Classroom* for learning from home, and for those few students who still attended school; tasking two teachers, confident with IT, to help parents by phone with IT issues; the principal delivering hard copy lesson materials to 15 families, until a safe system was devised for parents to collect learning packs from school; and, serendipitously, the introduction by the principal of the *Seesaw* App to the school in January which meant that when the pandemic started, P2 was well placed to communicate with families.

A survey emailed to families seeking feedback on the school's approach revealed parents' "overwhelmingly positive" response. P2, nevertheless, experienced an existential crisis while working in what he called "an empty carcass"—a school without children. His strong belief in promoting and using technology was challenged by the realisation that "you can't take away face-to-face teaching and learning. Schooling always has been about that social interaction. We talk about emotional intelligence—you don't really get that online. It might be different in a Secondary or Tertiary environment, but in a Primary environment that social connection is vital."

**P3** described her 22-student school as a one-class, well-resourced school with its own kitchen, and a bus. It is “a good little school, a very nice little place to be”. The school is located in a low socio-economic, small isolated farming community where “most of the dads are farmers and/or aren’t employed”. The only working mother is employed at the school.

In the past year, the community has been impacted by drought, bush fires and flood. Houses have burnt down, and several families now live in caravans without electricity. Despite this, families have stayed in the area and school enrolments have remained consistent. P3 recognised the locality’s “simple lifestyle”, where many “live off the grid”, noting that despite this, parents and the community are engaged with their children’s learning and wellbeing.

Once COVID-19 began to impact, the school community decided, at an impromptu meeting, that children should stay home to “keep them safe” meaning that, in effect, the school closed. As every child had an iPad or computer at the school, P3 sent these home assuming a relatively easy transition to home online learning. Her expectation neither matched that of the parents nor the reality of students’ situations. Most families had no home Internet access, and furthermore, parents did not want their children to have computers at home.

After struggling to maintain online learning for the few students with Internet, while producing hard copy lesson materials for most of the students, P3 made the decision to “scrap” *Google Classroom* and go “old school” by sourcing any textbooks they could find for handwriting, grammar, and mathematics. This meant more marking for the teachers, but aligned with parents’ wishes. P3 acknowledged that parents “have done an excellent job keeping their children on track throughout what’s been a really tricky time, considering that they’re not teachers. They really tried their hardest to make sure their children were up, in a routine, and learning every day.”

Once children returned to school, P3 noted several changes. The daily contact with families throughout the disruption has created a stronger sense of community, and greater appreciation of teachers. Furthermore, as an acknowledgement of parents’ wishes, children will have less computer time and more play breaks structured into the school day.

**P4**’s school, located on the outskirts of a small regional city, has an enrolment of 140 Primary students including a significant number from low socio-economic families. With the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, most parents kept their children at home. A family survey sent home by P4 revealed that 11% of families did not have Internet, computers, or enough data to support online learning, or only had one computer that had to be shared between working parents and children. Consequently, several old school computers were repaired and given to families with the greatest need.

During the period of home learning, staff briefings were held every afternoon using *Google Meet* to plan, and address staff issues and “frustrations”. Staff decided that both online and hard copy learning materials would be provided as it was felt younger students would not cope solely with online learning. As well, a *Google Platform* trainer was contracted for staff training. The school’s IT system struggled with bandwidth, and on one occasion, everything shut down. Many teachers struggled with online

forums whereby some were uncomfortable talking to students in online meeting rooms, while others would talk but not show their face.

When presented with the conflicting government announcement on March 22/23 that schools would remain open while parents were encouraged to keep their children at home, P4's immediate COVID-related tasks included determining: what software his school would use to support learning at home; what support and training did staff need to deliver learning at home; how would children be supported at school or at home by his staff, some of whom were at school while others were self-isolating; what hard copy material would be produced and how/when would this be distributed; how would children with learning support needs be supported given that initially the learning software company refused to allow photocopying of booklets for home use; where to source difficult-to-obtain toilet paper, thermometers, hand-sanitiser and pump-action bottles; and, what new protocols and policies would be developed with the cleaners.

P4 acknowledged that communication was key to responding to the pandemic and that the school had learned a lot from COVID including learning about themselves. Specifically, staff came together and worked as a team while staff upskilling and faster uptake of online lesson programming emerged. This, P4 reflected, would be useful in the future.

