

## New Norm, Old Obstacles: The Impact of Distance Learning on Student Agency during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tyler Cardenas

Mt. San Antonio College—[tylercardenas@berkeley.edu](mailto:tylercardenas@berkeley.edu)

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### ABSTRACT

Mandatory distance learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a new educational landscape for elementary students. Working- and middle-class students have had to meet new expectations around class attendance, homework, and time management, and some are now responsible for overseeing their own education. This study examines students' agentic expressions and perceptions of time to explore the effects of these expectations, and to contribute to a discussion about the implications of distance learning. Through participant observation and interviews with elementary school students across four Southern California school districts, this study offers insights into how students conceptualize their new role in their education and it provides concrete examples of how this manifests day-to-day. Students from ages five to thirteen learning from home, especially those with limited assistance from guardians throughout the school day, have new responsibilities and a greater sense of "their time," through which they simultaneously discover and establish their position as agents in their education.

**Keywords:** Elementary students, distance learning, COVID-19, socioeconomic status

experiences. Furthermore, the independence necessitated by these conditions led some students to experiment with their agency regarding their education in ways that the conditions of in-person school are not typically conducive to.

## Methods

Near the end of 2019, as a community college student preparing to transfer to a four-year university, I had been planning my first semester-long, independent anthropological research project. I intended to study spirituality in the United States. However, by March 2020, when schools were forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my original project lost its urgency. The moment I observed my five-year-old cousin (with whom I lived) open a Chromebook and join a Zoom classroom, I felt compelled to change my topic.

My primary method for this investigation was ethnography, specifically, participant observation in the anthropological tradition. Ethnography is cultural representation through textualization (Ricoeur 1973). The art of ethnography is negotiating the tension between producing an account of what you have observed and needing to re-create it to do so. This re-creation, what Geertz (1973, 9) refers to as “construction”, starts in our minds based on everything that we have experienced in the field and jotted in our notes, and is informed by our preconceptions about fieldwork, the field, our unique personal and academic backgrounds, and takes form, through textualization, in the written product of ethnography. The ethnographer’s task, as Emerson et al. (2011, 62) calls it, is “to write descriptions that lead to the empathetic understanding of the social worlds of others.” To do this, the ethnographer at once creates and discovers meaning:

...while the ethnographer often experiences “something going on in the notes,” neither the fieldnotes nor their meanings are something “out there” to be engaged after they are written. Rather, as creator of the notes in the first place, the ethnographer has been creating and discovering the meaning of and in the notes all along. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 190)

In December 2019, a novel strain of coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2 appeared in Wuhan, China sparking the first outbreak of a disease later to be called COVID-19. Despite travel restrictions from China and several European countries, cases arose in the United States by January 2020 and subsequent attempts to prevent the virus’ spread were inadequate. By March 2020, public schools across the country were being closed to slow the spread of the virus, and early concerns were being raised about the impact this may have on students, notably, children who rely on school lunch not having enough food, and a widening gap between privileged students who, for example, have the resources at home (computer, internet access, familial support, etc.) to succeed in online classes and those who do not (Chavez 2020; Blume and Esquivel 2020). These disparities were confirmed by a *Los Angeles Times* survey published in July 2020 of twelve hundred families across forty-five Southern California school districts, which found that “the digital divide is continuing to harm the education of low-income Latino and Black students,” with most of the impact stemming from a lack of funds for learning supplies, a lack of an appropriate and quiet place at home to do schooling, and a lack of internet access (Blume and Esquivel 2020; Esquivel et al. 2020). The author warned that “these inequities threaten to exacerbate wide and persistent disparities in public education that shortchange students of color and those from low-income families, resulting in potentially lasting harm to a generation of children.” (Esquivel et al. 2020) I set out to ethnographically explore from the student’s perspective what this “potentially lasting harm” may be. I found that, of these disparities, differences in support during the school day had the largest impact on students’ schooling

Ethnography was well-suited to this research because I was interested in exploring how distance learning was affecting students. Spending time with them as they participated in it was my approach to sharing and attempting to understand their experience.

