EDITORIAL

Our education recovery beyond COVID-19: Challenges, reflection, and transcendence

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The 2019–2021 interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic to many aspects of life is sharper and more profound than any other in living memory and disproportionately affects education. The most immediate and noticeable impact was the disruption of traditional in-person learning. Schools, colleges, and universities worldwide closed temporarily to prevent the spread of the virus. This forced a rapid shift to remote or online learning, which posed significant challenges for students, teachers and parents. Among the numerous challenges the pandemic placed on the education sector, the digital divide and inequity, quality of remote learning, mental health and well-being, assessment and evaluation, and teacher preparedness and professional development stand out as some of the most significant.

CHALLENGES

The rapid shift to remote learning highlighted the digital divide, where many students lacked access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity for online education, exacerbating existing educational inequities and disadvantaging students from low-income households or rural areas who could not participate effectively in remote learning. The abrupt transition to online education led to concerns about the quality of remote learning experiences. Many teachers and students were not adequately prepared for online teaching and learning, which raised questions about the effectiveness of remote education compared to traditional in-person instruction. The pandemic's impact on the mental health and well-being of students, teachers and parents cannot be overstated. Isolation, anxiety and uncertainty took a toll on mental health, making it challenging for students to focus on learning and for educators to provide effective support. The pandemic disrupted standardised testing and assessment procedures. Traditional testing formats were often ill-suited for assessing student progress in remote learning environments, creating difficulties when measuring students' achievements and determining promotion or graduation criteria. Teachers faced significant challenges adapting their teaching methods to remote or hybrid models. Many educators lacked training and professional development opportunities in online pedagogy and digital tools. Supporting teachers in this transition became a critical concern.

While these challenges were particularly acute during the height of the pandemic, they have spurred innovation and prompted discussions about the future of education, including how to address educational inequities and integrate technology more effectively into teaching and learning. Indeed, COVID-19 leads us to reflect on ongoing trends and considerations in education, such as hybrid learning and technology integration, equity and access, social and emotional learning (SEL), appropriate assessment methods and teacher professional development.

REFLECTIONS

The pandemic accelerated technology integration into education, leading to the exploration of hybrid learning models that combine in-person and online elements. Addressing educational inequities and ensuring equitable access to quality education remained a critical focus, with efforts to bridge the digital divide and provide devices and internet access to all students. Schools and educators emphasised supporting students' social and emotional well-being, recognising the importance of managing stress and building resilience. Traditional assessment methods were under scrutiny, and there was a shift toward more flexible and student-centred assessment approaches to better align with remote and hybrid learning environments. The need for ongoing teacher training and professional development in technology integration and online pedagogy continued to be a priority to enhance educators' digital teaching skills.

These reflections capture some of the ongoing educational trends and considerations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, proper strategies represent a holistic approach to improving education in the post-COVID era. By embracing technology, ensuring equity, prioritising mental health, investing in educator development and adapting curriculum and assessment methods, the education sector can become more resilient and better equipped to handle future challenges.

TRANSCENDENCE

The strategy involves integrating technology into education to create adaptable learning environments. It means combining traditional in-person teaching with online learning tools and resources. By doing so, schools can ensure that learning can continue, even during disruptions like pandemics or weather-related closures. For example, schools might use online platforms for assignments, virtual discussions and accessing educational resources, thus allowing students to learn both in the classroom and remotely. Ensuring equity and access to education is critical. This strategy means that every student, regardless of their background, has access to the necessary technology and resources for learning, including providing laptops or tablets to students who may not have them, ensuring reliable internet access and offering support for families facing financial or logistical challenges. Reducing disparities in access to educational opportunities can help all students succeed.

The pandemic has significantly impacted students' and educators' mental health and well-being. The transcendence strategy involves recognising the importance of mental health support within the education system. Schools should provide access to counselling services, wellness programs and resources to help individuals cope with stress, anxiety and emotional challenges; it's about creating a supportive and understanding environment where students and educators can thrive.

