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“Making the Unusual Usual:” Students’ Perspectives and Experiences of Learning at Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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“Making the Unusual Usual:”
Students’ Perspectives and Experiences of Learning at Home during
the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This child-parent research is a student-**led inquiry into three adolescent girls’ experiences of learning** during the age of COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandate. In this collaborative autoethnography, a research team of five (three adolescent researchers—two of whom are sisters—and their respective mothers) met via videoconference to engage in five rounds of inductive and deductive data collection and analyses. **Findings capture the three adolescents’ experiences of new teaching methods in new learning spaces: (1) the physical space of “Doing School at Home-How it Feels;” (2) the negotiations undertaken by the girls called “Improvisation and a School Mindset;” and (3) the need to respond to one constant: “Everything is Always Changing.” A fourth theme, called “Being at Home Gives Me...” was created to capture the human experience of doing school at home—and the new spaces that opened up.** Recommendations to help make school work in the home space are provided.

Introduction

Amplifying students’ voices in curricula, classroom activities, assessments and research has been a cornerstone of the middle school movement, and ensuring that student-centered **middle grades classrooms honor students’ choices and build on students’ experiences** has long been a part of the ethos of the middle school philosophy (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Thus, when thinking about what happens to students’ **learning during the “shelter-in-place” orders** from state officials, we wonder: What do students understand about learning as they are thrust into new, and for many unfamiliar, online learning spaces where their school companions might suddenly include parents, siblings, relatives, and pets? What happens to students’ voices when they can be amplified or shuttered by one stroke of a computer key? How do these new experiences feel to the learner, and what are the students learning? While we understand that **the teacher’s role in this new world order of learning** is also fraught with questions and anxiety, in this article we focus on what it means for adolescents **to “do school” in their home.**

Building on the methods used in previous studies that we engaged in with our children (Abrams et al., 2017, 2019, 2020; Schaefer et al., 2018a;

2018b), this child-parent research is a student-led inquiry into their experiences of learning during the age of COVID-19. Individually and with each other, the three teens study their experiences of learning online and seek to understand the challenges and affordances of learning in unfamiliar school spaces.

To help contextualize the experiences of the three adolescents, we provide a brief review of literature related to virtual learning and virtual schooling during COVID-19. We then frame this research conceptually through the lens of adolescents and parents engaging in participatory research.

Virtual Learning and Schooling: A Land of Confusion

For Klumpe [the teacher], the scramble began the Monday after classes were **cancelled. It ‘was just like a free-for-all.** We [teachers] all went to school. We created lesson plans in, like, 12 hours. So 10 days of lesson plans in a day, essentially. And we had to be prepared to launch those lesson plans by Wednesday and to start doing full-on e-learning, which our kids had never **really done before without us.’ (Turner et al., 2020, para. 7)**

As we consider the educational pivots—nay convolutions—required during the COVID-19 crisis, the lyrics from the Genesis song, *Land of Confusion*, come to mind: “Can’t you see this is the land of confusion?/This is the world we live in/And these are the hands we’re given/Use them and let’s start trying/To make it a place worth living in” (Genesis, 1986). These words resound in a variety of ways and, in reference to COVID-19 and shifts in education, they underscore how educators, students, and family members have had to rethink how, what, and **when school will “happen.” In a matter of weeks** (and, in some cases, days), the US went from having one million students engaged in virtual instruction to over 55 million students learning online (Butcher, 2020; Turner et al., 2020). **Thus, “with little training and even fewer resources, in a matter of days [schools were] shifting from a system of education that for centuries has focused on face to face interaction, to one that works entirely at a distance”** (Kamenetz, 2020, para. 6). **The “shift” in many cases acted more like a tidal wave that swept students and teachers into a faraway, unfamiliar land.**

The tremendous task of moving otherwise face-to-face K-12 instruction online has resulted in the immediate and continued use of a learning management system (LMS)¹, such as Google Classroom, Edmodo, Moodle, and Schoology, yet extant research of LMS use has been focused primarily on higher education, with few studies addressing the use of an LMS within the middle grades (Wang et al., 2020). A review of research (Bond, 2020) of flipped learning² revealed that a mere 22% of the 62 published studies included only the middle grades, and 25% of the studies included middle and high school levels combined. Furthermore, the most frequently used forms of technology in flipped classrooms were videos, followed by self-assessment

¹ An LMS is an online platform that supports a range of asynchronous functions, from repository and archive to interactive discussion forums, blogs, and collaborative work, to quiz-taking, grading, scheduling, and communicating.

² Flipped learning is the inversion of instruction wherein the student first encounters material through computer-based resources and lessons and engages in interactive activities in school (Bishop & Verleger, 2013).

³ In early April, New York City schools prohibited the use of Zoom due to concerns of privacy and hacking.

quizzes, and then the use of an LMS (Bond, 2020). Although flipped learning has been touted to support collaboration and student-directed learning, “**major problems...include teachers’ considerable workload of creating flipped learning materials, and students’ disengagement in the out-of-class learning”** (Lo & Hew, 2017, p. 2). Thus, unsurprisingly, it typically takes time to set up an LMS and operationalize it; educators need to identify online and offline resources, scan or upload materials, and organize and label assignments. Educators also need to consider, design, and cultivate a culture of interactive learning in the online space, and that, too, takes time to generate once the students enter the space. Nonetheless, in response to unanticipated social distancing, the shift to e-learning and school-at-home was swift and absolute, with most educators ill-prepared.

