

*Responses to educating students at risk during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

*Special Issue Editorial for Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*

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Since the beginning of 2020, the world slowly began to grind to a halt in the grip of the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. At the time of writing this editorial, UNICEF estimated that approximately 188 countries have imposed schools closures, affecting more than 1.6 billion students in terms of access to education. Since the start of the pandemic, schools have opened and closed and again and again as countries, and indeed regions, battled to control the spread of the virus and its variants. These rolling closures are unprecedented and are bound to impact students, particularly those at risk, in terms of academic achievement and general social and emotional wellbeing. Indeed, the effect of COVID-19 is felt by the entire school community including but not limited to families, school leadership, teachers, and other educational staff.

Projections of the impact in terms of academic achievement have been made based on existing literature on planned closures, absenteeism, or other unplanned closures like pandemics or weather-related events (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). These estimates provide good, but not perfect, estimations of potential learning loss (Harmey & Moss, 2020). Indeed, Kuhfeld et al. estimated that students in the United States could be expected to start the new academic year in fall 2020 with 63 – 68% of the learning gains in reading compared to a typical school year. In a follow up to this study, Johnson, Kuhfeld, & Tarawasa (2021) found that the observed data demonstrated that students actually made an average of 86 – 107% of the prior learning in reading. In the United Kingdom, preliminary reports have suggested that the disadvantaged gap is large with significant differences between schools (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Given that the world remains, to varying degrees, in the eye of the storm these projections are preliminary estimates of the short-term effects. It might be safer to conclude, therefore, that we know some students will be affected more than others, particularly those traditionally at risk.

In addition to causing significant disruption to learning, the school closures due to COVID-19 have disrupted students' day-to-day lives with potential impacts on wellbeing. Preliminary evidence in England is that there are increased levels of disrupted sleep and loneliness among students and that students in poverty are more likely to have less access to reliable internet and experience food poverty which adds to student stress (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021). In a rapid systematic review, Loades et al. (2020) concluded that because of the enforced isolation experienced during lockdowns students and adolescence are 'more likely to experience high rates of depression and anxiety' (p. 1218).

With the knowledge that some students will be placed at risk more than others, the educational community responded immediately to the needs of students. The articles in this special issue of JESPAR explores issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, considers how different members of the educational community have responded to school closures. This articles were chosen as they move beyond trying to estimate the effects of school closures, and instead collectively examine responsiveness to the pandemic. Taken together they examine responsiveness at different levels: the response of school leaders (Grooms and Childs, 2021), those delivering interventions (Beach, Washburn, Gesel, & Williams, 2021; Tambyraja, Farquharson, & Coleman, 2021), and how students themselves have responded (Toste et al., 2021) and their perception of schools' responses.

It is well known that students with students with speech and language difficulties are at risk of long-term delays, not only in terms of speech and language but also in terms of academic achievement overall. In *Speech-Language teletherapy services for school-aged students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A nationwide survey*, Tambyraja and colleagues present findings from a survey of 1,109 speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in the United States to examine how SLPs provided continuity in terms of clinical services by providing speech-language therapy online (teletherapy) and addressed the challenges of providing

teletherapy. They found that despite poor attendance and SLPs own personal circumstances working from home, many students continued to receive services. They found that a key issue in the adaptation and delivery of a different model of speech-language therapy was the anxiety and stress felt by SLPs themselves as they experienced the effects of the pandemic. It is imperative, therefore, that in efforts to continue to provide support to students, that employers acknowledge the systemic effects of the pandemic on their employees. Their findings provide useful consideration of the types of technology and common challenges that facilitated ongoing speech-language teletherapy to students which may inform future models of distance support for students.

In *'Pivoting an Elementary Summer Reading Intervention to a Virtual Context in Response to COVID-19: An Examination of Program Transformation and Outcomes'*

Kristen Beach and colleagues examined whether a summer reading intervention could be successfully implemented as measured by attendance, implementation fidelity, and change in student reading performance. Perspectives of key stakeholders were also considered. They presenting a compelling discussion of the pivot to online learning and key considerations in adapting a model of intervention while maintaining fidelity. Children in this small-scale study maintained oral reading fluency and accuracy and improved on curriculum-based mastery tests. Caregivers also responded favourably to the intervention.

Grooms and Childs in *"We Need to Do Better by Kids": Changing Routines in U.S. Schools in Response to COVID-19 School Closures'* addressed the leadership challenges of K-12 principals working in schools serving high numbers of students from racially and socioeconomically minoritized backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that principals faced a complex task – negotiating and manoeuvring through a range of ever changing policies while simultaneously creating organisational routines and adaptations which suited the needs of their students. Their research highlighted that local knowledge and

flexibility was key in knowing about students unique situations. Their findings echo research from other unplanned events like the Christchurch earthquakes where researchers found that there was a need for the development of contingency planning and ability to make decisions at a local level to develop locally appropriate responses to school closures (cf. Mutch, 2015)

In *'Eye-opening and chaotic: Resilience and self-determination of secondary students with disabilities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic'* Jessica Toste and colleagues used a mixed-methods design to analyse data from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with 21 students with disabilities. These students were placed at further risk, both in terms of academic achievement and wellbeing, due to the potentially disadvantaged circumstances of moving to online education. Toste and colleagues examined how these students responded to these circumstances and how they navigated learning online, particularly general education. In particular, they examined the role of resilience and self-determination in navigating their learning and considered how student strengths could be leveraged to navigate such difficult circumstances.

Taken together these four articles have provided an initial examination of responses at various levels to provide continuity of education during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which may inform other interventions and approaches to recovery in different educational systems. It is certain, that there will be detrimental effects in terms of academic achievement and student wellbeing. The research presented here, however, also provide preliminary evidence about unanticipated positive effects. Interventions pivoted to online modes of delivery with positive effects in terms of academic achievement (Beach et al., 2021), and for some students (see Toste et al. 2021) these modes of learning provided enhanced accessibility. School leaders navigated difficult circumstances and, in some instances, the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic created space to remove bureaucratic obstacles and create new, more inclusive routines that involved families to a greater degree as

the lines between home and school blurred. As we move towards, hopefully, a decrease in interruptions to learning due to increased vaccinations against COVID-19 across the world, perhaps we might conclude is that the education system as a whole can be flexible and responsive and in doing so can reduce the risk of sustained absence on the academic achievement and wellbeing of students at risk.

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