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# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON REFUGEE-BACKGROUND STUDENTS DURING SCHOOL SHUT DOWN IN AUSTRALIA: A CALL FOR ACTION

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## Abstract

*The majority of schools across Australia rapidly implemented online education during the first wave of COVID-19 restrictions. The school closure disproportionately affected the routines and socialisation of vulnerable students, including those with a refugee background. Refugee-background students have been impacted by COVID-19 as school closures interrupted face-to-face education, including English language and tutorial support and counselling services. School shutdown also impeded refugee-background students' activities outside the home, which could render adverse effects on their physical, mental and social wellbeing. Holistic efforts are urgently needed in Australia to support refugee-background students in order to prevent further learning loss and promote health and wellbeing.*

## Keywords

COVID-19; refugee-background students; education loss; physical; mental and social wellbeing; Australia.

## Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has infected 145 million people and caused more than three million deaths worldwide (Worldometer, 2021). The latest figures in Australia show that 29,626 people have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and 910 deaths are linked to the virus (Australian Government, 2021). In a bid to contain the spread of infection, the majority of schools across Australia rapidly implemented distance education during the first wave of COVID-19 restrictions from mid-March to early June 2020. A recent Australian study conducted by Brown et al. (2020) estimated that nearly half (46%) of the students experienced adverse effects with respect to their education and wellbeing outcomes during this time because of being abruptly physically disconnected from school. The school closure disproportionately affected vulnerable students due to disruptions to routine and socialisation due to their social disadvantage and specific learning needs (Coatsworth, 2020). The term *vulnerable* refers to the individuals and groups in society who experience health and educational disadvantage as a consequence of their social, cultural and economic conditions (Drane et al., 2020). Refugee-background students were disproportionately impacted due to their reliance on additional services provided by schools, including English language and tutorial support and counselling service.

## Impact on education

While a provision of services varies among states and territories in Australia, prior to COVID-19, targeted education support was available for refugee-background students. The intention of this support is to improve English language proficiency, educational achievement, school engagement and wellbeing outcomes. Students in Tasmania, for example, received support in the English language with homework and tutorial work support (Tasmanian Government, 2020). Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, including refugees, already perform less well according to results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing of 15-year-old

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students, when compared to their peers in Australia (Thomson et al., 2019). Research suggests that lower proficiency in the English language, lack of support structures at home, poor living conditions and potentially acculturative stress in the host society contribute to lower achievement among CALD students (Clark et al., 2020; Endale et al., 2020). Therefore, the removal of services and supports that address these identified impacts (such as language support) is likely to exacerbate CALD students' ability to engage effectively with schoolwork.

There was a reduction in service provision, such as access to digital devices and the internet, which might have impacted students' education, resulting in significant learning loss (Brown et al., 2020). The magnitude of learning loss among refugee-background students could be higher than their non-migrant counterparts because they lost tutorial support to assist with language during the learning-from-home period. A recent Australian study suggested that students from a CALD background, including refugees, experienced significant learning loss, and their parents were unable to offer much support for learning at home (Brown et al., 2020). Factors such as access to technology, capacity to use technology, conducive learning environments and academic supervision from their social networks could play a role in effective learning at home.

Much of the education in Australia during school closure transitioned into different forms of flexible learning arrangements, including online learning, distance learning or a blended model of learning (Ng & Renshaw, 2020). Online learning was often conducted using synchronous sessions, which occurs in real-time by using a video conferencing platform such as Blackboard Collaborate (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Online synchronous learning requires virtual in-person interaction between teacher and students. Distance learning utilises asynchronous learning, which allows students access to learning materials, to practise their skills and to communicate with teachers and peers at any time that works for them (Bettinger et al., 2017; Croxton, 2014). However, access to both synchronous and asynchronous learning for refugee-background students during school closures posed a further challenge due to the inaccessibility of digital devices and the internet. Internet access is generally high in Australia, with around 95 per cent of families having access to the internet at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). However, there remains significant variability in the distribution and the effective use of technology in disadvantaged families (Lamb et al., 2020). Refugee-background students are less likely to have access to high-quality remote learning due to their financial precarity, impacting families' capacity to access high-speed internet in the home (Mupenzi et al., 2020).

In addition, successful online home learning depends, in part, on the specific attitudes and skills of learners (Hart et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2001). For example, students who are inclined to procrastinate or are not skilled in self-regulated learning may become disengaged in the absence of direct guidance from their teachers (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013). On the other hand, positive attitudes and behavioural intentions with respect to engaging in learning are beneficial for students' self-directed learning during home learning periods (Lee et al., 2001). To best use online learning materials, students need basic literacy skills, digital literacy, motivation and the ability to work independently in an online environment (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017; Kerr et al., 2006). For many refugee-background students, these characteristics may not be strongly present. They often lack basic literacy skills due to their disrupted schooling or complete absence (Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Without basic literacy, digital literacy and the capacity to work independently are unlikely to be part of a students' repertoire.

Quiet learning spaces are often crucial for effective learning (Beckers et al., 2016). However, a recent Australian study reported that the unavailability of dedicated learning space at home hindered Australia-born students' learning while studying from home amid COVID-19 restrictions (Muir et al., 2020). There is strong evidence that refugee-background students struggle to establish a conducive learning environment with minimal distractions as they are often living in multigenerational homes, bustling with people and activity, making the acquisition of quiet space in the home difficult (Clark et al., 2020).