One methodological concern in doing ethnography was how to “make strange” a field that I participate in as a college student (Delamont 2017). Seeing as this was my everyday reality, there were doubtless aspects of it that I took for granted. The issue is that taking things for granted does not produce quality ethnographic data. In *Keys Themes in the Ethnography of Education* (2017), Sara Delamont suggests that to conduct original and enlightening research on education, research aimed at “producing luminous descriptions, causal explanation, and peopled ethnography,” we must “fight familiarity, stop focusing on schools, [and] devise more robust foreshadowed problems” (Delamont 2017, 6, 15). Delamont offers six “strategies to fight familiarity” which I took into consideration when theorizing how I personally would “make strange” the domains that I would be observing (Delamont 2017, 15). Distance learning, specifically attending class virtually, was entirely new to me, but I further defamiliarized it by, as she suggests, not focusing only on schools and classrooms. I was deliberate in looking at peripheral, yet still related, settings to distance learning, specifically student’s time at home before, after, and in-between “formal” distance learning activities; video calls that students organized and managed themselves to interact with each other; and tutoring or supplemental education whether in the form of homework help from parents or siblings, or private tutoring carried out by an organization other than the school. This proved to be essential because it led me to conclude that part of what makes distance learning so unique and consequential is its way of making one the home and the school, consolidating “free” time and “school” time, and blurring the boundaries of student agency.

The study participants were recruited based on access that I had (working at a non-profit tutoring center) to students and educators from local school districts. Additionally, considering

the limitations to conducting participant observation during a pandemic, I recruited three of my younger cousins, two of whom I was living with at the time. I supplemented my participant observation with interviews that I conducted in-person with family members who felt comfortable meeting, and over Zoom or Google Meet otherwise. The IRB at my institution determined that a formal review would not be necessary based on the nature of this research. Aside from the family members that I was near, all data collection was virtual to ensure the safety of my participants. I collected data between September and December 2020. The study included fourteen students from ages five to thirteen across four school districts in Southern California. I obtained written consent from parents/guardians for the students to participate in research, as well as verbal consent from the students.

One-on-one interviews with students were loosely structured around the topic of school-from-home with some emphasis on emergent themes such as time, space, agency, and friendships. I encouraged students to talk freely about their experience with distance learning and asked for elaboration when these themes arose. Most interviews were about an hour long, and I had multiple interview sessions and regular interactions with the students over the course of the data collection period. This approach, more time with fewer students, had its drawbacks, such as limiting the diversity of my sample but it enabled me to capture and analyze richer, more encompassing pictures of students’ lives to better assess the effects of distance learning that extend beyond the virtual classroom.

One interesting trend I noticed was that all the students with whom I spoke were enthusiastic about discussing their experience of distance learning with me. I, too, was enthusiastic to talk to students about distance learning because I was curious about what different school districts were doing, what worked and what did not, and what the students liked and disliked about it.

Additionally, I participated in digital learning environments by sitting with students (in-person) through their digital school day. This was only possible with my own family

members, who felt comfortable with me being physically present amid a pandemic. Even across different school districts, conducting research with multiple related participants (like in a family) can undesirably affect the outcomes of a study like this intended to explore the effects of a phenomenon on a larger population. Keeping this in mind, I limited related participants to three and chose them so that they would represent two different school districts. I also participated in peripheral (apart from scheduled class time) virtual situations with students, such as supplemental instruction, tutoring, and activities organized either by a school, other educational organization, or students themselves. I focused on student's behavior in these digital spaces that may or may not have been familiar to them; nevertheless, the context, pressures, and influences of distance learning were new.

I have organized the four school districts represented in this study based on the median income of households served by the district (United States Census Bureau n.d.) because the differences that I observed in the students' experience of their schooling were tied directly to socioeconomic factors, including the types of jobs that parents/guardians held (and thus their availability to help their students with school), the access to resources such as a stable internet connection and a distraction-free environment to learn, and the diversity of options they have for what to do in their free time. For convenience and anonymity, I have codenamed the districts A through D according to the descending socioeconomic status of the community. Unsurprisingly, school ratings, as reported by GreatSchools.org (n.d.) follow along this same descending classification. GreatSchools.org uses metrics obtained from the Department of Education to construct ratings based on "Test Scores," "Student Progress," "College Readiness," and "Equity." (GreatSchools.org. n.d.) The average of these scores makes up the "GreatSchools Summary Rating" on a scale from one to ten, and I have included averages of these ratings for each district below. The list below also happens to be ascending for the percentage of the Latinx student population of the school district. From this point on, I will refer to the districts as follows:

**District A:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 8.0 and a median household income of \$119K.

**District B:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 6.0 and a median household income of \$65K.

**District C:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 5.3 and a median household income of \$64K.

**District D:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 4.4 and a median household income of \$62K.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study included the sample size (fourteen students) and the geographic relatedness of the students (all being part of Southern California school districts). Additionally, this was a relatively short study, lasting only one academic semester (about four months) and I was working part-time and taking classes online myself throughout the duration. Bearing this in mind, I endeavored to make the most of this report while resisting the impulse to stretch too little data too far to achieve coherence. Geertz (1973, 19) warned that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description...there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story."

