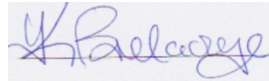


Kindergarten During Covid: Can One Have A Successful Education While Learning From Home?

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts – as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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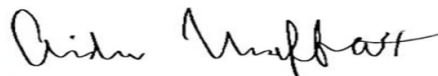
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Abstract

This Praxis Project explores how remote learning has disrupted the academic life of a child entering the education system for the first time. The findings in this study offers insight for educators everywhere and speaks to the importance of the relationship between teachers and students. The research revealed that as students were forced to learn remotely because of the pandemic, their relationships with their teachers, as well as with their peers, shifted. To conduct this study, I observed a kindergartener who learned remotely for the school year, examining the child's attention span, mood, attitude, relationship to peers and teachers, and academic growth as he learns virtually from his home.

Table of Contents

- 1. Title Page**
- 2. Abstract**
- 3. Introduction**
 - Problems I Am Focused On
- 4. Review of Literature**
- 5. What do Students' Need to Succeed: A Conceptual Framework**
- 6. Methods**
 - Methodology
 - Role of Babysitter
 - Participants
 - Learning from Home
 - The Roles of the Babysitter
 - Analyzing My Observations
- 7. Findings**
 - Student-Teacher Relationships

 - Student-Student Relationships

 - Student/Sibling Relationship
- 8. Conclusion**
 - Community Results

 - Implications for Teaching

 - Limitations I Faced
- 9. Bibliography**

Introduction

Day one of kindergarten, while learning remotely, brought both Gary and his family to tears. For Gary, it was the typical “first day of kindergarten” jitters. For his parents, it was the realization that their child was beginning kindergarten while sitting in his bedroom, and the unknown of his whole class learning remotely and what that would entail. One of Gary’s parents asked, “How is he supposed to sit still for seven hours of school?” I wondered to myself, “I have no idea.”

In March 2020, schooling transformed into a whole different process due to the pandemic. Remote learning took over the typical in person learning that is traditional in schools across the globe. Teachers and students alike struggled with adapting to this new method of learning as communication between teachers and students moved into a virtual model, as opposed to meeting daily in the classroom meeting face to face. With many lacking proper knowledge about technology, the added technological issues and glitches, as well as connection failures meant that remote learning took students and teachers a long time to figure out and how to adapt to. Along with these difficulties came the isolation of students no longer being able to learn in classrooms with their peers and teachers, and lack of student attention and motivation grew as in-person relationships perished due to quarantine.

As Clark University changed from in having in person classes to a remote learning model, faculty and students all struggled with this new and unexpected transition. Now, in the spring of 2021, despite having a year’s worth of experience with remote learning, students and faculty are still struggling to get back to where they were

last school year. It is hard to make connections with peers and professors who one sees briefly on a computer screen, and it can be difficult to dictate lessons via technology while keeping the overall message understood. As I see adults struggle with this new form of learning, even tech savvy young adults, I wondered, “How are children handling this drastic change?” I realized it would be hard to understand a child’s point of view on remote learning as perhaps they would not be able to describe their feelings and thoughts as adequately and with as much detail as someone who is older may be able to express orally.

While I was previously planning to engage in research in a Worcester Public School classroom, due to the pandemic I was no longer allowed to work in a public school classroom, which took away my access to studying a larger group of students as they underwent virtual learning. However, I soon realized that I would have the opportunity to observe a child entering kindergarten as the child I babysat, Gary, began elementary school remotely. His experience differs from other elementary school students given that he has never attended elementary school in person, since this is his first year, and I wondered if that would make the transition to virtual kindergarten smoother. Gary had had no experience learning in person in an elementary school setting, but he had been in preschool in person the year prior, so would virtual learning be a struggle? For a couple days a week, I was given the opportunity to watch how Gary interacted with his teacher and peers via his daily Zoom classes. I have gotten to observe his motivation, the amount of effort he put into his work, his connection with his peers and teachers, his attention span, and his mood; all factors affected by schooling turning remote. I wondered, would his attitude

towards school differ or be the same as a typical kindergartener entering elementary school, and how would virtual learning change his kindergarten experience? Will Gary be able to have a successful school year, and be able to access the resources necessary for this to happen, while learning from home?

In order to better understand the impact of remote learning on children, I first researched what the research literature indicates the most important aspects of schooling are in regards to have a successful schooling experience. After, I observed Gary as he underwent his daily lessons, to compare how remote learning impacted his schooling experience. To understand of how Gary felt, I asked him about his thoughts on his classmates, teachers, classes, and homework, while noting his mood and attention span during the day. I made notes if he was giggling and in a good mood before and after a class, or if his mood was more grumpy and frustrated. I noted if Gary was paying attention in class, by listening to hear if he was participating and sharing, or if he was playing with his toys instead. After classes, I would ask what was discussed and if he enjoyed it, to see if he was paying attention and what Gary's thoughts on the class were. I would ask him about his classmates, as I was interested to see if he could form a connection to his peers as he communicated with them on Zoom. I did my research over the course of a few months while Gary remained in remote learning, therefore my research did not continue and follow him in the spring when he returned to learning in person.

