The impact of COVID-19 on perceptions of Australian Schooling

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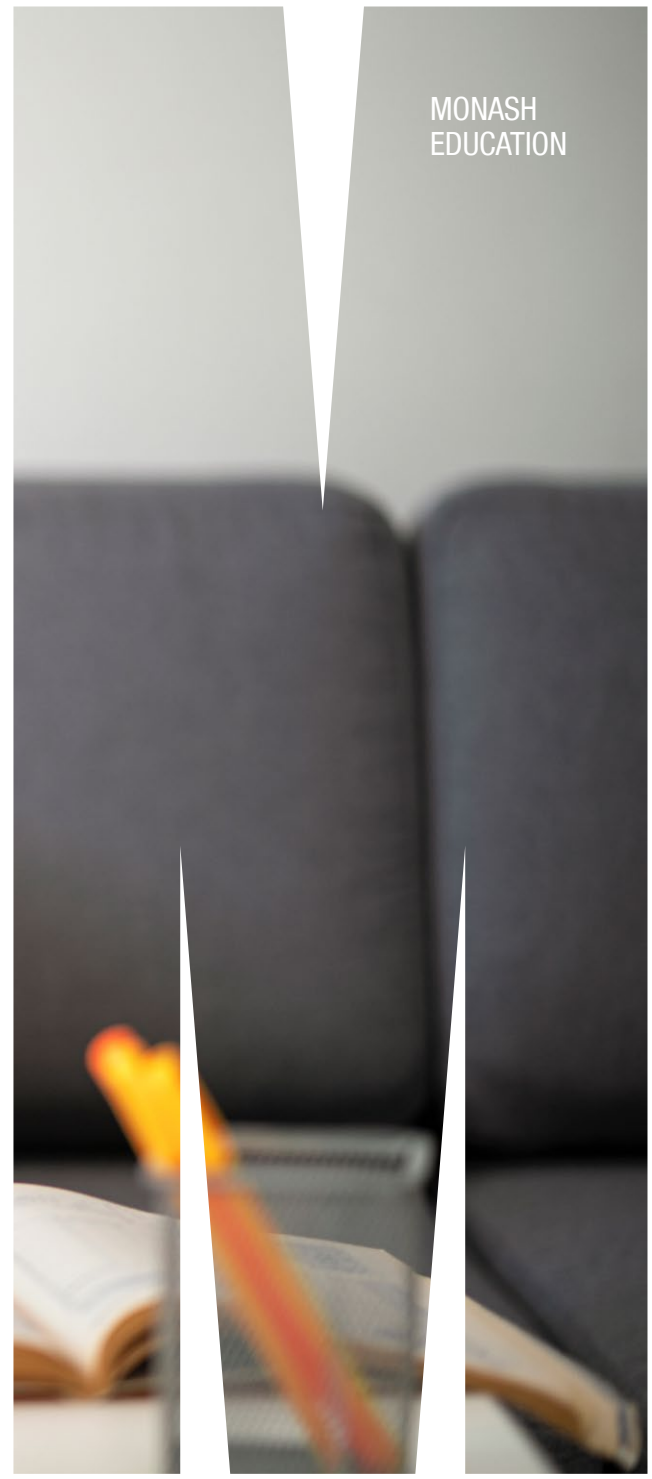
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The Impact of COVID-19 on Perceptions of Australian Schooling

Amanda Heffernan, Bertalan Magyar,
David Bright, and Fiona Longmuir

Introduction

Schooling in Australia has changed significantly in the past year. Lockdowns around the country saw schools shifting to online and remote learning - sometimes with only a few hours' notice. Australia's educators worked tirelessly to ensure students were supported and able to continue to learn while at home.

While many changes were enacted swiftly, it is inevitable that some of these shifts in schooling might remain in a post-pandemic world.