In the wake of shelter-in-place orders, teachers—many of whom were not prepared to teach online—**were “suddenly thrust into emergency remote teaching [and did] not have ideal conditions to offer well-planned, quality instruction”** (Milman, 2020, para. 5). This type of “**pandemic pedagogy”** (Milman, 2020, para. 4) is reactive to angst and health concerns and involves remote learning with children engaged in school from the confines of their home. Pandemic pedagogy has taken many forms, and **there has been a wide range of approaches: “In almost heroic fashion, teachers have learned entirely new ways of teaching...[and yet] many districts have only pointed parents to other resources without teacher-led instruction”** (Harris, 2020, para. 8). For some students, it has meant completing worksheets downloaded from an LMS or posting to a discussion board; for others, it has meant meeting through videoconference platforms, such as Google Meet and Zoom.³ And for others, although beyond the

Los Angeles public schools had a similar response (Strauss, 2020).

Teaching via videoconference has had its challenges, and, to support the immediate shift to pandemic pedagogy, companies have shifted their policies. On March 6, 2020, Zoom announced that it was “**Temporarily removing the 40-minute limit on free Basic accounts for schools in Japan and Italy, and by request for K-12 schools in the United States”**; by March 12, 2020, this list included seven more countries, and by March 29, the company added 14 more countries to the list, thereby offering uninterrupted videoconferencing for educators and

scope of this article, the specter of major equity and access issues related to such rapid-online learning that affect all—teachers, students, parents and society (cf. Turner et al, 2020; Will, 2020)—has emerged as some children and teachers find themselves trying to engage in school with limited, or no, resources. There have been numerous accounts of students and teachers driving to and working in their **school’s** parking lots to access WiFi because of inconsistent or unreliable Internet access at home (Jung, 2020; Will, 2020). The combination of circumstance and pandemic **pedagogy has, in many cases, resulted in “an unholy mix of the lock-step syllabus and digital content transmission” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2020, para. 3),** with teachers and students continuously tasked with efforts that whittle their “personal-professional bandwidth” (Olmanson & Abrams, 2013).

COVID-19 in China: Lessons (Learned?)

There are a handful of initial reports about how **middle schools responded to China’s “School’s Out, But Class’s On”⁴** approach to maintaining instruction online but from home and offering **“broad-based teaching and learning during a special period and in a special environment”** (Cheng, 2020, p. 503). Empirical research (Yao et al., 2020) of middle school education during **China’s school-at-home** response to COVID-19 examined teacher effectiveness (based on student performance) when students encountered two modes of instruction: (1) asynchronous viewing of pre-recorded video and no teacher-student online communication, a unidirectional approach that hinged on student self-study; and (2) synchronous use of software and bidirectional interaction between student and teacher. Even though the asynchronous approach supported student autonomy, findings revealed that students who experienced synchronous education benefited from teachers **“explaining and giving feedback online in [real] time,”** and the authors underscored the importance of human interaction and teacher mentorship (p. 522).

students in a total of 24 countries around the world (Gallagher, 2020, para. 29). On March 13, Zoom announced that it has lifted the meeting limits for almost 60,000 K-12 schools in the US (Gallagher, 2020). **Across the US, “companies are making their paid services free through the rest of the school year; in other cases, they’re lifting limits to services and/or**

It is well known that social interactions in the middle grades are essential to deep learning and the construction of knowledge (Bandura, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and play a powerful role in knowledge creation (Schaefer, 2017). This is especially the case in learning **spaces that privilege students’ voices, choices,** and literacies in active, student-centered learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2020). Even accomplished virtually, these interactions appear to matter (Yao et al., 2020). Other reports (Guo & Li, 2020) offered another perspective, suggesting that, although the combination of live video and classroom exercises might be helpful, asynchronous video **classes “are more focused on teaching project-based learning methods and assigning students tasks. By giving students time and space to practice, it will improve their learning interest and innovation ability” (p. 549). Rather than** seeming in contradiction to the prior study, **Guo and Li’s suggestions** support opportunities for self-regulated learning. Piaget (1972) contended that formal operations are established in early adolescence, a conclusion confirmed by researchers today (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Steinberg, 2014). Formal operations often are **discussed in terms of “metacognition” and “self-regulation.”** These represent a complex, multilayered process wherein children create goals, such as learning goals, and direct their behavior towards achieving those goals. The process of self-regulation is a crucial manifestation of metacognition and, especially **in young adolescence, “the capacity for self-regulation is probably the single most important contributor to achievement, mental health, and social success” (Steinberg, p. 16).** Research from China (Guo & Li; Yao et al.) confirms that engaging middle grades learners virtually requires multiple engagement methods and strategies.

Examining the effectiveness of pandemic pedagogy can seem to be an insurmountable task given complicating factors related to the immediate turn indoors and online; these include economic stresses, concerns about health and well-being, and the social instability

adding premium features to what’s free” (Schaffhauser, 2020, para. 1).

⁴ According to Cheng (2020), **“The concept of School’s Out, But Class’s On” originated from a series of documents from the Chinese Ministry of Education”** (p. 502).

that accompanies a shelter-in-place mandate. The immediate reports out of China reveal the importance of communication and clarity. As we consider education in light of COVID-19, we turn to the voices of youth to hear their perspectives. There are no control groups or interventions. There is raw, genuine feedback from adolescents who are living through this and, along with their schools and their families, are trying to work through unprecedented expectations.

