

CLASSROOM TEACHING**Learning Loss and its implications post-COVID-19**

The learning loss that accrued during the pandemic lock downs has yet to be fully investigated in Australia, but research in Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, the USA and Germany has indicated that the learning loss might tally up to be greater than the amount of time spent learning remotely. There is a concern that the rate of learning loss worsened over the school year. This was detectable in mathematical literacy and in native language literacy and affected all learners-regardless of age, gender, and achievement level.

[PROFESSOR KLAUS ZIERER AND JOHN YOUNG](#) JUL 16, 2021



Educators did their best during the pandemic but learning loss was significant.

Nationwide lockdowns across Australia due to the COVID-19 pandemic have focused attention on the effect of school closures on student performance. To date, there is a paucity of meaningful research about the learning consequences of frequent COVID-19 lockdowns. There is considerable international research data available indicating that learning loss will create long term problems, but we have no clear data about how much learning loss has occurred in our schools in WA.

A rapid review conducted by Professor Klaus Zierer (published Education Sciences May 22/2021) as a multi-country analysis of learning loss as a result of COVID-19 included a meta-analysis of 4,500,000 learners. Learners were from Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, the USA and Germany. Comparison was based on the development of mathematical and native language competence. The comparison included primary and secondary learners. The method used calculated the effect of the initial eight-week school lockdown. The means were learning tests conducted between March and May 2020 and by comparing annual learning tests with previous years. The review showed that school lockdowns and a move to distance learning had a negative effect on learning outcomes.

Results that were averaged then extrapolated to one school year indicated up to six-months' loss of learning. Loss was greater than the duration of the lockdown, because learners have not only forgotten knowledge, but also their learning attitudes have changed in social isolation. Also, a lack of effective and targeted pedagogy was a concern and the rate of learning loss worsened over the school year. This was detectable in mathematical literacy and in native language literacy and affected all learners-regardless of age, gender, and achievement level.

It is probable that this situation is the same in Western Australia.

A significant concern is that the negative impact of lockdown on learning outcomes was far greater in lower socio-economic (SEI) settings, with the impact doubling in low SEI contexts. COVID-19 has been a significant negative influence on educational equality.

At a national level, educational economists predict long-term earnings loss by students experiencing interruption to learning. There is a consensus that each additional year of successful schooling increases income by 7.5–10 per cent and it is thought that the impact of COVID-19 will result in a potential fall in GDP for the rest of the century. Not to be forgotten is the connection between a country's level of education and its capacity for democracy.

Prevention is better than intervention

Many learners have displayed a deterioration in learning behaviour as a result of lockdown. There has been a similar decline in motivation to learn. Long-term these factors are likely to be more serious than a decline in learning performance, as these factors form the foundation for learning performance. These areas of decline should motivate schools to re-conceptualise the traditional grammar of schooling and make schools more effective, more diverse, more equitable and, inexorably more humane. There has been a justifiable emphasis on learning achievement, but education encompasses more. Mental and psychosomatic disorders are on the rise among children and adolescents. Physical condition has deteriorated due to an increase in screen time and a lack of activity.

There may be a view that it is not so bad if elementary school students are behind as they still have enough time to catch up, but research shows it is better for learning success to avoid gaps from the outset and that prevention is better than intervention.

What can we do to ameliorate the damage caused by lockdown interruptions to learning?

We could consider structural measures, which may include an extension of the school year or a simple repeat year. State-wide comparison tests could help to determine the gaps in learning. But we should be careful and take the fundamental message of educational research in account: Whatever we choose, a focus on the individual as learner should lie at the core of our thinking. Schools must focus on teacher-student relationships in a supportive school environment. Schools have to become the most inviting place in town, to re-engage students.

It is clear that social-emotional supports will be increasingly significant for the improvement of students' well-being and connection. In the words of Emeritus Professor John Hattie:

"Creating a sense of belonging, a respect for every individual, a level of trust, in a place where we understand each other, where we are ready to learn from and with others."

It is becoming evident that long-term social cohesion is fractured by existing gaps in educational achievement. Also evident is that school closures have had a disproportionate negative impact on learners from low SEI backgrounds and there is a compelling argument to mitigate risk of further slippage for these students.

We find ourselves in a situation with a generation of children whose education has been frequently disrupted. What will we do to redress this situation? Is it possible to do anything within the rigid age-based system of progression in our schools? Where do we look for answers? What research will guide us? Are other systems doing something successful, or are we all adrift? It is high time to initiate a broad exchange about education and the future of our education system.

Klaus Zierer

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Reference

Klaus Zierer, Effects of Pandemic-Related School Closures on Pupils' Performance and Learning in Selected Countries: A Rapid Review, *Educ. Sci.* 2021, 11, 252. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11060252>

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