In 2019 we wanted to better understand perceptions of teachers and teaching in Australia. We surveyed 2,444 Australian educators and a nationally-representative sample of the public[1], finding a clear disconnect between how the public perceived teachers' work and how teachers felt they were perceived by the public. While teachers felt underappreciated and overworked, with 71% of teachers responding that the profession is unappreciated, public perceptions of teaching suggested that 82% of people felt the teaching profession was respected, and 93% of the public felt that the teaching profession was trusted.
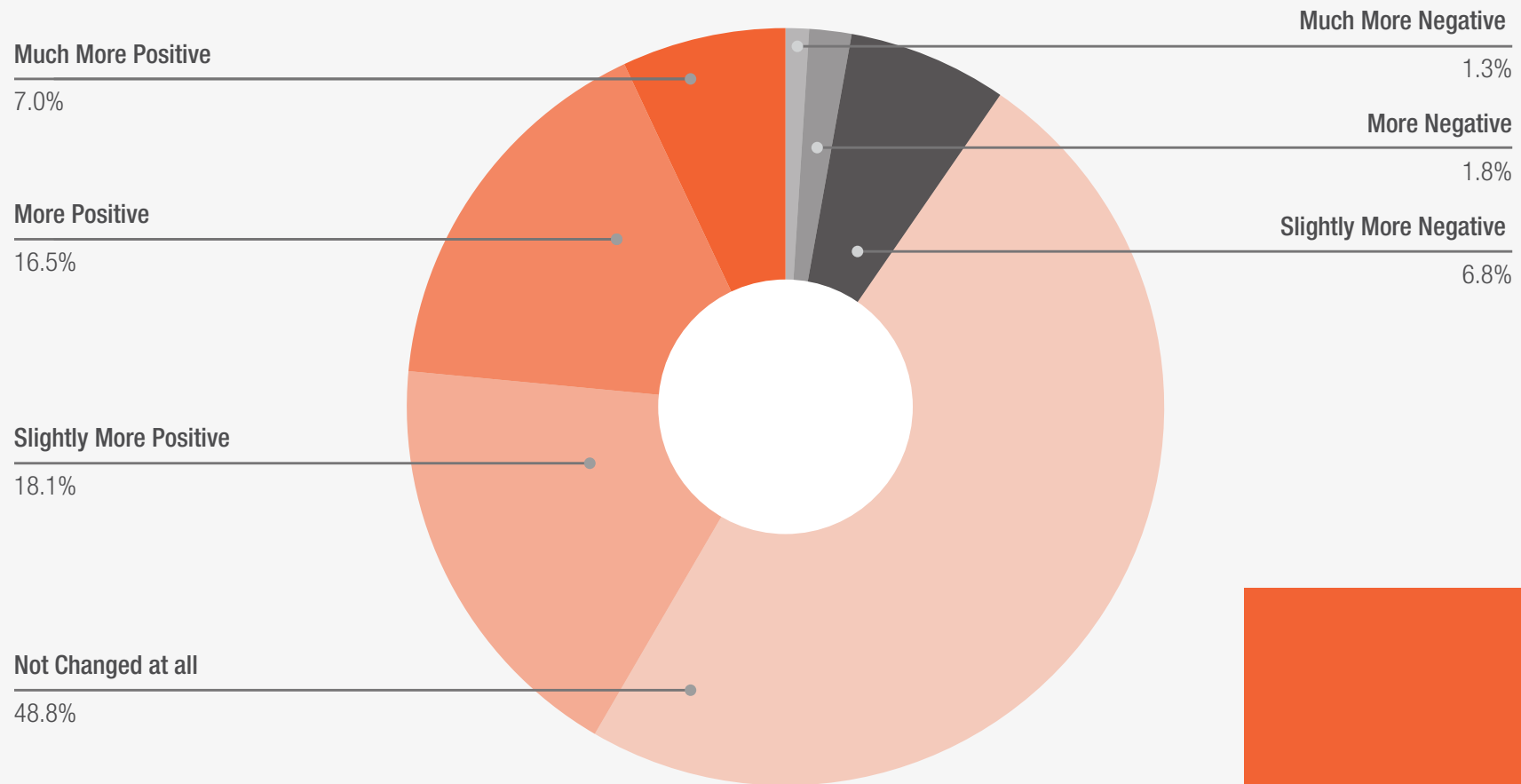
We suspected that COVID-19 would have an impact on these issues. The importance of school was at the forefront of much debate and discussion during 2020, with school closures and lockdowns forcing issues of schooling directly into the living rooms of many Australian families. We have seen patterns of lockdown, extended holidays, and remote schooling continue into 2021, ensuring this research remains as relevant and timely as it was when we conducted it in December 2020.

Please cite as:
Heffernan, A., Magyar, B., Bright, D., & Longmuir, F. (2021). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Perceptions of Australian Schooling: Research Brief.* Monash University.

1. Heffernan, A., Longmuir, F., Bright, D., & Kim, M. (2019). Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia. Retrieved from https://www.monash.edu/thank-your-teacher/docs/Perceptions-of-Teachers-and-Teaching-in-Australia-report-Nov-2019.pdf

PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS' WORK AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

Much More Positive
7.0%

More Positive
16.5%

Slightly More Positive
18.1%

Not Changed at all
48.8%

Much More Negative
1.3%

More Negative
1.8%

Slightly More Negative
6.8%

41.6% of respondents said that their perceptions of teachers' work had improved as a direct result of COVID-19.

Finding 1

Many people's perceptions of teachers' work improved as a result of COVID-19

Our previous research about the Australian public's perceptions of teaching showed a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of low public respect and trust of teachers, compared with the high levels of trust and respect reported by the public[2]. With COVID-19 lockdowns and remote learning 'opening-up' the classroom to many families and making teachers' work more visible to many parents, we wanted to see if these perceptions changed.