Child-Parent Research

In 2006, a senior scientist, inspired by his then-14-year-old daughter's class project on social networks and the proximity of children in classrooms and busses, worked *with his daughter to explore “what effect breaking up these networks would have on knocking down disease,” a social distancing approach now employed that has closed schools in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic* (Lipton & Steinhauer, 2020, para. 27). The importance of *listening to youth voices and ideas* is not new to middle school research or child-parent research, and, when we consider perspectives of schooling in light of COVID-19, who better to speak about their experiences than the youth themselves?

Child-parent research is a form of participatory research that is grounded in critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013), in which youth are centrally part of every phase of research, from design to dissemination. In the last 90 years, there have been a handful of researchers who have explored aspects of **learning through their child's or children's** meaning making experiences (cf. Abrams et al., 2019; Bissex, 1980; Dezuanni, 2018; Gee, 2003; Hackett, 2017; Halliday, 1975; Kabuto, 2008; 2014; Kabuto & Martens, 2014; Kress, 1982; Long, 2004; O'Mara & Laidlaw, 2011; Piaget, 1936/1952; Shannon & Shannon, 2014; Wolf, 1992; Yoon, 2012). More recently, the concept of child-parent research has been reimagined to acknowledge that the role of child-as-co-researcher is dynamic:

The research process and level of involvement and partnership can move forward and backward, can spin or turn in different ways, and can rotate with various momenta. The interplay of the five elements [dialogue, critical reflection, ethics, tension, and participation] can present options for the youth to partner in some ways and be

involved in others. (Abrams et al., 2020, p. 16)

Child-parent research intends to bring forward the child-as-researcher and, to do so, there are attempts to flatten inherent familial hierarchies **and preserve the authenticity of youths' words, ideas, and expressions.** Ideally, the parent-researcher is not the mouthpiece through which the child speaks, but rather, is a co-investigator designing the study, collecting and analyzing the data, and writing and/or presenting the data *alongside* the child-researcher. At times, the **child's age, stage, and schedule can place the** parent-researcher in a more apt position to write the research report; however, there are opportunities for children to co-construct the written analysis. As was the case with the research noted in this article, due to time constraints, Mary Beth and Sandra, the parents, crafted the literature review, conceptual framework, and methods sections. The teens primarily authored the findings section. Although there are some parent-generated syntheses, these were completed *with* the child-researchers; in fact, the teens retooled each section. In this and other ways, the child-researcher can take the lead, especially over time, as the child-researcher develops experience in conducting and writing about research (Abrams et al., 2017, 2019, 2020; Schaefer et al., 2018a; 2018b). Typically, because the parent-researcher comes to the investigation with prior experience as a researcher, there will be some scaffolded guidance, just as any research team member might need to mentor a new member. Nonetheless, opportunities abound for child-parent collaborations to take shape in a variety of ways that, most importantly, empower the **child-researcher's** voice and analyses.

Data Collection and Analysis

This collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) hinges on self-**study both on one's own and as part of a larger group; “it is a process and product of an ensemble of performance, not a solo act”** (Chang et al., p. 11). **To this end, we** build upon the methods from a previous child-parent collaborative autoethnography (Abrams et al., 2017, 2019; Schaefer et al., 2018a; 2018b) in which the youth first develop their ideas in writing on Google Docs and then, in the child-and-parent research team, debrief about their noticings. More specifically, between April 13, 2020 and April 29, 2020, our research team of five (three adolescent researchers—two who are

sisters—and their respective mothers) met via videoconference to engage in a total of eight hours of data collection and analyses. Add to this figure the writing we five completed, and the hours increase exponentially.

A combination of inductive and deductive data **collection and analysis began with the girls'** initial discussions about the experiences they wanted to share, and they responded to related parent- and teen-generated questions on Google Docs (see Appendix). Each teen self-assigned a color to use when writing as a way to identify her work (e.g., Molly: red; Maddie: blue; Charlotte: green).

The adolescents read their responses **individually and considered, “What did you notice that came to the fore?”** The parents took analytic notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009) and participated in the discussion wherein the teens talked about the core points of their responses, which transformed into five initial categories that also became section headings on a new Google Doc: (1) Stress vs. Relief, (2) Time and Feedback, (3) Environment/Context (distraction), (4) Intimidation and Comfort, and (5) **What Works and What Doesn't Work. Over a three-day** period, the three teens reviewed their responses to the prompts and considered key quotes to include under each of the initial five categories. Using the copy and paste feature, they placed their responses under the headings that they felt best represented their particular point. They did not use all their responses, nor did they distribute their work under *all* the headings. In this way, the adolescents coded their own data via a macro-review of the topics.

Additional rounds of data collection and analyses included each girl reading aloud her work so they all could hear areas of overlap, which we parents documented in analytic notes. The research team engaged in formal inductive analyses by highlighting phrases and using *in vivo* coding in the comments box. This round of **coding included words, such as “movement, routine or lack thereof, home-as-work, control/voice, schedule, distraction, school mindset, and negotiating new space.”** We five examined these points and then considered larger thematic threads among the codes.

