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Seven great ways to connect with students during snap lockdowns

By Angela Page, Jennifer Charteris, Joanna Anderson and Chris Boyle

This research might be about students with added learning needs but could easily apply to all students.

The snap school lockdowns required to combat the Delta variant of Covid-19 disproportionately affect different cohorts of students and teachers.

When the first school lockdowns were implemented in NSW in 2020, a group of researchers undertook a study to explore teachers' perspectives of the impact of the COVID-19 distance learning requirements on the education of students with additional educational needs. We asked teachers about: the issues they experienced in the education of children with a disability during COVID 19; how they viewed their students' connections with their peers; and any changes they made to the ways they teach because their students missed school.

We now know that learning preferences, the strength of existing social networks, and access to digital technologies and WIFI can impact students' ability to successfully navigate distance learning. Teachers may grapple with modes of delivery, pedagogical structures, and the need to establish effective systems of communication ([Hood, 2020](#)).

School connectedness and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic may have served to exacerbate existing stressors faced by students with additional educational needs, those **students with learning, physical or sensory needs that make it harder to learn than most children of the same age**. Challenges at home for these students can include anxiety around sudden confinement, increased tension about the unpredictability of the future, and increased strain which some parents may experience to manage these students' educational and social needs ([Fontanesi et al. 2020](#)).

School connectedness can be defined as incorporating a relationship with supportive adults, a sense of belonging, positive peer relationships, engagement with learning, and experiencing a safe and encouraging online climate ([Cumming, Marsh, & Higgins 2017](#); [García-Moya et al. 2019](#); [Pate et al. 2017](#)).

School connectedness can be seen as comprising four components: school bonding, school attachment, school engagement, and school climate. These components can be linked to the findings from the small qualitative study, which indicated four themes' teachers found challenging when teaching students at home during COVID-19. These were access to materials, capacity and willingness to use technology, motivation and changes in routines, and risk of further isolation. This relationship is represented in Figure 1.

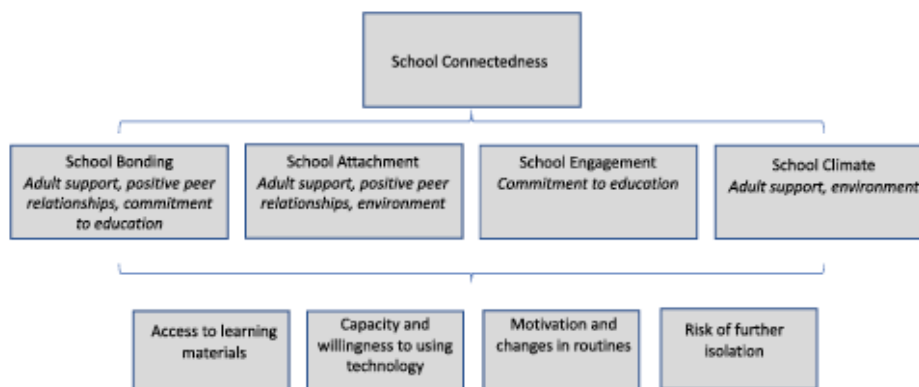


Figure 1. *School connectedness paradigm and the relation to the four components of school connectedness during COVID19 for students with additional learning needs*

Access to learning materials

Teachers commented that access was an issue for student learning when the schools shifted to an online model.

In addition to the principal delivering laptops to students who could not get to school to access them, the teachers went over and above what was required, visiting a home to provide technical support.

One family said, "we do not know how to use the internet thing". So I had to drive out to their house. It was little bit stressful. They brought the computer out to the veranda so I set it up for them and that was great because I knew they had an internet connection.

Capacity and willingness to use technology

Distance education can be challenging for students with additional educational needs as they are disconnected from their school-based learning. For some students this was problematic as they either refused to participate in online learning or were precluded from access to technology due to their homelife. These students who are already at a disadvantage were seen to be

at risk of slipping even further behind.