In the fall, I could see that while Gary retained his curiosity and desire to learn, without seeing his teacher and classmates in person he struggled to form connections with his teachers and peers, which discouraged him from his lessons at times. “I don’t need new friends, I have Mary” (his twin sister). In order to observe if Gary was able to form proper connections with his teachers and peers, I needed to narrow in on specific questions I wanted to find answers for that would help me narrow in on these ideas. I decided the most important aspect on Gary’s remote schooling experience I needed to focus on was his relationships within his class.

Problems I Am Focused On:

As remote learning is a newer concept, I decided I would focus on learning what aspects make a successful education, and look into remote learning to see if students can retain these same elements that researchers have deemed necessary to learn successfully. Through this research, I quickly found that researchers feel that connections between a student and his classmates and teacher are the key to a successful school year. Specifically, I would look into how Gary’s teacher and student relationships were affected by using Zoom as their main form of communication, and I would use this knowledge to observe if Gary would be able to attain these same relationships despite being in a different physical space than the rest of his class. What I was most interested in seeing is how would Gary’s relationships with his teacher and peers be affected due to not learning in person; would talking to each other over computer screens deter his class from making the strong connections necessary to

have a successful education? Would he be able to form friendships as he was no longer given recess time to play and chat with peers? How will these relationships look differently from those formed in person?

To address these problems, I will focus on how I see relationships being formed through computer screens. Will the lack of recess, lunch time, and hallway time result in less social children? I looked at how Gary acted with his classmates in the online environment and compared it with my previous experiences of children interacting in in-person classrooms. Additionally, I was interested in how Gary felt talking to his teacher, and observing her ability to get to know Gary on a more personal level now that they communicate via the computer? Before delving into my research, as I began babysitting Gary and his twin sister Mary before the school year started, I formed the following research questions to narrow in on the overall concepts I want to focus in on:

1. How does virtual learning affect the child's relationship with his teachers?
2. How does virtual learning affect the child's relationship with his peers?
3. How does virtual learning affect the child's attention span?
4. How does virtual learning affect the child's motivation to learn?
5. How does virtual learning affect the child's mood/feelings about school?

To investigate these research questions, I decided I would take notes on how I saw the child interacting with his teacher; was it in a professional/formal manner or was he discussing his personal life with the teachers? I would look to see if he showed interest in his studies and lessons, or if he pushed them aside. I planned to observe how he formed connections with his classmates, or if he could form friendships with his new peers without experience like lunch and recess together. From babysitting

Gary previously, I knew he was curious and loved to learn, so I observed if his love for learning decreased or remained strong while being taught remotely. October marked the start of the second year of babysitting Gary, and his sister Mary. The previous year, I babysat Mary once a week for the whole day, and occasionally babysat Gary. This year, I was to babysit Gary, as he was home most mornings remote learning while Mary was in school. Mary has downs syndrome, and was granted the ability to go into school every morning in order to ensure she was getting proper resources, which is why I tend to focus on Gary during this research as he spent the majority of time learning from home. Gary's parents are educators and were either at work in person, or busy teaching remotely from home and were unable to watch Gary, hence why I babysat.

A typical schedule for Gary looked like this:

8:30-9:00 Class Meeting

9:00-9:30 Library

10-10:30 Art

Independent work/homework time

Lunch

2:00 Foundations

2:45-3:00 Closing Meeting

As you can see, there is time factored in the day for breaks, recess, snack, and lunch, but since Gary was not officially in a classroom, he would get confused when I would tell him it was time for class. "But let's stay at the playground for ten more

minutes, and then class can start,” he would say. I realized he didn’t understand that I was not the one who decided when class was- it seemed since I was the one logging him into class, he assumed if I didn’t log him in, class wouldn’t happen. I speak more about Gary and my relationship further on in the findings section.

Review of Literature

For my research, I focused on remote learning during a pandemic. While remote learning was a concept prior to Spring of 2020, the unexpectedness of this pandemic has caused for remote learning to be unprecedented and unpredictable. There is not much literature or research on the concept of remote learning specifically during a pandemic, examining the experiences so many children had in 2020, so I had to look at news and articles written in the time of Covid before beginning my personal investigation. However, I found articles explaining how the lack of in person classes correlated to school communities and relationships perishing, and I decided to do more research on the benefits of a student forming relationships with their teachers and peers holds on their academics and their social life, and I decided I would compare that to my observations of Gary’s learning experience to notice if it was possible to form these connections while learning remotely.