Educators play a crucial role in students' success, and this strategy focuses on equipping them with the skills needed for effective teaching, especially in digital and remote learning environments. Professional development programs should provide training on digital teaching tools, online pedagogy and strategies for engaging students in virtual settings. Continuous learning and adaptation are key to ensuring educators can navigate changing educational landscapes effectively. Adapting the curriculum and assessment methods is essential for accommodating remote or hybrid learning environments. This strategy involves revisiting curriculum priorities to emphasise essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy and adaptability. Additionally, traditional assessment methods may need to be

rethought to align with these new contexts. This might include using formative assessment, project-based assessments and competency-based evaluation to ensure that students are assessed effectively in both in-person and online settings.

These strategies collectively represent a holistic approach to improving education in the post-COVID era. By embracing technology, ensuring equity, prioritizing mental health, investing in educator development, and adapting curriculum and assessment methods, the education sector can become more resilient and better equipped to handle future challenges.

SUMMARY OF THIS ISSUE

This issue comprises eight papers highlighting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, teacher education, international students and the implementation of Open Distance Learning (ODL).

Crawford (2023) presents a preliminary higher education pandemic response model by comparing responses to the current coronavirus pandemic to those of the Black Plague, Spanish Flu, SARS-CoV, Influenza A and MERS. The article is based on current and prospective literature and institutional reactions, providing a rigorous examination of existing research. Crawford proposes a four-stage pandemic response model: rapid adaption, improvement, consolidation and restoration. Crawford's findings show that some advanced universities and colleges will proceed through numerous stages simultaneously. The paper offers a theoretical framework for higher education during and after a pandemic and early evidence-based hypotheses for future empirical research.

Liang and Zhang (2023) describe how the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted teacher education. In Australia, the number of required placement days for 2020 final-year graduate teachers was reduced. Concurrently, the COVID-19 disruptions presented first-year teachers with significant obstacles. The study examined how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the transitional support requirements of three first-year teachers in Australian schools. The findings revealed a conflict between the unpredictability of classroom realities and the teacher students' lack of practical skills. The situated learning experiences were disrupted to differing degrees, impeding the development of close relationships and diminishing the likelihood of frequent interactions and fruitful dialogues with other community members. Teachers in their first year need assistance regulating student behaviour and differentiating instruction for students with special needs. The findings highlight the imperative need to implement a comprehensive school support structure to ease the transition of first-year instructors into the teaching profession.

Tuia and Cobb (2023) discusses how ODL has created new learning opportunities for teacher education students, particularly in small, geographically remote islands. In addition to expanding access to education, ODL is intended to foster independent and self-directed learning. Despite this highly individualised pedagogical orientation, little is known about how ODL is experienced in collectivist cultures, such as Samoa, where cultural practises are centred on a profound and interconnected relationality. The author addresses these concerns by employing the *fa'afaletui* research methodology to investigate the pedagogical experiences of sixteen Samoan teacher education students completing a two-year ODL-delivered teacher enhancement programme. Tuia and Cobb found that, in all phases of their ODL programme, the students placed a premium on interpersonal connections. Students maintained relational connections by arranging informal face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations with fellow students and instructors to enhance their learning. Despite ODL offering few relational and dialogic

opportunities, the study findings indicate that relational connections and dialogic interactions were crucial to teacher-student learning. In a time when the global pandemic has accelerated the need for ODL, the study's findings provide the international teacher education community with essential insights.

Rodriguez, Omidire and Anyosa (2023) investigated how teachers' perspectives on cultural and linguistic diversity and the function of language acquisition in diverse classrooms differ. Beliefs about cultural diversity influence language-learning strategies and how teachers in specific language-teaching classrooms view language as a tool for integrating instruction. The study's findings emphasise the difficulties schoolteachers encounter in diverse linguistic classrooms and demonstrate how multiculturalism can be used to improve such classrooms. The authors consider the crucial roles language and culture play in a global society in comprehending diversity and supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students in multilingual communities.