It is really concerning that kids could fall behind. We will find out the full brunt of it for the kids who did not engage online at all when they are back. They are already behind the 8 ball. I think we will see a bigger divide. We tried, despite our best efforts we had kids who did not engage at all. . . . I reckon it would be 20% – definitely. They just did nothing – just played. The parents said that they just would not do it . . . I think we will see kids have gone backwards.

Motivation and changes in routines

Students who did not engage with learning in the classroom were also challenging to motivate when undertaking distance education.

The same students found learning at home challenging . . . They are very traumatised people here and those kids we are finding hard to engage are the ones with undiagnosed mental health and medical conditions. They are the same kids who are difficult to engage at home. We praise any effort – even logging on. I had in my google classroom question of the day. ‘What is the most awesome thing about not going to school today – just anything to get them to answer – cos then I made that connection and then try and lead them into a bit of work. It was the same kids. It was not a magic wand. It did not fix anybody. We gave it a go.

There can be difficulties connecting with school and learning when routines are changed. One of the teachers stated a concern in how students responded to the change in the learning context.

Some of my kids could not separate school and home and so I got them to put on their school uniform as if they were going to school still. Then they would take it off at the end of the day and school was finished.

Risks of further isolation and falling behind

Students who are disconnected from peers can become more socially isolated. In the scramble to keep up with the educational needs of students, we can easily overlook that students experience loneliness, worry and sadness (Brodeur et al. 2020). The isolation experienced, as a result of lockdowns, can increase depression and anxiety (Guessoum et al., 2020).

Teachers expressed concern around the issue of social isolation for their students. Some of this concern was related to the erosion of the connectedness created by changes in routines that meant the students were less likely to want to be engaged in learning.

If you take Mandy, she can't cope very well with any changes at school you know? And she doesn't have a lot of kids that I would [say she could] socialise with at school, and so at home, I reckon it would be worse because when she gets stressed, she withdraws into her shell.

Despite the challenges, teachers overall held positive perceptions about how they supported students with additional educational needs at home. There was evidence of strong school leadership that was both supportive of staff and overtly visible for students and parents (e.g. regular Facebook postings). The teachers reported being committed to helping students who were at risk during this time.

Suggestions for connecting students with additional learning needs during snap lockdowns from our research: here are our top seven ways to stay connected with not only students with additional needs but ALL students.

1. Plan for and support peer connectedness. This may involve arranging informal fun activities to foster social relationships and pairing students strategically with a buddy.
2. Have a range of options for learning. There can be a challenge with access to online learning tools and materials, in particular for students with disabilities. Access to physical resources can be especially important for students with additional educational needs.
3. Strive to ensure that school routines are sustained at home (e.g. consistent timetables and the wearing of school uniform).
4. Keep in contact with parents where students are reluctant to communicate via online media. Strive to ensure that communication is consistent and frequent. Effective communication between school and home is a critical element in a successful response to remote schooling. Be mindful that in some circumstances overly frequent communication may overwhelm both students and their families.
5. Attempt alternative means to directly communicate with each student that might be specific to their needs (e.g. telephone calls).
6. Strive to maintain relationships for the well-being of students and teachers. This connection can address mental health.
7. There may be additional provision of specialist services warranted. This support may occur through supplementary planning meetings with parents

and key service providers. Consider alternative mechanisms to ensure connection and collaboration with specialists. Students who are isolated at home are at risk of not being offered specialist services because of the separation between school and home.



Clockwise from top left: **Dr Angela Page** has worked as an educational psychologist in Australia and New Zealand. She currently lectures in Special and Inclusive Education at the University of Newcastle in NSW. **Associate Professor Jennifer Charteris** is an experienced researcher and teacher educator, with a background in providing professional learning for principals, middle leaders, and teachers in leadership, assessment, and culturally responsive practice. She has schooling experience in Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. **Dr Joanna Anderson** is an experienced teacher, school leader and academic. She is interested in inclusive practice and leadership and works to improve the educational experiences of students with disabilities. **Dr Chris Boyle** is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is an Associate Professor in Inclusive Education and Psychology at the University of Exeter.

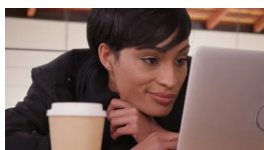
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