

Looking forward, looking back...

By Martin Levins, June 2021

In 'Looking forward, looking back', the title song of his 100th album, Slim Dusty wrote:

*There are strange days
Full of change on the way
But we'll be fine, unlike some
I'll be leaning forward, to see what's coming.*

Even though the pandemic may not yet be over, and we may face additional lockdowns or deprivations, let's lean forward and ask what we can learn from our 2020 school experiences.

I'll start with a provocative statement: The photocopier is the natural enemy of learning.

When I think of a photocopier, I immediately think of a worksheet.

When I think of a worksheet, my mind's eye sees 'busy work', 'drill and kill' and other similar educational epithets.

They're a temptation for the tired and a perceived panacea for panic, but they often end up breeding boredom.

Aren't they a hangover from the age-old, teacher-focused classroom, bound by four walls, which hasn't really changed since the initial schooling systems were developed by the Prussian army in the late 18th century?

In many cases, bundles of worksheets were put out in sheer desperation by schools that had nothing else. This should now be changing, and not just for preparation for crisis. There's a real opportunity to examine the worth of what we have been doing since the Prussian initiative.

Many progressive educators have suggested that being at home, or at least away from school,

would light the fuse for a more widespread move away from this tired system.

This suggestion is based on data collected via observation and survey, and not just from the last year or so. The data comes from Australia, the USA, Canada, the UK, India and New Zealand.



Australia

John Hattie, Emeritus Laureate Professor and Chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Board, refers to his experience as an adviser to the Qualifications Authority that oversees senior high school examinations in New Zealand.

During the devastating earthquakes of 2011, Christchurch's school system was severely disrupted and there was 'a cry for special dispensations for high school examinations'.

Hattie argued the opposite, basing his judgement on 'strike research (research on the effect of teacher strikes on student performance)', which showed no effects at this

upper school level, with positive effects in some cases’.

“Sure enough, the performance of Christchurch students went up, and as schools resumed, the scores settled back down,” he says.

“Why? Because teachers tailored learning more to what students could NOT do, whereas often school is about what teachers think students need, even if students can already do the tasks.”

It sounds perfectly obvious, but peculiar that, in his summary, Hattie:

urges teachers and parents to not panic if students miss out on 10 weeks or so of face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also recommends no meaningless ‘busy work’ **over the period** (my emphasis – M.L.) and giving students sufficient opportunities to learn things they do not know.

Why “over the period” and not “from now on”? Are we to assign busy work from now on?

India

2013 TEDtalk winner, Sugata Mitra, Professor Emeritus at NIIT University, Rajasthan, India, describes how slum children, who see a hole in the wall around the university containing an internet connected computer, taught themselves how to use the device, despite not knowing the graphical and English ‘language’ of the machine.



Hole in the wall. Photo credit NIIT India

USA

Contrast this with the USA Brookings Institution that made predictions in May 2020 that students would face a ‘COVID slide’, particularly in mathematics. They based this on what happens when a student is absent from school for a long time, such as summer holidays.

However, this (as they admit) is a big assumption in that summer vacation has no tuition at all, other than summer school, and this usually does not feature mathematics.

Michael Takayoshi, the principal of Cascade High School, Washington state, comments:

... rethinking of their work really helped people think about lesson design or user experience... ‘What can I trim?’, ‘What’s not clear?’ Getting to the core of what you’re asking students to do, and removing the things that may be superfluous.

This raises a similar question, as that prompted by Hattie’s comments: Why isn’t this the case always?

Educational commentator Alfie Kohn comments that:

Warnings about academic loss are not just dubious; they’re dangerous. They create pressure on already-stressed-out parents to do more teaching at home – and, worse, to do more of the most traditional, least meaningful kind of teaching that’s geared toward memorizing facts and practicing lists of skills rather than exploring ideas. Parents may just assume this is what instruction is supposed to look like, partly because that’s how they were taught (and no one ever invited them to rethink this model). And if standardized tests rather than authentic kinds of assessment will eventually be used to evaluate their children, parents, like teachers, will be inclined to do what is really just test prep.

Canada

Research carried out by the Ontario Public Supervisory Officer’s Association largely agrees with Hattie’s assessment. They found that

school closures due to Hurricane Katrina showed that:

The effect on student achievement was not as great as many expected. Students were out of school between three and seven weeks and many had no schoolwork in this time: There was a drop of -0.17 from Katrina, but what is more surprising is how quickly the Parish evacuees recovered from the experience and actually began to see gains in test scores.