Zhang and Chan (2023) emphasise the significance of international students in fostering a multicultural learning environment in their host nations. The paper examines the contributions of international students to Australian independent schools and the support they receive from the perspective of schoolteachers. Through interviews with Australian teachers who instruct international students in a variety of subjects, the paper examines the significance of international students to the internationalisation of Australian schools, including the improvement of cultural awareness and competence, the introduction of culturally responsive teaching strategies and multiple learning styles, and the diversification of teaching materials and methods. The paper also identifies school-provided support programmes for international students, such as language support, academic support, cultural and social support and EAL teachers for international students. The authors argue that when Australian secondary school teachers practise international education, they should recognise and acknowledge international students' contributions to the school's internationalisation and support students by respecting their unique educational subjectivities.

Matlubah (2023) examines the instructional practices of two Australian Muslim homeschooling mothers. These mothers have homeschooled their children in the primary grades for at least one year. Matlubah's study seeks to comprehend the pedagogical practises of Muslim homeschooling parents to implement learner-centred teaching (LCT) to meet students' learning requirements. As its theoretical foundation, this study utilises Weimer's LCT. Data generation was founded on a case study methodology involving semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that the participants implement contrasting curricula using four learning models: individualised, collaborative, experiential and game-based. Both study participants supported children's learning requirements through their selected approaches, although their practices did not reflect all LCT principles. Other homeschooling parents may be able to learn from the homeschooling practices of these participants.

Atre (2023) investigated the relationships between parental motivations and the heritage language education attendance of children (4–12-year-old) heritage language learners. Atre's study aimed to gain insight into parental motivations for teaching their children a heritage language using instrumental and integrative motivation frameworks. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 15 Marathi and 15 Japanese parents found that both groups favour heritage language education for their young children. Artre's findings indicate that rather than instrumental motivation, Marathi and Japanese parents' strong integrative-affective motivations contribute to their children's heritage language schooling. This research suggests that parental motivation can be explained more effectively as a continuum between instrumental and

integrative-affective motivation instead of a binary state in which the two are mutually exclusive. The study highlights the significance of parental motivations in the case of young learners' access to heritage language institutions. It offers empirical evidence on the role of parents in heritage language education.

Finally, the senior editors expressed their appreciation for a group of OCIES researchers, including Philip Wing Keung Chan, Tim Baice, Sonia Fonua, Zane Diamond, Grace Ji, Ben Levy, and Shaoru Annie Zeng. Their prompt response to the unfortunate demise of their colleague, Associate Professor Tagataese Tupu Tuia, was acknowledged. They jointly published *Scholarly Responses to 'Students' experiences of Open Distance Learning: A Samoan case study'.*

Aue! Ua maliliu Toa, Ua talai ofa tau, Ua tagi ai nei le fatu ma le ele'ele. Ua vala'au le Atua ia Fuaialii Tagataese Tupu Tuia.

On behalf of the Oceania Comparative & International Education Society (OCIES), we express our heartfelt condolences and sympathy for the passing of one of our great Samoan leaders, Fuaialii Associate Professor Tagataese Tupu Tuia. Fuaialii has been a critical member of our OCIES family and served OCIES for many years, contributing significantly to the ongoing development of the society. A passionate advocate for education in Samoa and across the Pacific region, Fuaialii's integrity, commitment and impact will continue to live on. Fuaialii's drive and passion for improving education and supporting ECRs in the region, particularly Samoa, are well known, as is their much enjoyed direct and honest manner of getting things done, which we will all miss.

We express our sincere condolences to Fuaialii's family and our National University of Samoa colleagues.

Ia manuia lau malaga Fuaialii Associate Professor Tagataese Tupu Tuia ma ia maua sou nofoaga mau ile Lagi ma le tatou Matai Sili. O au galuega lelei uma e manatua pea i loto ma agaga. Ou uiga tausaafia ma agamalū ia avea lea ma faailoga ole filemu i totonu o le tatou sosaiete.

Alofaaga mai lou aiga OCIES.

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