In reviewing the limited available research on remote learning, remote learning seems to have the most negative affect on children from low-income households (Kamentez, 2020). A large part of this problem involves lack of access to technology, therefore leaving students unable to access the virtual class sessions as well as their virtual homework. While Gary had access to electronics, even he was unable to access

his classes at times due to lack of WIFI and power outages (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). Anya Kamentez (2020) from NPR, says, “Four out of 10 of the poorest U.S. students are accessing remote learning as little as once a week or less... by contrast, for families making more than \$100,000 a year, 83% of kids are doing distance learning every day, with the majority engaged over two hours a day” (para 1). Gary had been given an iPad from his school in order to ensure all students had the technology needed to access their virtual classes. However, if students did not have WIFI at home, these devices can seem pointless. One must have the adequate technology at home in order to have full access to their work; thus, children from higher income households have an advantage over their peers who lack these services. Tawnell D. Hobbs (2020) of the *Wall Street Journal*, adds “there were students with no computers or internet access... and many parents weren’t available to help. It expects a greater learning loss for minority and low-income children who have less access to technology, and for families more affected by the economic downturn” (para 7). Students in lower income communities often have to figure out remote learning alone without the guidance of an adult, as their parents/guardians are away at work and are unable to assist them in their studies. In Gary’s case, I was available to help him with all of his technological questions as I am his babysitter during the school day, giving him an advantage that other children may not have. I found this problem is extremely crucial for kindergarteners, as they do not yet know how to read, and need guidance to read what is on the computer or iPad screen in order to access their virtual classroom. How are children supposed to access Zoom or do their homework online when they need an adult to read the instructions to them, which they do not have available to them during

the school day as their parents are at work or working from home unable to supervise them? Not all children have a babysitter, nanny, or parent to help them access their lessons leaving them unable to proceed until an adult is nearby to help them, causing them to fall behind the rest of their classmates who have greater support. A report on ABC News (May 20, 2020) adds that children struggle when their family cannot afford or access printing capabilities, and how this causes students to be unprepared for their lessons as well. While some school districts are giving students electronic devices, how are families with multiple children supposed to share these resources, especially if they cannot afford internet and WIFI? What if they break the device and can't afford to buy a new one?

Another problem researchers have found with remote learning is how teachers cannot support their students in the same way as they would have had they been in person to help them. Tawnell D. Hobbs (2020) dug deeper into this idea by interviewing a Spanish teacher on how remote learning has affected their relationships with their students. The research showed that it is hard for teachers to understand their students' body language and mood virtually, making it more difficult to provide support and assistance to their students. Tawnell quotes the Spanish teacher, "In the classroom, I can look around and see body language and know when some of my students not fluent in Spanish need me to switch to English. I can't do that online. We need the interaction with the kids, face-to-face" (para 15). For elementary school teachers, personal interaction is key for students to learn effectively and feel comfortable in the classroom... "You miss being in the classroom being able to look at all of them, being able to walk over to them, being able to say, 'Hey, are you OK?' or being able to give

them a pat on the back," Kristen Robinson, a fourth grade math teacher at Darnaby Elementary School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, told "Nightline" (2020, para 3). Early on in my research, I saw Kindergarteners on Zoom calls cry as the teacher remained helpless, unable to support her students as they were not in person to comfort them or ask them what was wrong. Similarly, it is harder for children to focus and stay on task when their teacher is not in the room to remind them and hold them responsible.

Most of the literature written on remote learning was pessimistic and determined that in person classes were superior in supporting students' needs. Remote learning catered more to the upper class, and took away many resources necessary for students to have a successful education. The limited amount of research on remote learning tends to focus on economic and resource allocation challenges. While these are important factors that play a large part in how one's remote learning experience will play out, what remains unaddressed, and is more pressing in this time when so many children are forced to receive instruction on-line, is how the remote learning experience affects the relational aspects of teaching and learning. In my study, I explore how remote learning impacts the relational dynamics between a teacher and their students and between a student's peers, and how this can affect their academics.

What do Students' Need to Succeed: A Conceptual Framework

Research reveals students' need to be able to form strong relationships with their teachers and peers, and to be able to socialize and communicate with their classmates (Sadker & Cooper, 2020). In essence, human connection and close relationships are the key parts of a successful education (Shakya, Fasano, Marsh &

Rivas, 2020). Classrooms need to have a sense of community in order for students to prosper (Spilt, Koomoen, & Thijs, 2011). When one is remote learning, they lose the opportunity to form a strong bond with their teacher and peers, as well as have other obstacles thrown their way, regarding technology, physical space, lack of individual attention, lack of structure, etc. (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). I use “connections” and “relationships” synonymously. The main relationship types I look at are between teacher and student, student and student, and in this particular case, between student and his twin sister. I will also spend some time examining my relationship with the student. When using the term relationship, I am looking specifically at how these relationships differ due to the class members being in different physical spaces. My assumption before the school year started was that when Gary was not able to learn in the same proximity as his teacher and peers, their relationships would be strained, thus affecting his education.