The school closure has, at least partly, transferred teaching responsibilities to families, an action that seems likely to magnify the effect of family educational background on students' learning (Lamb et al.,

2020). In many cases, there remained limited online lessons during school closure (Wilson & Mude, 2020). Refugee-background students, particularly high school students, require high levels of educational support such as homework and tutorial support, and English as an Additional Language (EAL) teaching support to acquire literacy and the English language to fully comprehend the curriculum (RoadstoRefuge, 2020). Not only do they have difficulty with comprehending the tasks due to English language levels, but family members are also often in the same position. While traditional approaches to language teaching are often productive and effective, they are not always adequate for refugee-background students because of the significant disruptions to schooling or lack of schooling background of this cohort (Woods, 2009). Schools need to play a central role in providing quality learning experiences for refugee-background students to consider their literacy level. Due to the compounding nature of the problem, refugee-background students are likely at more risk of not attaining educational grade-level standards, which may further exacerbate their disengagement from academic activities.

### **Impact on physical, mental and social wellbeing**

COVID-19 related circumstances have potentially pushed many families into poverty. The economic distress may have been higher in refugee-background students' families because of job loss and related difficulties sustaining basic needs, such as food security and rental payment. These stressors, in turn, may increase psychological strain on both children and caregivers (Bhatia et al., 2020).

Schools should provide a safe space for vulnerable young people, including refugee-background students. While regular opportunities for outdoor activities are paramount, school shutdown during COVID-19 has impeded students' activities outside the home. As a result, socialising opportunities and mental wellbeing of students could have been considerably compromised. Potential factors that increase the risk of impairment of physical and mental wellbeing in students from a refugee background include boredom and frustration, fear of infection, domestic violence and having language and health care access barriers (Clarke et al., 2021; Rees & Fisher, 2020; Sapkota et al., 2020).

School closures have upended life for students due to restrictions on their outdoor activities. School routines likely engage students in academic activities because they maximise students' time on task (Fredricks, 2011). When schools were closed, students were disconnected from their routine activities, and they often spent their entire time at home during stay-at-home directives due to COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown (Hand et al., 2020). While staying at home during a pandemic was a measure to mitigate disease outbreak, it could affect students' physical and mental wellbeing. There is an increased likelihood of becoming frustrated and short-tempered due to their daily routine being disrupted (Galea et al., 2020).

While a common policy response to help contain the virus was physical distancing and the requirement to stay at home, it often created uncertainty regarding becoming infected in refugee-background students due to the gap in information available to them. Fear during the pandemic was likely one of the most significant underlying elements for refugee-background students. Missing out on accurate public health information, due to language barriers or being cut off from communication networks, was likely greater in those from a refugee background (You et al., 2020), and may have fed this fear. Social media may also be partly responsible for the spread of rumours in the refugee community. Refugees are likely to live in a close-knit community and to rely on information available within their community (Sapkota et al., 2020). The content shared in social media from community members, who are not experts in the field, may lead to confusion and harmful behavioural practices.

During the lockdown, women and children have been at increased risk of domestic violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2020). The lockdown has led to an increase in conditions associated with a high risk for severe violence, including isolation, stress, job insecurity and risky levels of alcohol consumption, particularly amongst those with dependent children (Keck, 2020). Co-habiting with an abuser during lockdown also means the perpetrator has greater freedom to act violently without coming to the attention of others and also may restrict avenues for victims to seek help (Keck, 2020; Neil, 2020). A recent report of The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) highlighted that there had been a rise in

domestic violence in Australia during the COVID-19 lockdown. One in ten Australian women experienced at least one form of domestic violence, including emotional abuse, coercive control, harassing or controlling behaviour (Boxall et al., 2020). The situation is potentially higher in women and children of refugee and migrant communities due to the inaccessibility of culturally responsive services (Sapkota et al., 2020; Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Outdoor activities are paramount for the physical and mental wellbeing of refugee-background students. Outdoor activities were abandoned due to the physical distancing measures put in place. Students were advised to remain in their homes and not have any face-to-face contact with other people. Unfortunately, the impact of these necessary lockdown measures, such as isolation, stress, disruption of routine and social support structures, combined with isolated learning at home, may have adverse effects on the physical and mental health of the students. Physical and mental wellbeing could be further worsened due to a lengthy stay at home and the likelihood of consuming unhealthy foods. Restrictions on outdoor activities during the COVID-19 period have further provided a favourable environment for students to engage in digital devices. Weight gain due to a sedentary lifestyle in refugee-background students is predictive of poor physical and mental health outcomes (Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

### What next?

The loss of learning among refugee-background students may also extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to the gaps in learning and probable adverse effects on their physical and mental wellbeing. Although the Australian government, together with the school community and social organisations, is working hard to prioritise support for refugee-background students, holistic efforts are needed to support refugee-background students to prevent further learning loss and reductions in wellbeing. As COVID-19 infection is flattening in Australia, many schools were resumed from late Term 3, with some exceptions. There is an urgent need to support refugee-background students to compensate for this learning loss and enhance their wellbeing. While many refugee-background students may continue to receive English language, tutorial and counselling support when schools resume, the school system needs to extend these services and must also think creatively about how to encourage them in learning and wellbeing so that they can cope with the losses incurred during COVID-19. While there are data available on the effects of COVID-19 on the general student population in Australia, there is a paucity of evidence regarding refugee-background students. More information is required on home learning experiences of refugee-background students amid COVID-19 lockdown, which may provide evidence on effects on educational and health outcomes of this already vulnerable student population. Schools can then tailor additional support to prevent further learning loss and deterioration of their wellbeing. Hence, this is an urgent call to take action to prevent learning loss and the wellbeing of refugee-background students.

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