These rounds also included a micro-review of the data wherein the parents engaged in line-by-line coding and the research team retooled

categories; specifically, the teens offered clarifications and confirmations akin to member checking, and they developed their responses to explain how they managed their expectations and how, if at all, their thoughts about learning had shifted. Each used continua to express her shifts. The resulting themes were related to time, distraction, comfort, change, and discovery, all which captured the essence of the phenomena experienced by the adolescents in the time of COVID-19. We used our final meeting to clarify understandings and re-evaluate the continua, which the teens adjusted based on their most recent experiences.

In what follows, we provide our researcher positioning to situate the school experience prior to and during shelter-in-place mandates. However, before each participant-author introduces herself, it is important to acknowledge the kinds of privilege that situate this particular child-parent research project. We (Mary Beth and Sandra) identify as white, economically secure working mothers who have the tools to (a) engage in distance learning, (b) reap the benefits of knowing the educational system, and (c) **scaffold our children's** engagement in research. Although we five are daughters or granddaughters of a first-generation American, we are intentionally and actively aware that, as European Americans, none of us has faced the kinds of institutional and structural racism that affects the daily lives of so many immigrants and people of color. And as educators, we are keenly aware that the process and product of child-parent research gives our adolescent girls the extraordinary privilege to voice their feelings, thoughts, ideas, and concerns. As we note in our final section, we call attention to the need for more spaces that enable and invite adolescent voices, particularly marginalized voices, to engage in critical and transformative meaning making experiences.

Researcher Positioning

My name is Madeline Abrams, and I am 13 years old and in 7th grade at an independent school in a small suburban town in New York. *Prior to Shelter-in-Place:* In my school, we mostly stay in one room and most of our teachers come to us to teach a particular subject. I am stationed at my own desk that has all of my materials in it. We are required to be at school by 8:25am to begin our day. We then have a two-**hour class focusing on particular “block” topics,** which change about every month. We have

breaks at 10:30 and 12:45 when we can get a bite to eat and either go outside and have recess or we can go to the gym and play basketball, volleyball, tumble or climb the rope. We also have a five-minute break between each class to get the supplies we need and prepare for our next class. I can also use the little breaks in my day to talk to my teachers and ask them any questions I have. My school does not believe in using electronics in class, but in middle school we start to learn more about technology and use computers every once and a while in our cyber civics class. Instead we write and draw or do hands-on activities.

After Shelter-in-Place: School now starts at 9am which gives me time to sleep in and not be rushed. My first class is an hour and 45 minutes long, from 9:00-10:45. After, I have a break until 11:00, when I can put my supplies away, take out my materials for my next class, get a little bite to eat, call a friend, and/or get a head start on homework. Before COVID I had a 30-minute snack when I could eat with no rush, play basketball, and spend time with my friends. Now I only have 15 minutes to eat, use the bathroom, and switch out my supplies, and sometimes I feel **very rushed and don't even get around to getting** a snack for myself. My next class is from 11:00-11:30 instead of 11:00-11:50 which means I have 20 minutes less of academic time, and that applies to my third class as well.

My name is Molly Kurpis. I attend an International Baccalaureate (IB) school in New York and I am in 11th grade.

Prior to Shelter-in-Place: Being 17 years old in an IB school means that I have started the 2-year vigorous program. I take both standard level (SL) and higher level (HL) classes. The classes are fairly intense, with hefty content and long hours of homework. HL classes are typically harder than SL because they are sophomore college level work, while SL is only freshmen college level. I wake up at 6:30 am to jump on a 7:05 MTA (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) bus and transfer to a few trains in order to get to my school. From 8:00 to 2:20, I go to 7 periods of classes that are 50 minutes each. The day goes by pretty quickly because my teachers keep us engaged and on our toes with all of the IB work we need to get done. After getting home at 3:30, I typically have a few hours of homework waiting for me. Although these days were busy, I was efficient: I got a lot done on a daily basis.

After Shelter-in-Place: I set my own time for waking up, morning breakfast, preparing my schoolwork, and getting all of my assignments done in the late morning to early afternoon hours. Since I was so used to working in the morning, my motivation is drawn to a few hours after I wake up. I harvest these motives in my own personalized schedule and manage to get my work done at reasonable times with freedom for the rest of the day to pursue activities that I would normally not have time for. I have adapted pretty well to online learning now rather than 6 weeks ago, when I simply stared at the vast complexity of the Internet and wondered how on earth I would complete the most important year of high school in such a new and uncomfortable environment.

My name is Charlotte Abrams, and I am 15 years old and in 9th grade at an independent school in a small suburban town in New York.

Prior to Shelter-in-Place: My schedule for school used to include an hour-and-forty-minute class with topics that changed every three to four weeks. This time is used to really focus and dive into specific subjects and discussions. This class is followed by four fifty-five-minute classes with breaks throughout the day. In my high school, technology is accepted, although we do have to put our phones in a numbered pouch at the beginning of the day, and they are given back at the end of the day. Our teachers are available after school via email, and for projects and presentations we generally **research online. I play on my school's sports** teams and, because of this, I get home later in the day, causing me to complete my homework some time between ten and eleven **o'clock at** night.

After Shelter-in-Place: I attend school on Zoom calls and my teachers use Google Classroom to post assignments. For some classes, we use other websites as well. My current school day starts at 9:00am and ends at 12:55pm. My first class is now an hour-and-fifteen-minutes long and there are only three additional classes, which are forty-minutes-long. Since sports are no longer permitted and school ends earlier, I now have much more time to complete my homework and I am also less tired while doing it. This also allows for more time with my family, which I really enjoy.