**P5's** 87-student school is nestled in farmland amongst trees eight-kilometres from the nearest village. She realised, from the initial State Department of Education communication that directives were broad, and should be considered in the context of each school community. P5's first message to parents was that the school was open, advising that parents could choose whether their children attended school or not, and that "whatever their decision, it was alright". P5 also gave staff the choice to work from home or school. Due to this school's isolation from the nearest village, all staff chose to work from school, although some advised that if the COVID-situation worsened, they would work from home. P5 reported that some parents felt guilty, wanting their children to attend school, but were considerate of staff and were unsure if sending children to school was appropriate.

Immediately, school attendance was down to 55% and so children were reorganised from four classes into two. This enabled two teachers to prepare hard-copy workbooks, and to set up *Google Classroom* and online activities, both of which were provided to all children. Teachers delivered learning material to families' mailboxes while some parents collected material from the school. It was "made very clear to parents that the children would have work at home or work at school but they would be doing the same tasks". It eventuated that few families relied on hard copies of lessons, and 95% of students used online platforms. *Google Classroom* was used to communicate with parents. Daily communication with staff was supplemented by weekly updates from the Department.

Once the children returned to school, the principal noted increased anxiety amongst some students across all year levels. *Google Classroom* has been discontinued as parents advised they did not like online learning, although mathematics and writing software is still used in individual activities.

Overall, the principal considers that the decision to remain open worked well for this community. Throughout the disruption, her most important issues were: being conscious of teachers' choice to come

to school; parents wanting reassurance and support for students' home learning; and, sharing Departmental information with the school community.

**P6**, the principal of the most isolated school in the study, described the once prosperous farming community as having an aging population with high unemployment. At the end of 2019 during two separate weeks of bush fires, the 10-student school followed standard Department of Education protocols, and was non-operational. Therefore, students did not attend, nor was any teaching and learning organised for any students during these catastrophic fire weeks. Evidence of this community's isolation is that mobile phone reception has only recently been available, and Internet access is still a barrier for most families. When COVID impacted, only two of the 10 children had effective technology at home, six children accessed home online learning using borrowed school devices while the remaining four children attended school.

The main action for P6 was establishing classroom routines. He scheduled a daily 11am and 1pm check-in to answer any questions, enable children to interact with each other, and to keep students engaged. Through trial and error, P6 determined that it would be easier to set one *Zoom* session that ran all day—almost like an open classroom—with explicit guidelines that screens and microphones were only turned on if someone had a question. Both children at home and school did the same work: a combination of online learning using *Zoom* and hard copy. While it took a while to establish, this worked best for both children and staff.

### **Findings: ii) Main Themes within the data based on the research question**

Five main themes emerged from the data in this study: 1) Initial ambiguous media messages caused confusion for principals; 2) communication was central to successful leadership and student engagement; 3) technology-based learning from home was dependent on families' access to and attitudes towards technology; 4) all children were not affected equally; and 5) changes after return to school.

#### **1. Initial ambiguous media messages caused confusion for principals**

All principals reported that uncertainty arose with the pandemic's onset regarding: whether schools would remain open; what the government meant by essential workers; how learning would take place for students at home; and, how principals would support their staff. P1's comment is representative of the confusion each principal expressed:

“Initially we had no idea. We were just contacting other principals wondering what we were going to do. We didn't know if we were going to close or not in that initial week. We then stayed open and madly panicked thinking, do we just start making things until we're told we've got to close? It wasn't until the following week we received proper advice on what was going to happen.”

Nevertheless, each principal reported differing concerns. For example, for P5, the issue was just who were *essential* workers. As she explained:

“Straight away I knew the expression, essential worker, would be an issue because all employed parents would think they were essential workers—they needed to provide for their families. It was vague as to what we were supposed to inform parents.”

For P3, it was the influence of parents which ultimately set the direction her school would take.

“Once COVID hit, we had an impromptu community meeting and parents decided that they wanted to keep their children at home. We still had staff at school each day, even though the community wished for people to self-isolate.”

In response to the New South Wales’ directive (2020b) that schools would move to online learning, P4 sent home a survey to ascertain what Internet capability was available for students expected to participate in online learning from home.

## **2. Communication was central to successful leadership and student learning**

A theme within all the interviews was the integral role of principals’ communication with stakeholders in the school community. Principals reported that without clear channels of communication with staff, students and families, it would have been difficult to achieve effective home-based learning.