In *Community Level Design Considerations in Creating Communities of Inquiry*, Bielaczyc (2020) discusses the concept of a successful classroom viewing themselves as a *we*, rather than an *I*. However, it can be hard to form a close-knit community when the only interactions the students have with one another is virtual and they lack time to socialize. The students lose hallway time, lunch, and recess in which they would have had free time to bond and interact with one another. Bielaczyc stresses that community is needed within a classroom to best stimulate learning, as “socializing students into ways of talking, thinking, and acting as a community of inquiry provides a means for developing a deeper understanding of the nature of knowledge creation through disciplinary norms and practices” (p. 1). When students learn remotely,

learning becomes more about the individual than about the class learning together as one, which can lead to a lack of conversation and openness. Without this form of community, one's academic learning is affected as "individuals do not construct scientific knowledge, communities do" (p. 1). Bielaczyc further discusses the idea of a KBC, Knowledge Building Communities. The purpose of KBCs are for students to work together as a community, and to combine all of their diverse knowledge and skills. After reading this, I thought to myself, "Without building a community, how would students feel comfortable sharing knowledge with one another?" I kept this idea in mind as I observed Gary's kindergarten class, to see if such young students would feel comfortable speaking in front of other students they were unable to get to know.

Spilt, Koomen and Thijs (2011) further this idea of community and relationships between teachers and students stating that "teachers internalize experiences with students in representational models of relationships that guide emotional responses in daily interactions with students and change teacher wellbeing in the long run" (p. 457). The authors continue, "Teachers are important adults in children's scholastic lives, and there is some evidence that teacher wellbeing, at least indirectly, has significant effects on children's socio-emotional adjustment and academic performance... For students, it is evident that the affective quality of the teacher-student relationship is an important factor in their school engagement, wellbeing, and academic success" (p. 458). If a teacher feels they are lacking a bond with their students, the students are sure to notice and in turn their education will be affected. How is a student supposed to confide in their teacher if they do not feel they have a relationship with them? Will

students still respect their teacher in the same way as they would have had they been in a classroom together?

Sadker, Sadker and Cooper (1973) further discuss community and feelings of alienation within the classroom, stating, "Alienation demonstrates a feeling of estrangement in the environment, a failure of pupils to internalize school objectives and norms, and a lack of student cooperation and feeling of community" (p. 192). Without cultivating proper relationships with their teachers or peers, students are more likely to see learning as an individual process rather than one built and centered on community and working together. They discuss the importance of "the use of the community as a learning resource. Some schools enrich classroom learning by exploring and using the community. Guest speakers are invited to classrooms. Children attend movies, plays, and concerts, and go on field trips" (p. 291). These interactions are seen as crucial to the children in order for them to have a successful schooling experience. Without them, how is one to feel as though they are a part of a community of learning, as opposed to being an individual learner.

I came to the conclusion after reading many articles about the importance of relationships in schools, that these relationships are necessary in order for students to be able to reach their full potential within the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom. What remained unknown was how would these relationships be able to form over a virtual screen. I decide I will look to see if I find Gary's classroom is able to create KBC or a classroom community that exhibits traits similar to one. I will also look to see if Gary's class is able to bond while interacting remotely. Would they be able to speak to one another openly and comfortably, or would they remain more independent

learners? I will attempt to identify if Gary is able to form these relationships with his teacher, and how I see the relationship affecting his learning.

Methods

Methodology

As I was acting as a caretaker for the student I was observing, at first I decided it would be best to take more of ethnographic case study approach and remain more a fly on the wall. Any actions I took were that of a babysitter and tutor, not a researcher. However, sometimes I found my role of babysitter and my role as a researcher intersect, as I used both of these roles to help Gary form relationships with his teachers and classmates. My research became more of a practitioner inquiry as I began to make changes based on how I saw fit. Gary's parents gave me this freedom, and while we would have conversations where they told me some expectations, they also said "These decisions are up to you, since you are the one who is with him in his classes." They gave me the agency to help and assist Gary as I saw fit, which took away from my original "fly on a wall" thinking.

I decided I would write my notes based upon Gary's remote learning experience rather than both his and his sister's experience, as Mary was in school every morning whereas Gary did not have the opportunity to go into school as frequently as she did. As Gary's babysitter, all of the interventions I used to help him adjust to remote learning were tools his parents and I felt would best help him feel supported in his remote learning school year. I would be there to support and guide Gary when I felt

appropriate; I educated him and tutored him when I found he had a hard time focusing in class and was unable to do his homework, but I did not assist him and give him any answers during his class as I realized then he would not be learning at all. Any interventions were done as a caretaker rather than an educator or a researcher, as my role as a babysitter came first.

Role of Babysitter

I found this methodology was a good fit for my project because remote learning is a new experience that sprang out of the pandemic and I did not have a lot of insight in how to go about supporting a student in remote learning as a caretaker. As I am not a licensed teacher, I do not have the tools needed to guide a student through learning remotely, though most teachers are struggling with this as well. My job was to babysit Gary, though I would incorporate ideas from my research as I would tutor him, as well as try to get him to communicate more with his teachers and peers in order to grow a relationship with them.