My name is Mary Beth Schaefer, and I am interim Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Adolescent Education in the School of Education at St. John's University in Queens, New York.

Prior to Shelter-in-Place: I am finishing my second and final year as Associate Dean. In my first year in this position, I worked through a major administrative turnover and supported a new, interim Dean. In my second year, I supported a new Dean—one new to our university and New York. The enormity of the administrative tasks usually meant that my family, scholarship, and students were attended to after my full workday ended. Right before COVID-19 hit our world, I remember wishing that time would slow down.

After Shelter-in-Place: Although my administrative tasks continue, I no longer work in a university office with an open door. In my frequent videoconferences, I actually work in an attic bedroom with the door shut. While I miss my university colleagues, time has slowed and **feels a little more “mine.” I’ve started cooking** again. We have family meals. We watch movies together. Best of all, I was able to carve out a space for this child-parent research.

My name is Sandra Schamroth Abrams, and I am a Professor of Adolescent Education at St. John's University in Queens, New York.

Prior to Shelter-in-Place: I commuted about 3 hours roundtrip to the university to teach classes, engage in committee meetings, meet with students, and take part in university functions. I also worked alongside middle and high school teachers in various schools. In one particular school I have been researching the integration of a game-based approach to teaching that I designed to support socially responsible, agentive learning.

After Shelter-in-Place: I no longer commute to the university, and all of my previous activities—from teaching to committee meetings—now take place via videoconference. I use a number of resources to facilitate online teaching and learning, and I am offering students one-on-one assistance through digital means. I still support middle and high school educators as they transition and hold classes online. I have been observing/participating in high school math classes since they went online in mid-March 2020. I have attended these high school Zoom sessions daily for the past 12 weeks.

Findings & Discussion

Online learning is not a new concept; even before shelter-in-place mandates, all three of the girls used their electronic devices to engage in homework and various educational and social activities. Nonetheless, given the sudden shift to total online learning, the girls experienced the change in their everyday learning space in different ways; they felt it both as a source of stress (unfamiliar school distractions) and a source of comfort (they could shape the space to their own needs).

Although thinking about space as a metaphor could provide a provocative line of inquiry, in this study the girls primarily talk about the physical learning spaces inside their homes and inside of their online classrooms, so that is how we discuss it here. As adolescent co-researchers and co-writers of this piece, the girls engaged in transparent self-assessment through alphabetic text and images. Throughout the following sections, the girls use continua to represent their insights *and* to support their written stories about the strange becoming familiar.

Doing School At Home: How it *Feels*
[Molly: red, Maddie: blue, Charlotte: green]

Figure 1

How it Feels Physically and Emotionally to do School at Home

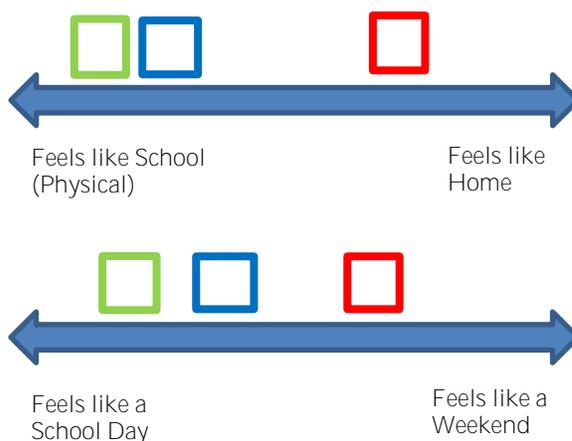


Figure 1 identifies how the girls perceived their physical and emotional experiences of school while sheltering-in-place. In this section, the three adolescents unpack the juxtaposition of

home and school and the challenges and affordances of their new educational spaces.

In pre-COVID-19 school spaces, the three girls experienced active, student-centered learning with lively whole-class discussions and an emphasis on cooperative group work, a pedagogy that supports active learning, meaningful social interactions, and deeper understandings (Bennett, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013). When Molly describes her previous school learning space as **“a grey table, an uncomfortable blue chair, terribly painted walls,”** this is also where she would **“take sips of water and sneak bits of my friend’s chips”** while participating in active learning groups. **“Now,” she says, “my learning environment is a section of my kitchen counter, my laptop, my headphones, my notebooks and textbooks scattered everywhere, probably a coffee mug and an empty bowl, pens galore, and a thousand tabs overheating my drive.”** She continues, **“I lean on my hand, bored, tired, and wanting to be anywhere in the world but in this spot with the same chair, the same counter, the same laptop, the same annoying light, and the same day as all the other days.”**

The sense of movement created by active learning spaces and the physical act of moving from group to group, from class to class, and from school to home, is gone. Without the chatter of spontaneous discussion, the home learning space can feel both stultifying stagnant and fraught with distraction. Charlotte writes,

We don’t leave our houses to go to school...My dog joins me and lies by my feet or my parents are on a call in the room next to mine. Even just having lunch at home and then walking a few feet to go back to another room and putting myself back into my school mindset has been difficult because I *am* at home but most of the time I have to act like I am at school.

Charlotte continues to try to separate school and home, but the space is porous. Sounds that are not usually a part of school permeate her daily learning experiences.