P2, the principal of the largest school in the study, used a football analogy to express the close working relationship that his staff developed during the pandemic.

“It was almost like we packed a scrum and my teachers would even today say how tight we were. Dealing with the pandemic united us even more than we were, so it was pretty powerful.”

Many principals increased the frequency of staff meetings to daily events which also alerted them to potential wellbeing issues. As P4 explained:

“I had briefings every afternoon and that certainly helped us to determine and iron out the issues that we had.”

P5 made the deliberate decision to speak each day to staff members individually:

“I’d touch base with staff daily. I’d ask, “Are you sure you want to come to work tomorrow? – or – Give me the heads up if you want to work from home so I can set up a structure for your class”. It was just being conscious. Making sure I checked in with staff and their wellbeing—that was really important, making sure they were feeling safe to be at school.”

The daily check-in with students was a communication strategy which each of the principals adopted. A characteristic response which illustrates this is provided by P2.

“Every day, from week 1, my teachers would record a 2 to 3-minute daily greeting and then an overview of the work to be done that day. There were a number of benefits from this—the teachers would physically and visually say, “don’t forget to check in to let me know you’re doing really well or if you need support”. For those children who

didn't check in, we had another teacher phone them. We also phoned our at-risk students every day. So, we smashed it, and we were very pleased with what we were doing."

Principals also took the lead to communicate with families from their school to disseminate information. Comments from P4 and P6 illustrate how important this was for families with P4 realising that:

"A lot of parents don't watch the news, don't read newspapers so they didn't really know what was happening. So, we relayed government updates as well as our own information."

P6 was constantly on the phone with parents, "touching base, making sure things were alright. This alleviated their concerns. Letting them know we were only a phone call away really helped". To ensure information reached parents with poor phone and Internet coverage, P3 took the initiative and arranged to leave messages on the noticeboard at the local community centre.

### **3. Parents' access to and attitudes towards technology**

When principals were asked about students' access to effective technology in their home environment, all reported that for a percentage of families, access was inadequate due to low device ownership, poor or no network coverage, or insufficient data. P4 outlined his approach:

"For families who couldn't afford to connect to the Internet, we helped them financially or provided dongles, otherwise their children couldn't access the Internet—couldn't access their curriculum."

Regarding the lack of devices at home, P3 responded to parents' concerns suggesting they timetable so their children could share the available device. He explained:

"Throughout the day teachers had scheduled a mix of offline and online activities. So, I would advise the parents who phoned, "You need to timetable your children —just like we do in a classroom of 30 where we only have 5 or 10 devices," and they understood. This worked well."

Nevertheless, despite all the challenges for his community, P3 reported that families worked hard to maintain their children's home-based learning.

"Even though there weren't enough devices, or there was no device, or the device was a mobile phone which was too hard for children to work with, or the Wi-Fi was really slow, or they didn't have the data – all those sorts of things and yet no one said, "Stick it – we're not doing it! This online learning is ridiculous." People are smart—they knew this wasn't a school issue, it was bigger than that. So parents were really supportive."

P6 found that only two families of the 10 students at his isolated school had Internet access. For P1 and P3 lack of Internet access combined with parental attitudes to technology determined the course of home-based learning. P1 explained, "Parents don't want me using computers in class with the

children, so I knew the children would never be allowed to use computers at home ... it just wasn't an option". In P3's case, some families had no Internet while some also had no connection to the electricity grid. Therefore, technology-based learning at home was not possible.

"On the very first day I sent home children's school computers. Turns out the majority of our families don't have Internet access—some of them don't even have electricity. So it was all fine and dandy that I sent the computers home, but they were really not much use. The children were happy to take them, don't get me wrong! But, there was no way it was going to work. The reality was we only had four students out of 22 who were using *Google Classroom*. We had parents coming in saying, "can we have books, can we come and get worksheets, can we come and get resources" ... It was ignorant of me to just send the computers home, and assume we'll go online. I'm very lucky that I had developed that relationship with parents and they were able to say, "Hey listen, we're a little annoyed you sent computers home—we don't want them, this is not how we want our kids to learn." So, I told them, "Right, we'll steer this ship in another direction."

For P4, in some cases, his teachers' limited experience with technology meant that they were initially resistant to engage with technology-based learning. P4 employed a trainer to upskill these teachers.