Unfortunately, doing ethnography during a global pandemic also means that most participant observation must occur online, which is not ideal for studying students attending school. Finally, three of the fourteen participants were members of my family.

### Finding a Foothold

When I began this study, I knew I would be looking at distance learning, but I was not sure what specifically I would be focusing on. Given how novel mass-scale distance learning was, issues were bound to arise. My purpose then was to identify if and how students were impacted by distance learning. Sara Delamont (2017) discussed three of the emergent themes that I observed as being historically of particular interest to educational researchers, namely "places and spaces," "time and timescapes," and "movement and mobilities." These themes take on new significance as they are defined and, in



some cases, completely redefined in the context of distance learning.

After my initial conversations with students, four themes quickly became apparent: time, agency, friendships, and space. These were the areas where students had the most to say and which I observed to inspire the most original thinking and consideration from students. Discussions around these topics were characterized by long pauses, hesitation, uncertainty, and questions— signs that students needed to work to make sense of them. I briefly elaborate on each of these before returning to the two thematic areas that this work focused on, time and agency.

### Time

Time is a principal component of the American grade school system. Everything in school—class, lunch, recess, breaks, etc.—happens on a schedule, and time awareness is reinforced repeatedly throughout the school day, traditionally through the ringing of the school bell. Students are obliged to abide by a schedule through the threat of disciplinary action and, aside from the few students who choose to “ditch” class, student actions are limited to classroom matters within the span of the class period. Based on Karp’s (1986) distinction, students are not agents in this context, but rather, *actors*:

The actor refers to a person engaged in action that is framed, as is all social action. An actor’s action is rule governed or oriented. The agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the “bringing about of effects,” that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of “causal power” through which we realize the potential of the world (Karp 1986, 137).

I suggest that in the distance learning context, disparate, undefined, and difficult-to-regulate expectations relating to time enable some students to discover and exercise agency in ways that the rigidly structured nature of traditional, in-person schooling encumbers.

In my initial interview with a sixth-grade student from District C, I asked him to describe

what a typical day participating in distance learning was like hour-by-hour, as well as what a typical day at in-person school the year prior had been like. I had no doubt that students’ days at home looked different than they did when they were in school, but it was not until hearing his descriptions that I realized just how drastic these differences were. In Table 1 below, I have listed some of the events common to both settings and the times at which they occur to highlight the major differences. The student explicitly listed the concrete times, like school start and end, and the others were coded based on cues in the breakdown of his day.

As part of their transition online, many Southern California schools employed a two-shift system where half the students attend virtual class in the morning and the other half attend in the afternoon. However, this two-shift system was not the case for the student whose schedule is illustrated in table 1. Ultimately, these values were consistent with the student’s estimate when asked directly, and my calculation after re-examining what he reported in his hour-by-hour breakdown. This is the typical daily schedule of just one student, but the reason I chose to highlight it here is that, based on all the students I observed and interviewed, this student’s schedule represents the most median situation across all variables: school district, relative socioeconomic status, parental intervention, and time spent on technology. I interviewed students in both high and low socioeconomic groups (A and D), and, in my sample, most of the students’ situations were like this one.

### Agency

I was observing an after-school tutoring program (gone virtual) serving six fourth graders from District D when the coordinator of the Zoom meeting, the tutor, asked the students if they had finished their homework. After confirming that they had, the tutor said that they would work on a Kahoot (an online group quiz) for extra math practice. One student then immediately exclaimed, “Nuh-uh! I am not doing that, bye!” before turning off her camera and muting herself. Later, I interviewed this student and asked her about the event. She said that her parents make her stay the entire duration of the tutoring session but that if it is

Activity	Time (in person)	Time (distance learning)
Wake up	6:30-7:00 a.m.	8-8:40 a.m.
"Arrive" at school	7:45-7:55 a.m.	8:43 a.m.
School start	8 a.m.	8:45 a.m.
School end	2:45 p.m.	11:00 a.m. (latest)
First YouTube video watched	5:30 p.m. (earliest)	5 p.m.
First video games played (phone, console, PC)	5:30 p.m. (earliest)	5 p.m.
<b>Total spent on technology (not including class/homework)</b>	<b>3-4 hours</b>	<b>5-7 hours</b>

Figure 1: Student Schedule in person vs. distance learning

"boring," she will turn off her camera and watch YouTube, draw, or play *Roblox* (a popular phone game). I asked if they ever came in to check on her and see this, and she said they do not. From further observations, I noted that this behavior is regular, including among other students, and that indeed, her parents, and the parents of other students, do not check on them during these sessions. In addition, these agentic outbursts were contagious—students whom I had never observed behave this way would eventually behave similarly if the circumstances became disagreeable enough. I noted that the coordinator has very few tools for dealing with this and instead must try to creatively prevent it, or simply accept it. Consider the equivalent of this behavior in an in-person setting (if an equivalent exists) and the disciplinary action that may be associated with it. Over the course of my research, I observed that agentic expressions like this one are regular occurrences even during proper class time in front of a student's actual teachers.