Maddie also tries to do school with sounds and activities that are familiar to home space rather **than school space. She talks about her dad’s computer “changing colors as he watches the news, or...even just the sound of the refrigerator opening and closing, or the opening of the**

cabinets and getting a plate, or even filling a glass with water can be very distracting.”

The manner in which students learn has changed now that content is delivered and negotiated in online spaces and at home. For Maddie and Charlotte, who also engaged in offline work, the change is still extreme because **“technology was never a big part of [our] school and then all of a sudden, it *became* school.”** New ways of learning had to occur, new devices had to be introduced, and new interfaces had to be encountered. For Molly, being online was **stifling: “I have no space or flexibility to alter the boring moments in this routine. I am glued to the same spot for *hours* because of how long it can take for me to finish an assignment.”**

Improvisation and A School Mindset

The girls create a setting for school that is a hybrid of old and new learning spaces—the familiar, and the unfamiliar. Improvising means negotiating the different learning spaces and creating one that motivates engagement in class activities and assignments.

Maddie misses the opportunity to be able to pull aside her teacher in her classroom or in the hallway to ask a question. The new experience of waiting for a response changes the learning **landscape, which Maddie finds “can be stressful.”** To get a more immediate response in her online classroom, Maddie secures her **teacher’s attention in a clever way. During a Zoom class, if she has an unanswered question, she crumbles a piece of paper in front of her computer. The sound is picked up, and Maddie’s visage, she explains, “will pop on the screen.”** Relatedly, Charlotte sticks her hand in front of the camera to get attention. Without these improvised methods in this new space, the time lag between asking questions and getting answers can feel frustrating.

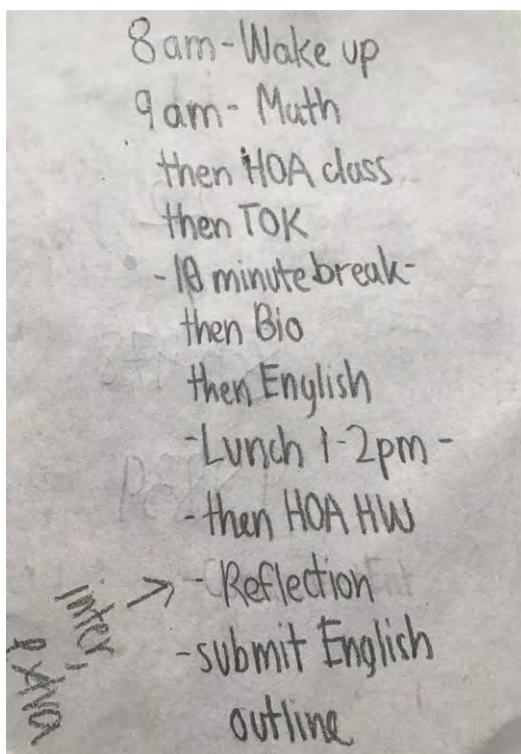
For Molly, who has asynchronous schooling, this frustration had led to increased emails for **teachers: “Quarantine has left me no choice but to bombard my poor teachers with emails when my fear gets in the way of learning. I’m crazed to make sure everything I am doing is perfect.”** Molly is overwhelmed because **“all of these assignments tend to build into a vicious monster that takes me almost the entire day to slaughter.”** Despite shifts in environment, the **girls’ self-expectation to succeed has not changed, but negotiating new educational**

landscapes can be difficult. Charlotte explains, “I find that sometimes it is harder to meet my own expectations when I am sitting in my house, feeling like I am at home, but knowing my mind needs to be in school.”

Be it crumpling paper to get attention or creating new routines, the girls have discovered ways to adapt via improvisation. Charlotte describes “putting myself back into a school mindset,” an effort all three adolescents extend into their home space. Molly creates her own routine: “During breaks that I take in between subjects, I try to practice dances, go on small walks for fresh air, read an enticing book, or complete chores around the house. These small breaks typically rewire my brain back into work mode...I value these breaks: they are one of the only things that feel regular to me.” In an effort to develop time management, Molly also creates subject-focused daily school schedules (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Molly’s Daily Schedule



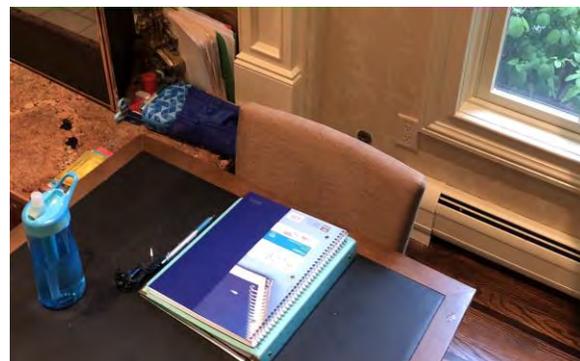
These lists also are part of a larger adaptation effort. Molly explains, “Motivation is lost to me when I don’t have a set schedule...the schedule helps me feel organized and helps me focus my

attention on my work so that I can tackle each task to the best of my ability. It has helped me adapt to online learning in this new and uncomfortable environment.”

Maddie generates her school mindset when preparing for the school day: “When I go on a Zoom call for school, I go to my corner where my table is located, and make sure I have what I need set out” (see Figure 3). She explains: “It’s like school—I have all of my stuff, but it’s still homey...there is a heater right there. I feel comfortable.” Interestingly, because face-to-face social interactions are limited to immediate family, Maddie is able to focus more on school: “At home I may have very few distractions but with my headphones on I am able to ignore what is happening in my house.”