"Some staff, especially older staff members who were not really technology savvy were trying to avoid it at all cost – but they 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."

#### **4. In these disadvantaged schools, not all children were affected equally**

Four of the six principals (P1, P2, P4 and P6) noted that not all children were affected equally by the COVID disruption, and that the academic and social impacts were greater for children in Kindergarten (5 and 6-year-olds) and Year 6 (11 and 12-year-olds). P2's reflection illustrated this issue:

"I think our younger students were severely impacted—a massive impact and that lessened as the age groups went on. As well, socially the impact was wide-spread. There were anxieties about coming back to school. So, we brought in extra staff to work with Kindergarten to Year 4."

For P3, the principal of one of the two most isolated and disadvantaged schools in the study, the issues were even more extreme.

"We talk about self-isolation. Our children are out on rural properties and they're completely isolated—there's no one else to play with—there's nothing else to do. So, there's just themselves and their families. I get very overwhelmed thinking about how I am going to make up for those first disruptive months for our Kindergarten children—that introduction to school where you're setting up the norms and the processes and learning how to be at school."

All principals noted the great impact for Year 6 children. P5's comment is representative:

“Year 6 is an opportunity for students to take on a lot of leadership, attend courses and organise events. This is the year where they should be the leaders of the school but they haven't had any of those opportunities. Our major excursion was cancelled and the children were heart broken. Some went home in tears. Parents have expressed disappointment—they're not critical of the school—they're just disappointed that the children are missing out.”

Several principals (P1, P2 and P4) talked about the academic impact of disruption. For P1's small rural school where attendance had been poor already, expecting the parents to be responsible for assisting their children doing schoolwork at home was disastrous. P1 lamented “These children have really lost all these weeks at school, so we're madly assessing and trying to play catch-up. It just feels like the first day of the year again”. P2 commented on the “loss of traction” with learning.

### **5. Changes after returning to school**

When asked in what ways their school is different once school-based learning resumed, all principals commented that they are now in a ‘new normal’ with the introduction of government-mandated social distancing and hygiene regimes. A characteristic comment came from P2, “We don't shake hands! I think we're cleaner—all of us.”

All principals reported that their future teaching and learning practices would be different because of their experiences of delivering learning during the pandemic. For two of the most isolated and disadvantaged school communities (P1 and P3), the principals advised that online lesson delivery at school conflicted with parents' wishes for their children. P3 explained:

“Now that I appreciate parents' reluctance for their children to participate in online learning, we're certainly changing the amount of screen time children have in the school. We're now really focused on student wellbeing—this will continue moving forwards, especially allowing enough play time for our students' social and emotional development. So, they're probably our two biggest changes, less technology and more time for play.”

At P5's school, where 95% of children had engaged with online learning at home, parents expressed a similar view. P5 explained:

“Now that children are back at school, we don't use *Google Classroom* as some parents weren't happy with online learning. We're only using some computer-based programs as independent activities.”

In contrast to these smaller more isolated schools, the principals of the two larger schools (P2 and P4) reported benefits from the shift to online learning in terms of staff collaboration and rapid upskilling. P2 reported:

“COVID forced us to go online and we haven’t looked back. Another big thing is staff collaboratively planning and programming. They worked so hard. Now, if a teacher is away tomorrow, it’s just seamless. The substitute knows exactly where the students are up to, and that’s only evolved over the last 6-8 weeks—that’s where we wanted to be at the end of this year.”

Nevertheless, several principals (P1, P2 and P4) talked about the academic impact of disruption. P2 commented on the “loss of traction” with learning. For P1, whose students’ attendance had been poor already:

“Expecting parents to be responsible for assisting their children at home was disastrous. These children have really lost all this learning time, so we’re madly assessing and trying to play catch-up. It just feels like the first day of the year again.”

## Discussion

When principals were asked to reflect on the immediate actions they took due to COVID restrictions, it emerged that their main concern was trying to make sense of the ambiguous public messaging from the Australian and the New South Wales governments. This meant that neither principals or parents understood clearly whether children should attend school or stay at home, nor what the government meant when they advised that children of essential workers should attend school. This created confusion for both principals and parents who wanted to either self-isolate their children or who needed their children to be at school. Fortunately, the New South Wales Government’s *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy (2011) gave principals the authority to make the urgent and necessary decisions for their school because principals are “best placed” (p. 3) to know their school and community needs.