Learning from Home

For my site, I observed a 5-year-old child whom I have been the babysitter of for over a year—this is our second year together. I feel the child trusted me and felt free to communicate his thoughts to me, and would clearly explain his thoughts on remote learning to me the best he can. Because we already had a connection and trust between us, he openly discussed his emotions and thoughts. As I was watching him

for multiple days a week, I had the opportunity to watch Gary's Zoom classes, giving me the ability to see how he interacted with his teachers and peers, and to note his attitude towards the class. We stayed in the house all morning, typically just the two of us, with one 30 minute break either at the local playground or in his backyard.

Occasionally, one of his parents would be home, but they would be on another floor of the house to give Gary space during his classes. Around noon we would pick up Gary's sister Mary, and during the afternoon classes Gary would work in one room, while Mary and I worked in another.

Participants

In the previous year, Gary attended preschool, so he had experience with in person learning before starting remote kindergarten. Both of his parents are in the education field, so Gary has grown up surrounded by educators, and though he had not experienced in person learning beyond a preschool level, he had enough experience to feel the difference between his prior preschool learning, and his remote kindergarten learning. As both of Gary's mothers are in the field of education, they had their own tips and tools in how to proceed with remote learning in a way that would help Gary, and the two could speak to me clearly about their hopes and goals for Gary's school year. As a student studying education, I came prepared with tools of my own to assist Gary, and I was able to have deeper conversations about how I saw remote learning affecting Gary with his parents. Similarly to Gary, Mary had experience in school prior to kindergarten, but she was in the school every morning so she had

more of an insight into her peers and teachers than Gary was able to get from home. Another aspect that is important to note is Mary has down syndrome, which allows her to learn in person every morning with help from her teachers while Gary learned from home, and this affects the two of their relationship.

The Roles of the Babysitter

It was my second year babysitting Gary, so I was able to start my research with a close relationship between us already formed. Last year when I would babysit Gary I would play games with him and entertain him, and be the “fun babysitter.” This year our relationship is a little different, where I am his “helper” all day as his parents called it, for a couple days a week. Being called a “helper” rather than being called a babysitter was meant to show Gary that I was there to support his academic needs as well as his personal needs. While we would still play games and be silly with one another, I also helped him with his homework and lessons, taking on more of a tutor position at times. Although sometimes he got frustrated with me when I would exit my role of playmate and enter my role of tutor/teacher, he often listened and was comfortable working with me. Because this is our second year together and he first met me in a non-educational role, Gary seemed comfortable telling me his thoughts and how he is feeling and made it known when he would and would not do work. While our relationship has grown this year, from the start of the remote school year he felt open about telling me how he feels about remote school; I did not have to worry about him being shy or holding information back. Having met him first last year as a

“playmate” (babysitter), this year he would get confused at times as to why I was telling him to do homework. He would ask, “Why can’t we play?” Over time, he began to enjoy doing his homework, to the point where he would ask me to take out his homework instead of me initiating it, showing charge.

Data Collection

While babysitting, I collected the following forms of data:

Written logs:

I left a book log for his parents, so they could have an insight to how he was reacting to his remote learning while they were away at work. I noted his attitude, behavior, and schedule.

Notes

During the first month, I wrote down every class that Gary had, and how he reacted to said classes for my own personal notes. I took weekly notes to write down anything I found important in-regards to Gary’s temperament and how remote learning was affecting him.

Written Student Work

I took pictures of some of Gary’s homework and classwork, so I would have a copy of some of his lessons, and to see how he responded to the questions being asked of him.

Analyzing My Observations

Given these are the ways I documented my research, I narrowed in on observing how Gary’s relationships were affected with his classmates and teachers as he was learning in a different physical space than them, and how his sister affected his remote

learning when she returned from morning school to do remote afternoon lessons. I also focused in on how his twin sister being home in the afternoons affected him, as they were in the same class, and how I saw having a peer in the same space helped him focus better in class.

I looked to see if I find a sense of community within Gary's classroom that resembles a KBC, by noting the class's participation and communication with one another. I noted Gary's conversations and attitudes when conversing with his classmates to determine if I feel they have made a strong bond and an open classroom community, or if they end up only interacting with the teacher. I looked to see how Gary formed a relationship with his teacher, and see if he could form his own personal connection with her, or if he was seen as one of her various students. I noted their individual conversations, within and outside of the virtual classroom, and noted how they interact with one another.

Findings

As I babysat Gary during the whole school day, I was able to set plans in place to help him focus on his studies and understand the materials. As the adult watching over him during the school day, I was responsible for him attending his online classes, and doing his homework. It took a few weeks for me to figure out how much of an active helper I should be to him during his remote classes. At first, since he is young, I figured I should sit beside him to help him work technology, since the teacher would frequently ask questions such as "click on the button that says, "Breakout room,"" or "click the "Mute" button" which Gary was unable to do since he could not read yet.