Rhetoric about schooling during COVID-19 was mixed. Many parents and carers were introduced to the complexities of teaching while also balancing their own work and other commitments. The increased knowledge and experience of seeing teachers at work resulted in social media and mainstream media campaigns celebrating the work of teachers. A contrast was noted between these positive representations of teachers and those of the pre-COVID-19 era in the media.[3]

It is important to acknowledge this increase in positive perceptions of teachers' work, given mounting evidence that the COVID-19 crisis has significantly increased the levels of stress and burnout among teachers around the world.[4] Teachers have reported working untenable hours to ensure students maintain access to learning remotely, and in many countries have put their own health and safety at risk by being required to continue teaching in classrooms that are not COVID-safe.[5] The increase in positive public perceptions of teachers' work reflects an awareness of how teachers responded to the challenges faced during the crisis. Importantly, our findings showed a correlation between respondents who had a school-aged child at home and more positive perceptions of teachers' work during COVID-19. This suggests that people who experienced remote learning first-hand were more likely to have a more positive perception of teachers' work as a result.
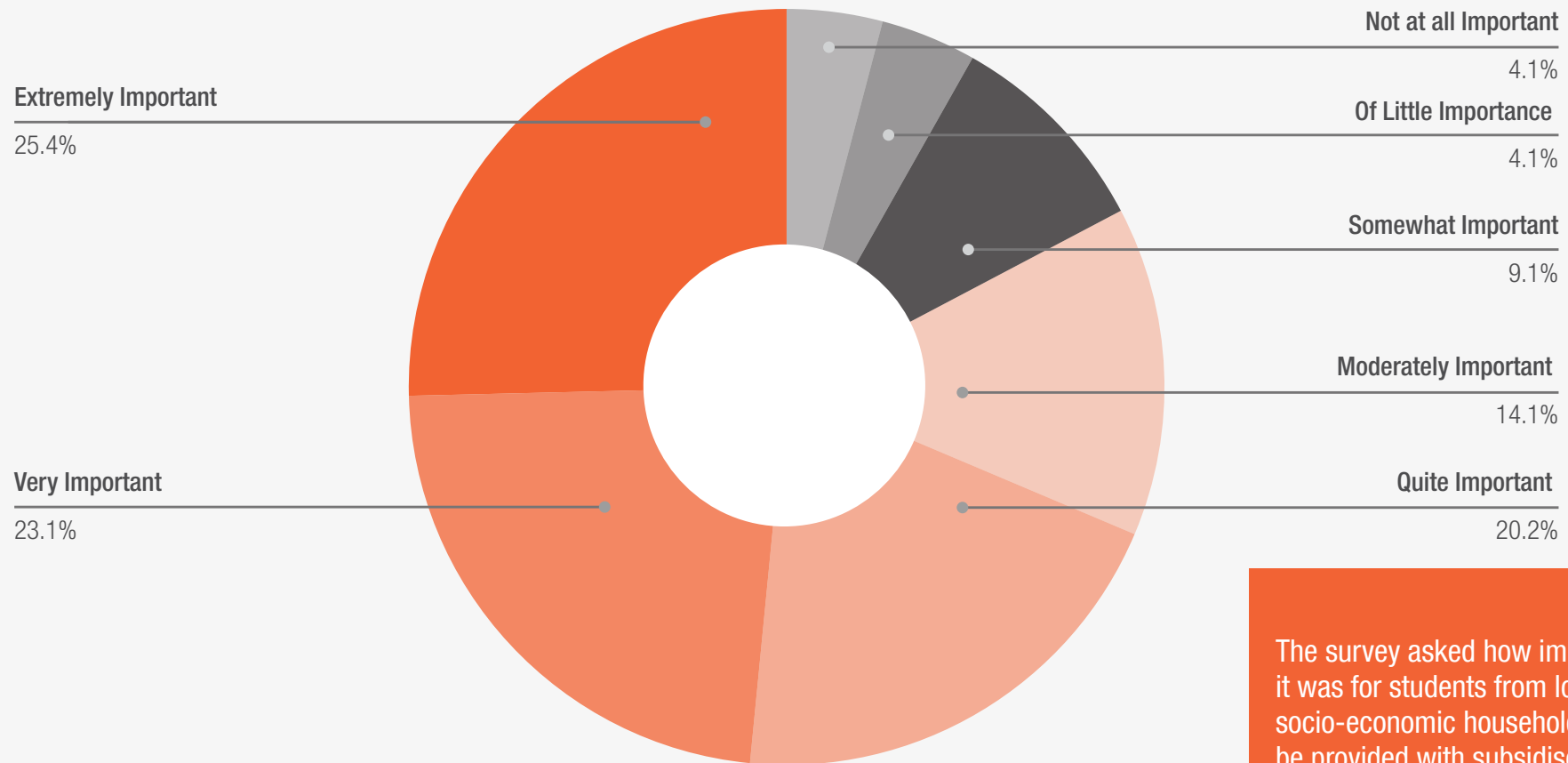
2 Heffernan, A., Longmuir, F., Bright, D., & Kim, M. (2019). *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia.* Retrieved from https://www.monash.edu/thank-your-teacher/docs/Perceptions-of-Teachers-and-Teaching-in-Australia-report-Nov-2019.pdf