I propose that student agency is closely tied to two key aspects of this new context: first, the glimpse that distance learning gave students into the inner-workings of education, particularly, the fragility of this once unchanging aspect of their daily lives; and second, the increased amount of time ("free"

and otherwise, real and imagined) some students were afforded by being home all day, including, in some cases, the freedom to complete their schoolwork on their schedule and terms.

### Friendships

One of the topics that students brought up consistently was their friends. It comes as no surprise that students miss seeing their friends during distance learning, but I observed extensions of this theme which caught my attention. Few parents of the students with whom I spoke were defying county recommendations and allowing their children to congregate in-person with their friends (though this was usually not the case for meeting with family members). However, the students who were allowed to spend time in-person with their friends were most often from higher socioeconomic status families. Apart from this, I observed that all communication students were having with their friends was mediated by social media applications like Zoom, Google Meet, Discord, Google Hangouts, Instagram and through video games with chat functions such as *Roblox* and *Minecraft*. Thus, in these distance learning contexts, data is being harvested from students' communication with their peers and, subject to the terms of use of the platform, may be used for the purposes

of building their “data doubles”: digital second selves, built from mined data and surveillance, that are “increasingly the objects toward which governmental and marketing practices are directed” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613). Although I chose not to pursue this further in this investigation, more research is necessary to discover the implications of children communicating within these conditions.

In some cases, for example that of a sixth-grade student from District C whose classes were held using Canvas Conference (a video conferencing program specifically designed for classes), students were able to send chat messages during class directly to individual students, but teachers were able to see and monitor these chats. The student became aware of this because the teacher would often verbally make comments about them chatting or even enter the chat conversation (in one instance, interrupting a conversation about playing Xbox after class to say, “don’t go to your Xbox after school, do all your work!”) The student laughed as he told me this and said that now he talks to his friends on Discord (a chatting platform geared towards the gaming community).

In contrast to online distance learning, under normal circumstances, students had at least one, and at most, three hours of unmediated, unmonitored, non-archived, face-to-face interaction time with their friends and peers when attending school in-person. Could there be negative effects associated with denying children privacy in these quotidian contexts where it was never of concern before? What could the implications of students’ data being collected from such a young age be?

## Space

The spaces that students used to know as simply their bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms have been redefined as spaces for schooling. One student I spoke to attends class on the same desk his PlayStation and TV are on. Another student attends school from her living room couch. Are these repurposed spaces impacting students’ ability to succeed? The teacher of a first grader in District A would ask parents at the beginning of every class to move any distracting objects that students might feel tempted to play with out of reach. The same

school district sent an email to parents requesting that students do not use spinning chairs at their desks because, as you can imagine, virtual teachers were having trouble stopping children once they got spinning. Research in this area is needed to explore the impacts of these new, hybrid learning spaces.

## Agency and Schooling

Scholarship about children’s agency reveals that the task of defining agency is not straightforward and demands its own theoretical dissection (Abebe 2019; Sirkko et al. 2019; Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie 2006). Ahearn (2001, 130), further complicates the matter with their admonition that “for anthropologists in particular, it is important to avoid treating agency as a synonym for free will or resistance.” Ahearn (2001, 112) elaborates that “all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation;” we do not act in a vacuum. Culture and the world around us influence the way we think, what we believe, and as a result, the possible actions that are available to us (Ahearn 2001, 114). Agency, therefore, as Ahearn (2001, 112) defines it, is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.”

Hammersley (2016, 119) issues a warning like Ahearn’s (2001)—but specific to children—about the danger of dichotomizing agency: “simply opposing a passive model of children to one where they are wholly unconstrained or undetermined in their behaviour, and therefore can exercise autonomous will...children, like adults, must be seen as active in some respects and to some extent but not in any absolute sense.” On top of this, Abebe (2019, 8) suggests conceiving of children’s agency as “interdependent”, which is to say that it is always situated in contexts and relationships, and as a “continuum” in flux, “negotiated continuously between children and families and communities as they navigate tensions between personal and collective interests.” These theoretical considerations informed how I understood and utilized agency conceptually in this research. In addition, I have chosen to refrain from quantifying agency and talking of “more” or “less” agency: “agency is not a quantity that can be measured.” (Ahearn 2001,

122) They continue, “researchers should focus on delineating different kinds of agency, or different ways in which agency is socioculturally mediated in particular times and places.” (Ahearn 2001, 122) Furthermore, it may be possible to emphasize actorhood over agency when discussing students attending in-person school, but this does not void or make the discussion of agency less important. Distance learning produces differential terms and settings for the negotiation of student agency, and the traditional channels of power are challenged as teachers and administrators are bounded by the screen.