Aside from technology help, I would remind him at times to pay attention and to listen to his teacher. Yet, after a few weeks I realized that although assisting Gary was helpful, he was regularly distracted by my presence. While he did need an authoritative figure to watch over him during class, his teacher needed to figure out how to fill that role while teaching remotely; since I would never attend school with him in person, my presence added direction but it was also an added distraction. Gary would try to climb on my lap, or play with me during his classes instead of focusing on his lessons. While I wanted to aid him in his transition to online schooling, it became clear that having me in the room was more a distraction than helpful.

To combat this, but to still be helpful, I began to disassociate from him while he was in class. I would log him into his remote class but then go sit in another room so he could not see me. If he needed guidance or help, he would come and get me when needed. Since he would not have a babysitter or an aid in school, my presence brought on an added distraction. It was difficult to decide to leave him unattended as I wanted to help him with technology, and to explain what the teacher was saying, but overall I found it better for him to be an independent student (not in regards to the class, but in regards to me) when I was out of the room. He had to rely on his teacher for cues and questions, which in turn helped them form a relationship. Although his relationship with his teacher was not near what I assume it would have been had he been learning in person, I realized as a babysitter/nanny, I cannot replace the teacher no matter how much of a tutoring role I took on; it simply was not how Gary saw me. Though I disengaged and sat in another room during his classes, I still found there

were times where I was needed to help him communicate with his teacher, which is when I would interject myself.

When I would peek in to check up on Gary occasionally during class, I would find him crying in distress. It took him a while to take some breaths and to explain his emotions, but when he could, he told me sadly “My teacher didn’t call on me,” and he was not given a chance to explain his ideas as he felt he had been ignored. I had to explain that because remote learning is difficult at times, his teacher did not have time to call upon everyone, but that it did not mean she was not interested in his ideas. After a couple weeks of this, I decided to speak to the teacher after his class ended one day. I asked Gary if he wanted to explain his feelings himself, and he said no, so I shared to his teacher what he shared to me. I explained to her that Gary would cry when he was not called on, and he wanted to talk with peers and explain his ideas. The teacher hadn’t realized she was the reason Gary was upset, and thanked me for sharing. “I saw he was upset, but I could not determine why,” she told me. I used my role as a caretaker to explain Gary’s thoughts to his teacher, which in turn would improve his relationship with her. Because of this talk, Gary’s teacher dedicated time once a week for thirty minutes as “Share Time,” where each student would get to share a fact or an item they found interesting. Gary looked forward to Share Time, and when he did not get a chance to explain his ideas to the class, I would remind him he could share at the set Share Time. This intervention was extremely helpful, as it helped reassure Gary that he would have time to speak to his peers eventually, despite not being in the same room as them.

I found another cause for crying was when he was having a hard time understanding the materials being taught, and it would cause him to cry in frustration as there was rarely any time at the end of class to ask the teacher for help. I decided I would look ahead in his schedule and tutor him a little in the materials of the upcoming lesson so he would have some background knowledge on the issues and gain confidence. Soon after prepping him for his classes, as the teacher introduced the new material, Gary would light up and say, "I heard about that, I can share about it!" Since he lacked the individualized teacher support he would have received had he been in school in person, by prepping him on new concepts in advance, he gained a sense of confidence and his participation in class grew. He began shutting down less, as he was eager to help introduce his classmates to these concepts, excited he had insight. "Look at my paper, I did the work!" he would say excitedly, or when the teacher would announce the worksheet the students would be filling out, he would proudly say, "I already did that with my babysitter." I found tutoring Gary and going over his homework together helped prepare him for class, so he wouldn't need me to explain anything to him while learning new material as we had already discussed it.

I was able to help Gary with his technology troubles as well; although many kids are used to using electronics to play games, using an iPad for school is much different. I noticed one of the biggest flaws of using technology in Gary's case was he was unable to read, so he was unable to click the correct buttons. Often, his teacher would say, "Everyone, click the button that says breakout room!", but would forget that the students were only beginning to learn how to read and did not know how to spell that word. I would assist him in getting into the breakout rooms, but the other students did

not have someone to help them find the correct buttons. The teacher would say, "You can all go into the Zoom breakout rooms now, you can do it, I see Gary did it," and I discussed this with his parents, explaining how all the other students were held to a higher expectation because Gary had an adult to assist him. Often times he would log himself out of his calls by accident and not know how to log back in. Other times, he would purposely log out of the Zoom call, so he could gain a few moments of play time while I re-logged him in. I could tell it was accidental when he would log out of the call once a day, and ask me to hurry to log him back in, and other times it was evident he did it on purpose as he did it multiple times in one class and would not tell me he logged out. In our case, he would revert back to me, and I would reroute his iPad back to his lesson, but I have since realized that the other students did not all have an adult able to assist them with technology during their lessons.