3. Kenway, J., & Epstein, D. (2021). The Covid-19 conjuncture: rearticulating the school/home/work nexus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* doi:10.1080/09620214.2021.1888145

4. Darling-Hammond, L. & Hyler, M. E. (2020). Preparing educators for the time of COVID … and beyond, European Journal of Teacher Education, 43(4), 457-465, DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2020.1816961

5. For detailed discussion about concerns for the health and safety of teachers and students during the pandemic, see Kenway & Epstein, (2021).

IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY FOR REMOTE LEARNING

Not at all Important
4.1%

Of Little Importance
4.1%

Somewhat Important
9.1%

Moderately Important
14.1%

Quite Important
20.2%

Extremely Important
25.4%

Very Important
23.1%

The survey asked how important it was for students from low socio-economic households to be provided with subsidised or free access to laptops and other devices necessary to complete their schoolwork at home. A substantial majority (91.9%) of people responded that it was important with 68.7% indicating it was "quite", "very" or "extremely" important.

Finding 2

There is widespread recognition of the importance of ensuring all students have equitable access to technology that supports their learning
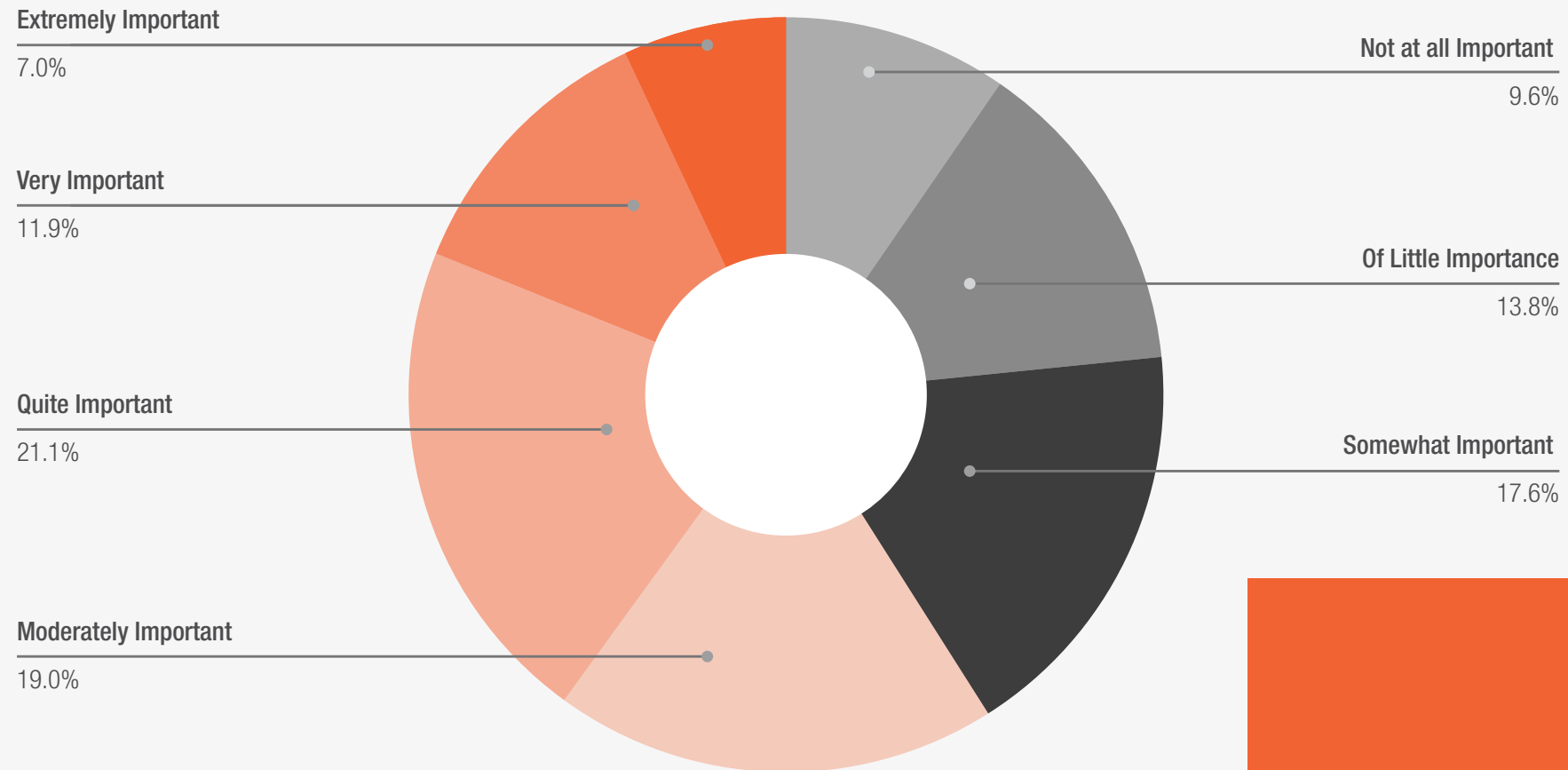
The shift to remote learning highlighted issues of equity and access for students in different school contexts. For example, the divide between access to the internet at home for students was put into stark relief when students were expected to learn from home: less than 40% of Australian households in disadvantaged areas are connected to the internet, but over 90% of advantaged houses are connected.[6] Schools reported delivering laptops and devices to students who did not have access.[7]