Practice theory and the idea of habitus aid in the conceptual leap from simple free will or autonomy to a more nuanced and context-dependent understanding of children’s agency. Practice theories are theories of action that emphasize the entanglement of human action and structures of society and culture, they help us understand how “persons and human activity can be constituted through the social process, while at the same time society and history can be constituted through meaningful human activity.” (Ortner 1989, 11) Habitus is the process which generates dispositions that acknowledge societal structures and constraints; these are not only encoded into our common sense, but are embodied and play out in each situation as we navigate our lives, thus ultimately reproducing the structures and constraints (Bourdieu 1977, 78; Ahearn 2001, 117; Brown, Tubelle, and Mcilwraith 2017, 311). In social theory, habitus is closely related to inequality and power imbalance. Habitus results in ways of being in the world that reinforce our “place in society” and which tacitly consent to our domination.

For example, when most students enter a classroom, they immediately sit at a desk—and sit in a particular way—rather than sitting, say, on the floor. This results in a classroom where all students are sitting in desks, feet on the ground, facing the front of the room. When another student walks in, what will they do? And when it is time for the teacher to plan or enforce classroom etiquette, how will they conceptualize the way students should be in the classroom? All student behaviors are subject to this process: how they enter the school, what rooms they freely walk in to, when they speak in

a classroom, and where they go at recess are the result of, and reason behind, habitus. In-person schooling thus provides the generative circumstances for the habitus of the physical school, rather than schooling more broadly. However, the habitus may generate different possibilities, if, for example, the generative circumstances change abruptly. When we divorce education from in-person school, a merging and reconfiguration occur between the habitus of the school and the habitus of the home. And when gray areas inevitably emerge, authority from parents/guardians may contain major schisms, but what happens in the absence of that authority? I suggest that in these cases, agentic students are filling the gaps.

The “Paradox of Pedagogy,” as expounded by Kant (1803), illuminates the antithetical forces acting within pedagogical settings: encouraging students to exercise their freewill while obliging them to follow the rules. Kant (1803, 27, my emphasis) adds, “[the student] should be made to feel very early *the inevitable opposition of society*, that he may learn how difficult it is to support himself, to endure privation, and to acquire those things which are necessary to make him independent.” In mentioning “the inevitable opposition of society,” Kant nods to the conditions out of which agency arises. Feeling the opposition is the beginning of the negotiation that is agency. The paradox of pedagogy is clearly visible in the highly organized and structured, face-to-face classroom setting where the stakes are high, and punishment feels like a real possibility. Considering the ways in which it limits movement, for example, precluding the ability to leave the classroom or school grounds as one pleases (students cannot close the laptop lid on school in person), the habitus that the physical school institution generates results in a tightly bounded version of student agency. What I would like to invite the consideration of is how detaching education from this context affects agentic possibilities for students and their awareness of them. This research specifically looks at how agency differs for students from different socioeconomic circumstances, which I identified in my fieldwork as the determining factor of the degree to which parents/guardians can recreate



school at-home so that it results in agentive possibilities not too dissimilar from those generated by in-person school. Ultimately then, during distance learning, the “school at home” becomes yet another site for the production of inequality as the conditions for the habitus that is most suitable to academic success are maintained by the parents/guardians of children privileged enough to have them around (Khan 2021, 16).

## Two Critical Aspects of the Transition to Online Distance Learning

Based on my observations, two unique aspects of the transition to online learning have had the greatest influence on student’s sense of agency:

1. Students have witnessed what was previously a taken-for-granted and static element of their lives, education, be deconstructed and have subsequently been a part of the reconstruction process through which they have seen a sneak-peek of its inner-workings.
2. Student's roles have been redefined as part of this reconstruction which in some cases has demanded of them a new sense of responsibility for their education, a greater awareness of time, and an understanding of, and reliance on, technology.