Figure 3

Maddie’s “homey” in-school-at-home Space

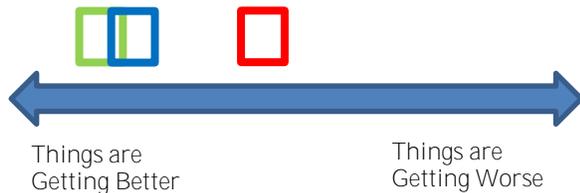


Similar to Maddie, Charlotte takes comfort in the familiar areas of her home while engaging in stressful school work: “I sit in a room that is very close to the front door of our house...I can see into my kitchen and sometimes my mom will stand in the doorway and listen to my presentations. Although this can be very distracting, it also is reassuring because I feel comforted by my mom’s support and my stress about the presentation lessens.”

Nonetheless, “Everything is Always Changing”

Figure 4

How the Girls feel about Ongoing Changes to Online Learning



In Figure 4, the girls represent their feelings about online learning. For them, the initial **transition to online learning was “confusing” and felt “more or less [like] an experiment [in which] things are changing very quickly.”** The day is no longer “set in stone”; rather, **class time is fluid:** time expands and contracts as needed.

Threaded throughout the girls’ experiences of doing-school-at-home is the idea of “change” as a constant feature. Despite the girls’ attempts to manage their schedules, teachers’ valiant efforts to respond to students’ needs also translated into multiple changes in scheduling and class time. Maddie writes,

I have remade my personal schedule four times to fit the times of when I am in school, when I am doing homework, and when I **have free time...My schedule when I was at school was pretty much set in stone.** Whereas now I have more than half of the **day to do what I would like to...However the constant changing in the schedule makes it hard to find a time to equalize and balance out the academic time and homework with what I have set on my schedule.**

Maddie and Charlotte work *with* their teachers to improve the new learning experience. This school-led collaborative and responsive approach underscores teacher caring and accessibility that **matter for students’ social and academic success in the middle grades** (Dooner et al., 2010; Kiefer et al., 2014; Murray & Greenburg, 2000; Schaefer, 2014; Strahan & Poteat, 2020).

Nonetheless, the sudden onset of learning in-school-at-home required teachers, students, and

parents alike to contemplate and discern how, when, where, and why technology would be used. The iterations necessary to establish balance might have been challenging, but they eventually led to a healthier rhythm. As **Charlotte notes, “Over the past five weeks, my schedule has changed four times based on students’, parents’, and teachers’ inputs. It was difficult to keep adjusting to new schedules because one week our school day ended at 3:00pm and then another week it would end at 12:55pm. However, I appreciated how my school was open to suggestions and acted upon them trying to accommodate for everyone.” Molly has a different experience as reflected by her mark in the middle of the continuum (see Figure 4):**

My learning is influenced by the assignments my teachers give us daily...Videos, worksheets, recordings, and textbooks are all used by my teachers to teach us...When working at home, the pressure of time and the isolation of a classroom are relieved. My teachers used to be on our backs for getting our work done at a sufficient time, and now I have all of the time in the world to answer a single math problem.

This time aspect—being done, undone, redone, and loosely bounded—creates confusion, stress, and uncertainty. However, it also offers opportunities to create new spaces and new ways of envisioning learning in-school-at-home.

Improvisation: Changes in Self-as-Learner

Despite the platform or the type of interaction, student agency, self-knowledge and self-regulation take time to hone as students transform their spaces to help them learn. All three girls offer crucial insights into the skills they have been developing, such as time management, self-motivation, and self-awareness—important attributes of college readiness (Conley, 2007; Schaefer, 2014) and self-regulation (Steinberg, 2014). All three adolescents articulate what they like and need from the new space in-school-at-home. The following section is written solely by the adolescents (as opposed to co-written with their parents), and it speaks to the human experience about this new way of doing school.

Being at home gives me...

Molly: In this extra time that I am given during quarantine, I have the ability to pursue activities I would normally not have space in my day for. Such activities include video games, reading novels, writing creative works, and watching films that have always been on my list. I spend more time with my brother, who teaches me fun hacks for my video games and yells at me to do ACT prep. I go college hunting with my mom, and it's fun to do virtual tours and look into majors that I might be interested in. My college advisor has set up accounts for us so that we can easily look at any college across America and create a list of ones that stand out. I've been doing lots of research lately on Wesleyan and Boston University, and they have been very appealing schools to my interests. Their small acceptance rates are another motive for me to get all of my work done (and done well). I also have Zoom dance classes in my room with my teachers and friends.

Maddie: When I am at home I have days where I feel I don't do much besides homework and chores. Other days I watch TV and call my friends. I try to balance out both so that I have time for what I need to do, and time to do what I would like to do. In my free time I have built a pyramid out of building blocks and I have made cool polygons out of paper, called my friends, built things in Minecraft and spent time with my family. What is nice about the extra time is that, in the past, I have put things aside to do something else instead. Now I am able to use the time I have to do those things, such as my free throws that I have been trying to get better at, cycling, and playing a domino game. I have also been able to spend more time with my family and that has been really great.