Like Hattie's take on teacher strikes, they compared to vacation effect sizes, which were quoted as being very low.

The effects from school holiday are very small on students, and there is little reason to believe that the length of the school year has much effect at all. Note that the so-called vacation effect (-.02), summer school length effect (.08), the summer school effect (.19), and the effect of modifying school calendars (.08) are low.

Here, the biggest effect was in mathematics

There is data on the effect of teacher strikes and lengthy shut outs – and again the message is that the effects are very low, especially for students below middle school, but they increase after middle school, especially in maths.

United Kingdom

Stephen Heppell, Director of the Felipe Segovia Chair of Learning Innovation at Universidad Camilo José Cela, Madrid, Chair in New Media Environments, [Centre for Excellence in Media Practice](#), Bournemouth University, and Emeritus Professor New Learning Environments, Anglia Ruskin University. (He has a very big business card.)

He asks, "What do science + common sense tell us?" and stresses the importance of communication with all members of the school community and the crucial role of their wellbeing:

There is no 'perfect way' to do any of this. Most decisions involve a degree of choice. Below are just suggestions, but well-considered.

Parents and teachers will want to know and see that:

- the children are safe;
- the teachers are safe;
- the cleaners and caretakers and other staff are safe too;
- new systems are in place;
- the school has considered the many details and complexities;
- the school is still improving its caution day by day;
- ...and that learning is happening!

Australia

Recently launched research, carried out by Pivot Professional Learning and the Coalition of Australian Principals, calls out important findings on the impact of COVID-19. A synthesis of data from 456 school leaders across the country who were surveyed about how their work changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, what they are planning for 2021, and what types of support would be most valuable found that:

1. Leaders of schools with an ICSEA score higher than 1000 were more than twice as likely to report a successful transition to remote learning than those leading schools with ICSEA less than 1000.
2. Leaders of lower ICSEA schools were significantly more likely to say that their school had insufficient technology access.
3. Leaders at higher ICSEA schools were twice as likely to report that students had learnt 91–100% of the curriculum.
4. Leaders at lower ICSEA schools were more likely to believe the pandemic had a negative impact on student learning.
5. Communication and crisis planning were rated the most useful pandemic leadership skills.

Note: ICSEA is an index of community socio-educational advantage that provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students; it has nothing to do with the staff, school facilities or teaching programs at the school.

The top 3 investment priorities for 2021 across all ICSEA levels and sectors were related to staffing. The largest proportion of principals (75.6%) rated investment in teachers as the highest priority, followed by social workers and school psychologists (72.3%).

Hardly surprising was the finding that principals of lower ICSEA schools were 3 times more likely than others to nominate technology investment as a priority. This showcases the poor standard of technology in these schools and how difficult it was for them to respond to the COVID crisis with the technological solutions that were adopted by many other schools.

What can we make of all this?

My takeaway is to ask whether we measure what we value, or value what we measure?

Most of the commentary above regarding negative effects on learning concentrates on senior, final year students who are facing high stakes standardised testing.

This is a very small proportion of our national student body.

Discussion between Digital Technologies in focus curriculum officers showed that clear, concise and consistent messaging with the school community and consideration of wellbeing are the most important responses to the COVID crisis.

The best technology in the world is fairly useless unless this is considered.

Schools have often been compared to the huge cargo ships that traverse our oceans in that they take a long time to change course, but I personally take great comfort in the way that schools responded in the main with agility and

with compassion before worrying about worksheets or stressing over the curriculum.

These successful schools adopted technology after considering the human element, which made their technological interventions much more effective.

References

- [Education expert John Hattie weighs in on the impacts of distance learning](#)
- [Sugata Mitra's Hole in the Wall TedTalk](#)
- The Brookings Institution: [The impact of COVID-19 on student achievement and what it may mean for educators](#)
- Education Week: [Lessons from the pandemic that can improve leading and teaching](#)
- [Ontario Public Supervisory Officers' Association \(OPSOA\)](#)
- [Alfie Kohn](#)
- [Stephen Heppell](#)
- Principal Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19: [Pathways Toward Equity in Australian Schools](#)