### The Fragility of Education

Intermittent stay-at-home orders forced public education to go virtual nationwide, and students had front-row seats to this process. The exact dates vary, but for most of the country (including Districts A-D), sometime around March 2020, students were told that they would not be attending school the following week and that “temporary arrangements” were being devised so that they could continue their education from home. Students witnessed the struggle to produce Chromebook laptops; in some districts, including District A, every student had one before the school closed. In others, such as District D, students did not receive a Chromebook before the end of the school year. After that, students waited for their teachers to undergo training on how to use necessary online resources (like Canvas, Google

Classroom, Zoom, etc.) to move their classes online. Many of them also saw parents/guardians scramble to put a space together for them to learn in. All this culminated in a shortened, sometimes chaotic, and, as Hart et al. (2019) suggests, potentially easier, stay-at-home version of school. Hart (2019, 8), who studied distance learning in Florida high schools, found “positive effects on passing the contemporaneous course but negative effects on subsequent course performance [and] graduation proxy” for first-time, virtual course takers. The sum of these experiences may have negatively affected students, particularly those who were already only partially committed to their education or who, as I heard from a student in District D, only attend school “because they have to.”

### Students' New Roles

As a result of the chaotic reconstruction of schooling chronicled above, student roles have been redefined and, in some cases, this has entailed a host of new responsibilities.

As a second-grade boy from District B was breaking down his day for me, I could not help but notice how specific he was in detailing the times at which events occurred and their durations: “12:01 to 12:03,” “seven to eight minutes,” “around 2:19.” I asked him if he checks the time often, to which he replied, “Oh yeah, a lot.” He said that he is constantly checking the time on his computer’s taskbar and on his tablet’s home screen, and when he is bored in class he said, he will just watch it. He shared that if his teacher misses the time, (for break for example), he becomes anxious and repeats to himself, “Come on...Say it, say it!” I asked if he had ever thought about time before when he was at school in-person. He paused for a moment. He told me that the only time he ever thought about it was when he was in afterschool care, and it was nearing 6 p.m., which meant that his mom might be late to pick him up. Besides that, he said that his dad would wake him up for school, feed him breakfast and drop him off, and then the bell would go off. And for every subsequent time-bound event during his school day, a bell would go off. I asked, “What would happen now if you did not look at the clock?” and he (an eight-year-old) responded:

If I didn't look at the clock then I definitely know that ...If I don't get anything on time, then my homework assignments wouldn't be assigned [turned in] when they're supposed to be, and I'd get my computer suspended, and I could get bad grades, and I'd just be really messed up.

This abrupt necessity for young students to familiarize themselves with time is stressful and unnatural, specifically for this student: "In young children (6-8 years), the concept of time is closely related with family and leisure time (play)" (Michel, Harb, and Hidalgo 2012, 40). In addition,

Even though they learn how to read a clock, to tell time, during their early school years, it takes [children] a long time to learn to translate their experience into standardized time units...These are the sort of temporal tasks children struggle with and for which they will need support from parents and teachers for many years. (Forman 2015, 2)

This student was not the only one to demonstrate a hyper-awareness of time. In fact, most students had quite a bit to say about time in our interviews, and while I was observing classrooms and after-school programs, there were invariably occasions when a student checked the time or made a comment about it. In one after-school tutoring session, a girl said to the tutor in a stressed tone, "Oh come on, it's already 5:54...We won't have time to play a game before it's over [at 6 p.m.]." This greater awareness of time, in relation to the new distance learning demands on students, was especially impactful for those primarily responsible for overseeing their class attendance and the completion of their assignments. This included those without a parent or sibling at home to remind them of responsibilities and is the first part of the equation that has influenced students' altered sense of agency.

### Balance

Along with a heightened awareness of time and, in the case of the students with minimal assistance or supervision during the day, the

added responsibility of managing their schoolwork, comes some necessity for *balance*. Balance, as I define it, is the ability to allocate the time at your disposal in a way that allows you to fulfill your responsibilities and still have time left for yourself. Balance is usually not something students have to think about until high school, if not college. Why is it then that I observed multiple elementary school students who were either staying up until 11 p.m. to finish a project due the next day, working on daily homework assignments until 9 p.m., or cramming multiple, backed-up assignments (the record for which goes to a first grader whom I observed with ninety-eight pending) the night before the teacher checks for completion?

### Technology

An understanding of technology is another prerequisite that distance learning created for students. I observed that a student's relationship with technology can either expand or limit agentive possibilities in the sense that understanding the capabilities and limitations of their technology, while not being an exhaustive understanding, was enough to allow them to position themselves more favorably in agentive negotiations. Meanwhile, not being able to grasp the basic functions of their Chromebook for example, may relegate students to the distance learning structure dominated by parents, teachers, and administrators. In the study, I found this to be one factor independent of socioeconomic status. While the students from District D may have had less access in general to different varieties of technology (smartphones, tablets, computers), they typically had more unsupervised time to play and experiment with what they did have. And even if the students from District A had more technology at home, their time on it may be more controlled and supervised.