Experts highlighted the efforts of governments who subsidised internet and laptop / device costs for students who lacked access.[8] However, the 'digital divide' includes not only a gap between levels of physical access to the technology required to learn, but also refers to the skills, knowledge, and confidence required to effectively navigate technology.[9] Providing students with access to devices and internet connectivity, as well as the knowledge and support required to effectively use technology, can go some way to mitigating the digital divide into a future where rapid shifts to remote learning remain a very real possibility.[10]

6. Drane, C.F., Vernon, L. & O'Shea, S. (2020). Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID-19: A scoping review. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00409-5

7. Page, A., Charteris, J., Anderson, J., & Boyle, C. (2021). Fostering school connectedness online for students with diverse learning needs: inclusive education in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, doi:10.1080/08856257.2021.1872842

8. Selwyn, N. (2020). Digital education in the aftermath of COVID-19: Critical concerns & hopes. *Techlash*, 1, 6-10.

9. Willems, J. (2019). Digital equity: Considering the needs of staff as a social justice issue. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), 150-160.

10. Selwyn, N. (2020). *Schools reopening, but it makes sense to plan for more remote learning*. Retrieved from https://lens.monash.edu/@education/2020/05/22/1380501/back-to-school-for-now-we-should-plan-for-more-remote-learning

CREATING A FLEXIBLE 'HYBRID' MODEL OF SCHOOLING INTO THE FUTURE

Extremely Important
7.0%

Very Important
11.9%

Quite Important
21.1%

Moderately Important
19.0%

Not at all Important
9.6%

Of Little Importance
13.8%

Somewhat Important
17.6%

76.6% of participants were in support of rethinking the way we 'do' schooling into the future by creating a more flexible model where students attend school but have the option to take some classes online.

Finding 3

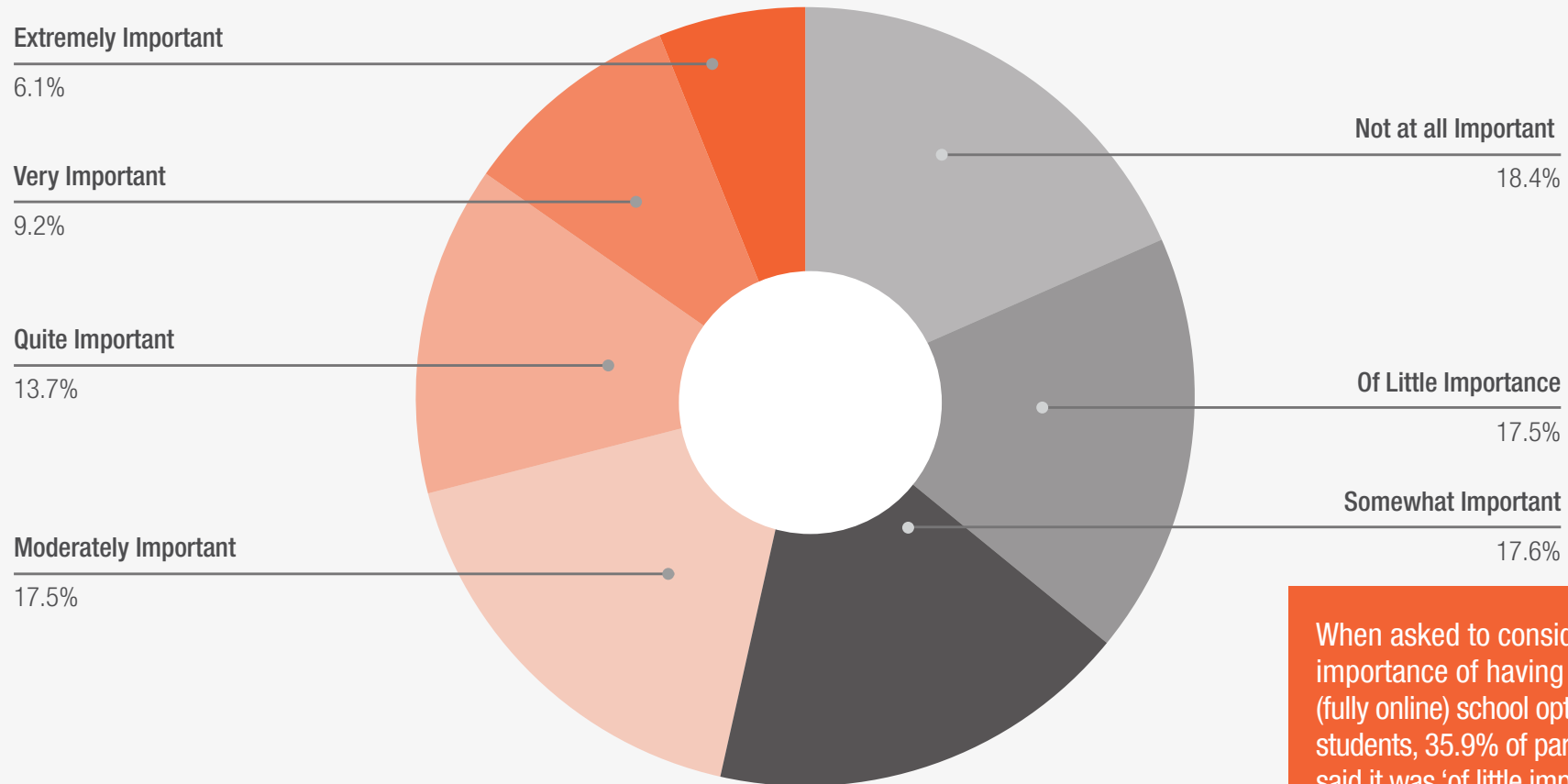## There is perceived merit in a hybrid or more flexible approach to schooling