Charlotte: Being at home gives me the opportunity to accomplish many tasks that I usually would not have time for. An extra credit assignment for school was to recreate a Roman mosaic, which I have spent hours working on. I am able to make the mosaic detailed and to my satisfaction because I have the time. I was also assigned a self-portrait for school and I was not pleased with my first attempt, although I had to hand it in because it was due. However, I was

able to make another self-portrait (see Figure 5) that I am more confident about because I had time to sit down and not rush. Being home also gives me the opportunity to spend more time with my family and that is definitely something positive that the social distancing has brought. I have time to walk my dog and play games with my family—things I usually would not have time for. Because I am at home, I have time throughout the school day that I would usually be spending at school. I also have more time after school because my after school activities are cancelled.

Figure 5

Charlotte's Self-Portrait**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In child-parent research, children's voices are central—not peripheral—to listening and understanding *their* experiences instead of hearing their voices through the adult mouthpiece. The child's "unadulterated (and un-'adult'ed") voice [is] essential" and presented through co-research and co-writing (Abrams et al., 2020, p. 30). Thus, this type of research offers opportunities for youth to be instrumental in spotlighting educational, social, and even political issues. Amplifying the voices of youth also creates an imperative to hear *all* voices, particularly those that have been marginalized or ignored. We envision permutations of child-parent research to support such an important movement.

In this research of their school experiences during COVID-19, the girls embraced, understood, and developed important life and learning skills. They improvised to make new learning spaces and methods that worked for them. They used key features of deep thinking

and learning: They engaged in the processes of self-regulation, self-monitoring, time management and reflection. They created schedules, managed new learning spaces, and collaborated with their teachers to figure out what was and was not working. These skills represent their improvisations—their attempts to make school work in this land of confusion.

In line with such growth, the adolescents envision recommendations for online learning should a shelter-in-place scenario occur again. These recommendations are not to supplant face-to-face instruction; rather, they are to offer boundaries in a rather boundless online world.

Charlotte, Maddie and Molly's Recommendations to Make School Work in the Home Space

Create a rhythm that includes boundaries and rules:

- Set a time by which a teacher can assign work due for the next day (we are thinking no later than 4pm). Anything thereafter only can be due for a future date.
- Consider creating and adhering to a set schedule for when teachers assign work and the day it is due (e.g., anything assigned on a Monday only can be due on a Wednesday).
- Set a time by which students should check their email for any updates (we are thinking 8pm). Thereafter, students *and* teachers can expect that no new announcements or emails will be read until the next day.
- Relatedly, create an expectation for teachers and students to check and respond to email. If a student does not hear back from a teacher within 24-48 hours and has not met with the teacher during office hours/Zoom calls, then the student is responsible for sending a follow up email. We all are human.
- Although each class can have its own additional rules, there should be some standard rules across all classes.

We want to be clear that while these recommendations sound like they are for teachers, they are really for *all* of us who are engaged in education in this new land of confusion. Many teachers have acted heroically and selflessly in this pandemic—and we look

forward to the research that they create when they have the chance to take a breath, step back, and reflect. Our recommendations are not just for the current situation. They also are applicable for any situation in which adolescents are learning, be it in new or old spaces.

Although many challenges accompany the sudden change from face-to-face to online learning, so do many opportunities, including those that comprise the foci of this research. The girls explain how they negotiated their new spaces in ways that helped them to continue to experience academic success. In their enhanced understanding of *how* they learned, the girls developed a deeper appreciation for and understanding of ways to self-motivate and find a healthy balance between online and offline meaning making.

We should not let this opportunity go to waste. We know that students who engage in self-regulation processes (i.e., time management, self-monitoring) display greater levels of motivation, achievement, and self-efficacy (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004) and middle grades students can do this difficult work, but they need support. Teachers can start by asking students to reflect on how and why they are learning during this confusing time. In a *New York Times* **“Special Learning Report” (2020) a middle grades social studies teacher said, “They may not be learning as much history as my former students, or writing as many essays, but they are LIVING history right now...they’re learning so much—resilience, time management and how to be responsible for their own learning” (para. 11).** Let us build on the self-initiated aspects of this new learning world and ask students to try to understand themselves as learners online and offline: how do they learn best? What conditions do they need to be motivated? How can they motivate themselves? Taking time in content areas to engage in these conversations perhaps can help reengage students. From the girls, we learned that they needed opportunities to work collaboratively and by themselves.

We also have seen the stress that the girls conveyed when they were asked to do a lot of unfamiliar tasks during the early days of COVID-19. While pandemic pedagogy can evoke images of patchwork triage, **the girls’ voices and experiences suggest otherwise: schools and families can work together to create a schedule that has firm(ish) boundaries, but with aspects of flexibility that can be responsive to students’**

needs and interests. Ask students to share their improvisations so they can build on different ideas and find out what works for them. Talk to students about what learning methods work best and try to build on those. Of this situation, **Maddie said, “I’m trying to make the unusual usual and that is not easy.” It feels like all of us** in education right now are all striving to make the unusual usual. Together we are a community of improvisors working towards the same goal: engaging, responsive, vibrant, active learning spaces for all.

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Appendix

1. **When you are “in school” now, do you feel that you are** learning? How do you know if you are actually learning?
2. How has the learning environment changed?
3. What are the factors (e.g., self, others, environment on and off screen) influencing your learning? Learning experiences? Good and Bad.
4. How does your school **handle schoolwork and what works/doesn't work?**
5. What being at home means for us – how do we use the time?