An example of how the reliance on technology during distance learning factored into the agency equation was around the pressure to understand how to use technology well enough to efficiently complete school activities. I emphasize "efficiently" because the biggest obstacle I observed related to technology was surprisingly not how to connect

to a Zoom call or interpret a Google Classroom page, but rather a crippling unfamiliarity with the basic functions of a computer and site-specific tools (like the toolbar on Google Docs). I observed one fourth grader from District D who did *not* know how to move the cursor when typing (and, as a result, would 'backspace' an entire sentence or more just to capitalize a letter); did not know how to change the shape in the shape tool on a homework website and had to make lines and circles out of rectangles (which were quite impressive, notwithstanding how painstaking they were to create); and who did not know how to move and reshape text boxes and thus was forced to format his text with spaces (pressing the spacebar repeatedly). These minute details were the most painful for me to witness because they are basic struggles that can be addressed easily, but awareness of them is lacking. (Fortunately, ethnography is nuanced enough as a research method to identify issues like these.) His parents were out of the home during the day when he worked on assignments so even if they could help him work with the technology more efficiently, there may not have been an opportunity to.

On the other hand, many students were remarkably familiar with technology; they might have had a phone or have used a laptop prior to distance learning or simply learned very quickly. In any case, knowing how to use technology, being comfortable with it, and being able to manipulate it *feels good* and offers students some sense of power. This is especially true for students who realize their parent's or classmate's limitations as far as using and manipulating the same technology. This awakens students to an ability they have that is beyond their parent's and teacher's control. They familiarize themselves with and navigate these digital spaces from an early age, spaces that their parents and teachers might not even understand completely. I interviewed a sixth grader from District B who serves as a proxy between his parents and the internet. He orders items for them, books appointments, downloads files, orders food, and much more. He has become so familiar with his computer as a result of spending all day on it that he exudes a sense of pride during our conversation; I asked, "Is there anything you can't do on the computer?", to which he replied, "Probably not."

with a smirk. As demonstrated in these two examples, a student's confidence and sense of what is possible can be influenced by their relationship with technology. This "sense of what is possible", specifically, is a precursor to a student's positioning in agentive negotiations.

## The Socioeconomic Factor: Case Studies

During my investigation, I identified three distinct, generalizable (within the limited sample) cases circumscribed by one factor that defined the extent of the impacts on students' sense of time and agency: socioeconomic status. To be clear, I am referring here to median income of households served by the district, not necessarily the socioeconomic status of the student's household specifically (I did not elicit this data from students). In my sample, these three levels are clearly distinguishable, but given the small size of the sample, attempting to draw sweeping generalizations would be a mistake. I am including the descriptions and characteristics of these three cases because they were too distinct to ignore in my study, and while they can in no way serve as an end themselves, they may be able to contribute to further research.

I labeled these three socioeconomic distinctions upper-middle-, middle-, and working-class representing District A, B/C, and D, respectively. The most impactful dependent variable within each of the distinctions was parental involvement in the child's schooling. I gathered data about parental involvement both through interviews: asking how involved a student's parents are, how often they are home to help with homework, etc.; and through participant observation: observing whether a parent was present, whether anyone was checking-in on the student, and assessing how near someone who could help is while education is happening. What follows are three case studies corresponding to the three levels. I have only included the student's grade and gender to maintain their anonymity.

### Upper-Middle-Class Case Study

I engaged in participant observation with a boy in kindergarten from District A who has a second-grade sister learning from home as well. I sat beside the student throughout an entire

class session (about two hours). This student's parents hold jobs which allow one of them to be always home. Several qualities that I observed about the environment suggest that education is held in high regard in the household: the cleanliness and organization of the students' desk areas, the strict schedules that they adhere to, and the parent's insistence that they focus during class. I noticed that the parent had already turned on the student's laptop and set-aside the worksheets that the student would need for the day as well as the other necessary materials. The student was in his seat minutes before class started, and throughout the entire class time, the parent was either seated next to, or within earshot of, the student. When break time came around (which the parent was prepared for), they engaged the student as soon as it began and got him working on homework. At one point, when the teacher was giving instructions, the student either did not understand or got distracted, but he was able to turn to his parent and have the instructions clarified at once. At the end of class, no time was wasted; he ate lunch and homework followed immediately after.

Of particular interest here is that the student in this context's daily routine is not too unlike a regular school day: they are awoken by their parents at the same time each day, fed breakfast, and they always have a supervisor and timekeeper present with them. I never observed this student check the time, stress over a lack of balance, or struggle with technology. As such, the elements of new student roles which I laid-out in the previous section and described as having an impact on their sense of agency seem to either not apply at all or to apply only minimally to this student.