The COVID-19 pandemic opened up new modes of learning for schools around the world. Early in the pandemic, suggestions were already being made that hybrid or blended learning would continue to be a feature of Australian schooling post-pandemic.[11] Parents reported benefits from the shift to remote learning in Australia and the USA including more family time, more flexibility in children's schedules, better parental understanding of their children's learning, a reduction in anxiety and stress, and an increase in children's confidence in learning.[12] Other research found that relationships between schools and parents/carers had improved as a result of remote learning, along with increases in teacher collaboration and collegiality.[13] Remote learning could potentially open up new avenues for specialist study for students in the future, given the difficulties faced by many hard-to-staff schools in securing expert teachers in some learning areas.[14] However, our respondents were cautious to note that while flexible or online learning would not work for all students, flexibility to meet individual needs and circumstances would be a positive approach.

We note that if schooling was to be reimagined into a more flexible mode, teachers' work would also need to be reimagined so that teacher workloads - already at critical levels[15] - would not be increased, and so that educators could benefit from flexibility in working modes as well. Our previous research showed that teachers were seriously concerned about their ability to balance their lives and their work, a finding supported by other research.[16] Providing teachers with more flexible ways of working could have positive implications for teacher attraction and retention.

"Some students are independent workers and some are not. All forms of education should be available to suit all students."

- Participant comment

"If students can demonstrate they perform as well (if not better) via virtual classes than in the classroom, then this may be a very positive alternative."

- Participant comment

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11. Cowden, G., Mitchell. P., & Taylor-Guy, P. (2020). Remote learning. Rapid Literature Review. Association of Independent Schools NSW & Australian Council for Educational Research. https://doi.org/10.37517/978-1-74286-610-9

12. Roy, A., Breaux, R., Sciberras, E., Patel, P., Ferrara, E., Shroff, D., … Becker, S. P. (2021, February 8). Key Strategies, Challenges, and Benefits of Remote Learning Expressed by Parents During the COVID-19 Pandemic. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/5ca4v

13. Ziebell, N., Acquaro, D., Pearn, C., & Tiong Seah, W. (2020). *Australian Education Survey: Examining the Impact of COVID-19: Report Summary.* Retrieved from: https://education.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3413996/Australian-Education-Survey.pdf

14. Timms, M. J., Moyle, K., Weldon, P. R., & Mitchell, P. (2018). *Challenges in STEM learning in Australian schools: Literature and policy review.* Retrieved from https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=policy_analysis_misc

15. See the Gallop Inquiry Report for detail of rising workloads and subsequent implications for teachers' work https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/gallop_inquiry_report_2021.pdf

16. Borman, G. D., & Dowling, N. M. (2008). Teacher Attrition and Retention: A Meta-Analytic and Narrative Review of the Research. Review of Educational Research, 78(3), 367–409. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308321455

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING VIRTUAL (FULLY ONLINE) SCHOOL OPTIONS

Extremely Important
6.1%

Very Important
9.2%

Quite Important
13.7%

Moderately Important
17.5%

Not at all Important
18.4%

Of Little Importance
17.5%

Somewhat Important
17.6%

When asked to consider the importance of having virtual (fully online) school options for students, 35.9% of participants said it was 'of little importance' or 'not at all important'. The majority of remaining responses were more cautious, with 35.1% of respondents seeing it as 'somewhat' or 'moderately' important. The remaining 29% of respondents were more supportive of the importance of the idea.