Principals reported that communication was central to their successful leadership and student learning throughout the pandemic. Clear communication between principals and their staff ensured effective and swift organisation of home learning; all six principals made this a primary focus. Communication between principals and parents also became crucial. Schools created regular—in some cases, daily—communication with parents through *Google Classroom*, the *Seesaw* app, phone calls, texts, *Zoom*, *Facebook*, and for communities with poor mobile network coverage, messages were posted on a community centre message board.

Technology-based learning from home was dependent on families’ access to and attitudes towards technology. Despite Australian governments’ efforts to roll out a National Broadband Network over more than a decade (Moorehead, 2019), it is clear that some remote and rural areas still cannot access reliable (or any) Internet connectivity. Therefore, the government’s assumption (New South Wales Government, 2020b) that a universal switch to online-based home learning would substitute for formal schooling was flawed, as it did not take into account an individual school’s geographical and social context. Rural disadvantaged areas had poor, if any, Internet access, while socioeconomic factors limited some families’ capacity to invest in computer technology. Furthermore, for rural communities in which a high proportion of families are living off-grid or have an in-principle objection to computer-based learning, technology was not adopted for learning from home. Even where access and attitudes were

largely favourable towards online learning, economic factors resulted in a significant gap in access due to limited devices at home. This is further evidence of the gap of disadvantage in rural New South Wales as outlined by Piccoli (2014). These access-to-technology issues align with Tawil's (2020) and the OECD's (Schleicher, 2020) findings that determined that access to technology is not available to all.

It is evident from this study that, despite the State-wide approach to schools adapting to the pandemic, not all children were affected equally by the learning-from-home disruption. Principals volunteered that it was the youngest and most senior students in their Primary school who were most impacted. Notably, Kindergarten children missed out on making important social connections with other children, learning school routines, and learning how school worked, in addition to the impact on their early academic learning. Year 6 children missed out on many of the all-important leadership opportunities and milestones that mark the conclusion of Primary school, specifically, the 'rite-of-passage' activities such as the excursion tradition where these rural and isolated students visit large cities with major attractions, which is perceived by children as a reward.

All principals acknowledged the changes which COVID precipitated for their teachers and talked positively about improved collaboration. Two principals mentioned improved staff technological skills, and enhanced online lesson programming for future use. Only one principal admitted that online learning had increased in his school once students returned. Conversely, three principals, acknowledging parental disdain for computer-based learning, made the conscious decision to design their teaching around face-to-face learning and structured play, while minimising or eliminating student use of technology. The two remaining principals returned to their pre-COVID predominately non-technology-based approach to teaching. That principals were able to make local decisions based on their particular contexts demonstrates the successful operation of the New South Wales' *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy (2011).

## Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of six principals from rural and disadvantaged Primary schools in northern New South Wales, Australia. These principals not only led their schools during the COVID-19 disruption, but negotiated the transition to home-based learning. While the study was unashamedly small-scale, importantly it engaged with and exposed the seldom-heard voices of principals from a specifically marginal and, in some instances, isolated demographic. From this study, five main conclusions can be drawn about the impact of the pandemic in rural and disadvantaged schools. First, the authority given to principals through the Government's *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy, enabled principals to make prompt local decisions for the particular needs of their school community. Second, the initial-ambiguous government messages at the beginning of the pandemic caused confusion for principals and their communities. Third, throughout the pandemic, communication was central for principals' successful leadership and for student participation in learning. Fourth, expectations that learning from home would be online for Primary (5 to 12-year-old) children during the pandemic did not take into account the disadvantage of families in rural and isolated communities who did not have reliable, if any, Internet or devices. Finally, online learning can exacerbate inequities and

present unforeseen challenges for rural and isolated schools. The findings of this study indicate that the expectation that learning from home during the pandemic would be online and technology/Internet-based was a far-from-universal approach used by these rural and educationally disadvantaged New South Wales schools. The main limitations of this study were its small sample size and the fact that the interviews took place in July 2020. Re-interviewing principals at the end of the school year in December would provide the opportunity to further explore the potential impacts of school disruption on these students.

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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"> <li>▪ Academically?</li> <li>▪ Socially</li> </ul>	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"> <li>○ attended school throughout the disruption?</li> <li>○ have returned now that restrictions have lifted?</li> </ul>	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 school restrictions?	Opinion
• Your reflections? Lessons for the future?	Opinion