### Middle-Class Case Study

I was not able to sit with this student through class, but I did conduct three interviews with him over the course of the data collection period. This student was a second-grade boy from District B who has an older brother who was also learning from home. He explained to me that one of his parents must go out to work every day and the other works from home. During the school day, his parent is not available except at lunchtime, when they only

have a long-enough break to feed the student and his brother, not help with homework. The student explained to me that he is largely in charge of his schooling: he must join his classroom video call on time, identify and track his assignments, time his breaks and daily reading time (he says "Siri, set a timer..."), and be done with his homework by the time his parent is done working if he hopes to play video games. The student told me that if he has questions during the school day he has to try and ask his older brother (who is often busy or reluctant to help) or "figure it out on [his] own." This student admitted to obsessing over time, "daydreaming," and staying up late to finish homework. He explained that he was having a harder time with his schoolwork than he did when he was at school in-person. He also shared that he is comfortable using his computer (more so than his classmates) and that he has a tablet on which he plays games and watches YouTube in the morning before school and during breaks.

I have classified this student's situation as 'middle' because, of all the students I talked to, this situation or a slight variation of it was the most common. They have one or more parents/guardians working from home, and they may have a sibling also engaged in distance learning. These students have the autonomy to do as they please during the day seeing as they complete their schoolwork, and in general, they value school because they believe education is important. In this case, each element of student's new roles applies here: the student had to become familiar enough with clock-time to stick to a schedule on their own, the student sometimes struggles balancing schoolwork and leisure, and the student is confident in their abilities with technology which adds a layer of possibility to their actions. Instead of asking about his agency explicitly (which would have been tricky unless I had, for example, offered him a situational vignette—a method utilized by Gurdal and Sorbring (2018) in a study about student agency), I asked about his brother and whether they ever disagreed. He said that his brother often tries to "boss him around" when his parents are not present. I asked if he stood up for himself, and he said that he does. He said that sometimes he asks his brother for help with his homework and his brother says



that he cannot help because he is in the middle of a video game; he said that in these cases, he will yell at him “[brother] you need to help me because I have homework and you’re just playing video games!”

### Working-Class Case Study

I was able to observe a fourth-grade student from District D in several afterschool tutoring program sessions and was able to ask her questions regularly. Her parents work outside the home and are gone all day, though she has an older brother at home. The student explained that she and her brother are responsible for “going to school,” doing homework, and feeding themselves during the day. She said that she does her homework as quickly as she can so that she can play phone games like *Roblox* and *Among Us* and watch YouTube and TikTok. She told me that her parents do not raise any questions as to how she spends her time as long as her assignments are turned in. During the virtual afterschool program, she is one of the many students who will verbally object to the activities suggested by the coordinator and will turn her camera off to play when she is not interested. I asked her if she is obligated to attend afterschool tutoring or if not, why she does. She said that she joined to see her friends. This student’s familiarity with games and apps demonstrated that she was comfortable with technology. I asked the student if she felt that education was important, and she said she “has to do it.”

Based on my observations, this was the most extreme situation in terms of new agentic possibilities. The student already viewed her education as a means to an end—the barrier between her and video games or social media—and distance learning, as a result of the pandemic, served to further frame education as a fragile institution, susceptible to change and negotiation. Beyond that, the responsibilities that she had taken on by overseeing her education and her meals translated into agentic action in the context of the optional afterschool program, that is, making of the situation what she wanted—a hangout—and challenging the authority figure, whom she realizes, lacking the threat of coercion, has few options for re-making the situation.

## Conclusion

Mandatory distance learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic merged the home and the school, consolidated “free” time and “school” time, and in the process blurred the boundaries of student agency. The degree to which students experienced the agency-altering effects of distance learning was inversely proportional to their relative socioeconomic situation. Higher socioeconomic circumstances meant that parents/guardians were able to recreate ‘school-at-home’ such that student’s agentic possibilities were not too dissimilar from those generated by in-person school. Lower socioeconomic circumstances resulted in several new responsibilities for students, including the need to prematurely conceptualize time, practice time management, and learn to use and rely on technology. These responsibilities sometimes led to stress, imbalance, and obsessive behaviors. At the same time, they presented students with new agentic possibilities around their education that resulted in resistance, negotiation, and adapting educational contexts to meet their desires. The implications of this may be further educational disadvantages downstream and lower rates of educational success for students who were already at a disadvantage, thus ultimately perpetuating the reproduction of inequality. As others have noted (see Blume and Esquivel 2020; Esquivel et al. 2020), this is unfortunately a recurring theme: amidst new circumstances, the disadvantaged remain at a disadvantage. This discourse must continue if we hope to interrupt this cycle and move towards a situation where education can equitably serve all students.

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