Finding 4

Participants are more cautious about the idea of fully virtual schools in post-COVID-19 times

One-third of our respondents did not support virtual (fully-online) school options for students in a post-pandemic Australia. The remaining participants felt less strongly positive about the suggestion, with only 15.3% of respondents seeing this as an 'extremely' or 'very' important option.

Some participants recognised that virtual schooling would be appropriate for some students, but that it likely would not meet the needs of other students. Participants raised concerns around a perceived lack of attention paid to the experiences and needs of students with disabilities during the pandemic and in discussions about rethinking education post-pandemic. Research has explored the impact of remote schooling for Australian students with diverse learning needs, praising teachers for forging through difficult circumstances to meet their students' learning needs while emphasising the need to focus on connectedness and belonging in the event of future shifts to remote learning.[17]

It may be that participants were influenced by frequent political and media discourse about the importance of keeping schools open for economic reasons.[18] However, participant comments largely focused on the importance of maintaining a sense of belonging and connection for students, and the importance of traditional face-to-face modes of schooling for students' social and emotional development. This echoes research during the pandemic which focused on the need for students to maintain a sense of belonging and connection to their peers, teachers, and schools.[19] Advice from education systems and international organisations such as UNESCO also emphasised the importance of caring for students' social and emotional wellbeing before attending to academic issues, highlighting the important role played by schools in students' emotional wellbeing and development.[20]

Concerns raised by respondents about the importance of students learning without technology reflect notions of returning 'back to basics' and commentary about banning mobile devices and technology in schools. Other participants simply could not see a justification for changing schooling practices so fundamentally 'if they are working'.

> "COVID highlighted for me how much kids love the interaction with their friends and teachers."
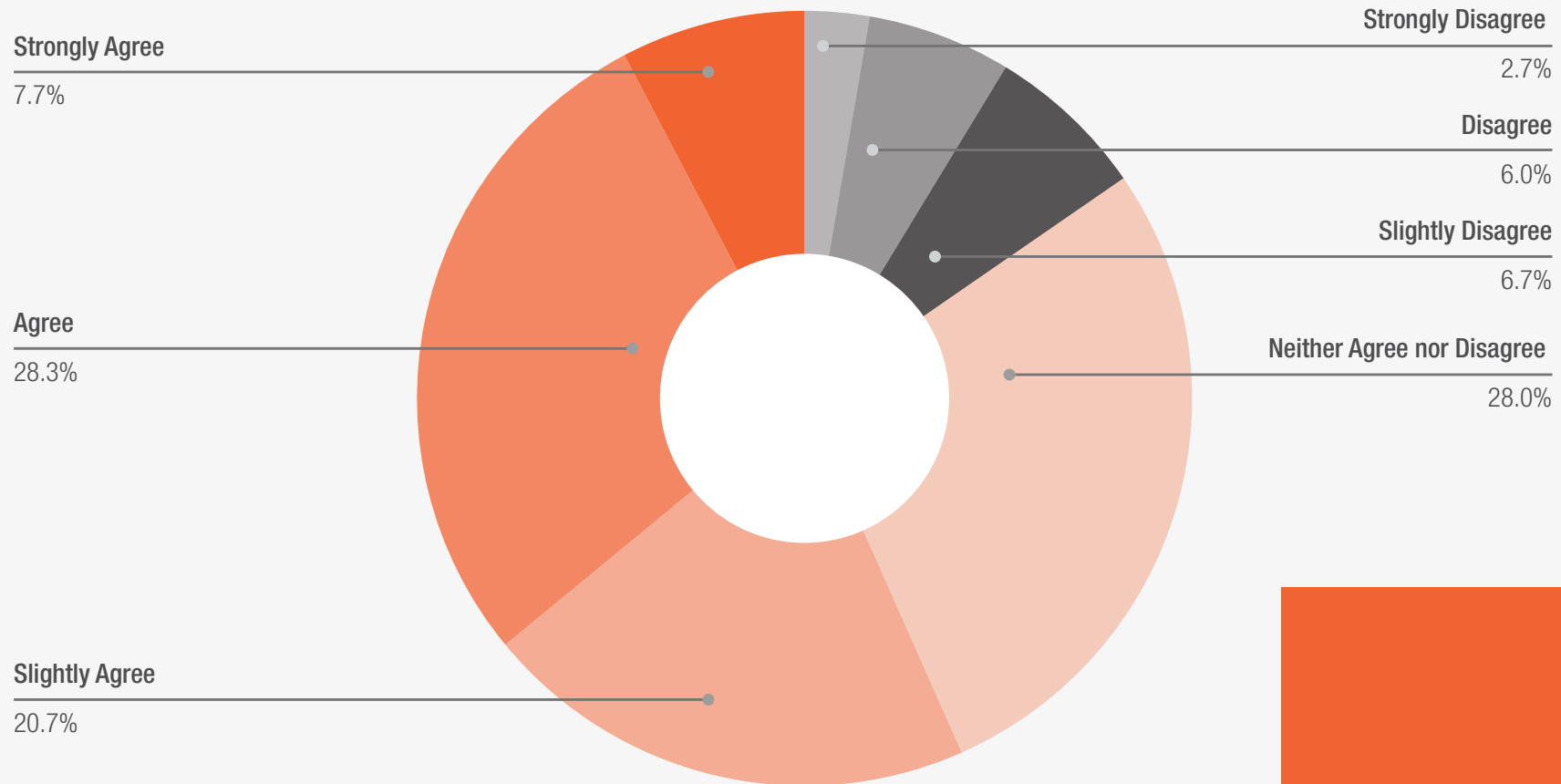>
> **- Participant comment**

17. Page, A., Charteris, J., Anderson, J., & Boyle, C. (2021). Fostering school connectedness online for students with diverse learning needs: inclusive education in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, *European Journal of Special Needs Education,* 36(1), 142-156.
18. Kenway, J., & Epstein, D. (2021). The Covid-19 conjuncture: rearticulating the school/home/work nexus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* doi:10.1080/09620214.2021.1888145
19. Longmuir, F., Allen, K., & Grové, C. (2020). Begin with belonging: Why schools in Victoria need to focus on connection and wellbeing for term four. Retrieved from https://lens.monash.edu/2020/10/05/1381438/begin-with-belonging-why-schools-in-victoria-need-to-focus-on-connection-and-wellbeing-for-term-four
20. For example, see UNESCO's advice for distance learning during the pandemic: https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-10-recommendations-plan-distance-learning-solutions

SHIFTING TO REMOTE SCHOOLING DURING COVID-19 WAS SUCCESSFUL IN AUSTRALIA

Strongly Agree
7.7%

Agree
28.3%

Slightly Agree
20.7%

Strongly Disagree
2.7%

Disagree
6.0%

Slightly Disagree
6.7%

Neither Agree nor Disagree
28.0%

56.7% of respondents agreed that the shift to remote schooling during COVID was successful. 36% of those participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement.

Finding 5

Shifting to remote schooling during COVID-19 was successful in Australia

Our survey findings suggest that the Australian public largely perceived the shift to remote schooling during COVID-19 as successful.

Researchers studying social media sentiment over a period of three weeks in April 2020 found that during the early weeks of the pandemic, comments were largely positive and included humour, appreciation for the time spent with children, and appreciation for teachers. By the end of the three-week period, there were more negative tweets than positive ones, but tweets about teacher appreciation had notably increased as time went on.[21] There was widespread recognition of the challenging work teachers were undertaking to ensure students were supported and remained engaged in their learning,[22] reflecting the public perceptions of the success of remote learning found in our survey.

The shift to remote learning was not without its challenges. Research and media reporting have both shown that there were significant challenges in relation to maintaining a sense of connection for students, both with each other and with their schools and teachers. Parents also reported struggling with remote learning and, for many, difficulties in finding a balance between supporting their children alongside their own remote working commitments.[23] The country's various lockdowns - and the pandemic itself - had a significant and lasting impact on morale, health, and wellbeing for many Australians, and the looming threat in 2021 of continued lockdowns contributes further to negative perceptions and experiences. These challenges could contribute to perceptions that remote learning was not successful (15.4%) or the percentage of participants who remained neutral in response to this question (28%).

"There was widespread recognition of the challenging work teachers were undertaking to ensure students were supported and remained engaged in their learning."

21. Ewing, L. A., & Vu, H. Q. (2021). Navigating 'Home Schooling' during COVID-19: Australian public response on Twitter. *Media International Australia, 178*(1), 77-86.

22. Kenway, J., & Epstein, D. (2021). The Covid-19 conjuncture: rearticulating the school/home/work nexus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* doi:10.1080/09620214.2021.1888145

23. Ewing, L. A., & Vu, H. Q. (2021). Navigating 'Home Schooling' during COVID-19: Australian public response on Twitter. *Media International Australia, 178*(1), 77-86; Kenway, J., & Epstein, D. (2021). The Covid-19 conjuncture: rearticulating the school/home/work nexus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, doi:10.1080/09620214.2021.1888145

Methodology

An online survey was conducted between 2nd-7th December 2020 with a nationally-representative sample of the Australian public. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1012 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Australian adults (aged 18+).

Acknowledgements