When Gary is in his Zoom classes, his fellow classmates do not know how to read and thus cannot click the button to get them into breakout rooms to work in small groups. Without access to the breakout rooms, the students lose the ability to work and converse in smaller groups, isolating themselves. Without the ability to communicate to each other in smaller groups, the kindergarteners lose an important requirement of forming a KBC. Similarly, for the first few month of online lessons, I find Gary's teacher had to spend more time giving out technology instructions rather than teaching the lesson, limiting the time students have to share their ideas and limiting talking time.

While analyzing data, I could see my main focuses were on three types of relationships; Gary—teacher, Gary—classmates, Gary—Mary. The few that did not fall directly under these three categories included reoccurring themes of technology usage, structure/lack of structure, and resources, but my main focus was the relationships Gary made/lacked and how it affected his education. I also look closely into how physical space and proximity shaped these relationships. Below I take up the student-teacher relationship first before turning to the relationships with his classmates and sister.

Student-Teacher Relationships

As discussed earlier, Hobbs and Hawkins (2020) describe the importance learning in person plays into teachers picking up on their student's emotions. In classrooms when a student cries, the teacher can pull them aside and talk things out. While learning remotely, it is harder for teachers to tell when their students are suffering not to mention picking up on why they are suffering or find the time to speak to the upset student individually as they would in a classroom. It is also more difficult to comfort students through screens. I found this especially prevalent while observing a kindergarten Zoom class. Children so young cry easily, and as one can expect, the added challenges of remote learning added to their tears. One of the challenges of this was that students would often turn off their camera when they were upset. I found this was prevalent for Gary. While he could see his classmates and teachers faces on Zoom, I noticed Gary would turn off his camera when he got upset, or would he leave the room. Because he was able to hide his emotions, his teachers could not read his

body language and did not know he was upset or confused. Similarly, there were various times that Gary got upset and would cry and raise his hand to be called upon to find a solution to his problems, and his teachers would either not notice, or they would not have enough time to teach the lesson as well as address their students' emotional needs as they would if they were learning in person. Multiple times, he would raise his hand for the entire thirty minute lesson without being called on once, and groan in frustration, tears forming in his eyes. Gary would think his teachers did not care about his well-being and told me he thought they were purposely ignoring him which angered him; I had to explain to him that his teachers only had a certain amount of time for class and did not have the time to call upon everyone. After this occurred for a couple weeks, Gary and I would remain on the call after the class ended, and I would help him verbally explain to the teacher his emotions, so that she could help him find solutions, and would understand where he was at mentally (see also, below). Without his teacher being able to comfort him or discuss anything that was unrelated to school, he struggled to develop a strong relationship with her that would have given him more motivation to focus and pay attention in class.

Hobbs and Hawkins (2020) interview Austin Beutner, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, who added, "We all know there's no substitute for learning in a school setting, and many students are struggling and falling far behind where they should be" (para 5). Though this was Gary's first year in elementary school, he felt a disconnect between him and his teachers for the first few months of remote learning, as he did not get many opportunities to speak in class given that remote lessons were short and told me he thought this was because the teachers were

ignoring him on purpose. To make up for a lacking relationship with his teacher during Zoom calls, Gary and I would send emails with the ideas he did not get to share in class, and while this worked as a substitute, it was nowhere near as fulfilling to Gary as it would have been had he been given a chance to discuss his knowledge in class as he would have a couple more hours each day spent conversing and interacting with his teacher. His teacher would leave comments on the work he submitted or emailed her and say, “Good Job!”, but this was not an adequate relationship to either discussing it in detail or hearing it in person, as Gary would continue to get upset and think the teacher didn’t call on him due to personal reasons, which was not the case. The substitutes were nowhere near on par with in person schooling as seen by his frequent frustration, and eagerness to speak to any teacher he saw when we would drive to his school to pick up Mary from her morning in person classes. However, we made it work, and as the year went on it felt more normal and natural than it had at first. The more the teacher communicated with Gary through leaving comments on his work, or through conversations had after the class Zoom call ended, the more praise he spoke about her and the more he participated in class and remained optimistic.

Student-Student Relationships

Early on, I began to see how Gary lacked a connection to his peers, and how it left him unmotivated to interact with his classmates. While he would mention his classmates sometimes when out of the (virtual) classroom, he would say, “Mary is the only friend I need,” which I felt was him trying to rationalize being okay with lacking friendships with his classmates. Erin Brown (2020) discusses how remote learning

leads to lack of socialization for children, which can lead to changes in sleeping, eating, and other behaviors. I found Gary would have tantrums when he realized some students were allowed to be in his school alongside Mary, while he learned remotely. He would cry about how much he wanted to be with his peers. He cried in distress, saying, "I want to be at school," and showed jealousy when he learned his sister had the opportunity to play with classmates weekly. I would also see this when I would take him to spend his "recess" at a local playground; he enjoyed seeing other kids around his age, and when I would inform him we had to leave the playground, he would cry and try to convince me he should have a longer play time. Despite showing how much he wanted to get to know his classmates, when I would ask him questions regarding his peers, he would answer as if he was uninterested in getting to know them. Because Gary lacked the ability to play with his classmates every day, we would spend time outside playing with his neighbor, a first grader named Walter. Yet, I realized that because Walter was not in Gary's class, this did not motivate him to participate during class, whereas Mary would recognize and speak to the classmates she met while in school. Walter helped Gary by socializing, but when it came back to the classroom, he still lacked connection with his peers.

Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall (2011) state, "Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by numerous biological, cognitive, and social transitions" (p. 216). I can see Gary's desire to make friends and have companions in his class. After a couple months of remote learning, when Gary would join his Zoom class, I prompted Gary and Mary to rejoin their Zoom call after lunch a few minutes early, and I had them greet their classmates as they entered the call. This way, Gary began to feel a stronger

connection, as he this became his only time to converse with his peers in a non academic sense. Gary and Mary would begin class by saying hello to different classmates, as a way of getting to know them. “Hello Scooter! Hello Janice!” they would say excitedly, beginning a chain of greetings between the kindergarteners. They seemed to feel a need to connect all of the classmates together to form a learning community, as opposed to the independent learning that remote learning entailed. The classmates never went into deep conversation other than greeting one another, but the need for socialization was evident and by beginning a stream of greetings, the kindergarteners found a brief moment in their remote lesson to simply say hello to one another. I found that because of these greetings, the classmates would then talk more to one another during class discussions, which bonded the class together and allowed for more in depth conversations. Although I did not get to see Gary and his classmates form close bonds, I did see them slowly introduce themselves to each other over time, which in turn made the children evidently happier as they showed giant smiles on their faces, and it raised participation and a sense of community within the class. While he didn’t create a KBC with these greetings, it was never his role to create that in the first place as he was just a single kindergartener in a larger class, but it did bring a sense of unity to the class and gave the students a moment to converse with one another.

Student/Sibling Relationship:

While Mary was in-person for class every morning, she would be back home for remote learning every afternoon. I noticed that her presence in the house in the afternoons made Gary more focused on class, as he would help guide her through the

process of remote learning. “See Mary, do you get it?” he would say, helping her along with either counting lessons, or reading words. When Mary was next to or near Gary as he was in virtual class, it seemed her presence being in the same physical proximity helped him focus on his lessons as he often felt it was his duty to help her. He would remind her how to sit and focus, and how to unmute her microphone and share with the class. I felt that with his sister by his side, or in the next room over, she was able to add a sense of normalcy to Gary’s routine which allowed him to focus more on his studies. As a multiple myself, I had assumed having Mary near him while in class would distract him, but instead, Gary took on the role of her helper to help guide her through class, and her presence made him focused even more. Typically, I would sit with Mary in the afternoons while Gary sat in another room and worked independently, but often times he would walk into the room to help Mary if he saw on the Zoom call she was confused, or he would respond to her on the Zoom call and rephrase what the teacher said in a way she could better understand.

I noticed a big difference in how Gary acted when he saw his sister in the class Zoom, as opposed to when she was back home with him. Having her in the same proximity helped him focus and share more, while just seeing her face on the Zoom call did not seem to have the same level of impact on his performance. When Gary saw Mary on Zoom in the mornings, he would quickly either call me over to wave, or say a quick hello before going back to his lesson as normal. However, Mary being in the same physical proximity as him allowed Gary to work in the same space as a classmate, which encouraged him to work. The way I understand this, part of this has to do with Gary feeling as though he needed to help Mary, he would pay better

attention in class when she was home so she would pay attention, and he could model appropriate Zoom behavior. This need to guide Mary surprised me, as he was confused as to why she got to attend morning school and have help from aids when he did not, but yet at the same time he felt the need to assist her as a caretaker would. Another part has to do with being in the same physical proximity as one of his classmates. He was able to interact with her in person, something he was unable to do in the mornings when she was at school, and being in the same physical proximity as Mary helped him keep his behavior in check and pay attention to the teacher to model the behavior Mary should copy.

Conclusion

When I began this research, I thought that I would find that Gary's education would suffer immensely due to not being in the same physical proximity as his classmates and teachers, as I felt these relationships would only become strong if he was learning in person and leave him unable to form the connections and classroom community necessary to have a successful school year. However, after completing my research, I ended up seeing while his learning experience was far from the norm and less than ideal, Gary nevertheless continued to gain knowledge and it just took longer for him to get accustomed to the routine of school when it was different than what he was expecting. It took longer to set classroom norms, such as "no interrupting the teacher" which was harder to comply with as all the students had to do was unmute themselves to speak, but throughout the fall and winter, Gary, his classmates, and his

teacher found ways to modify remote learning to give students a similar learning experience as they would have had they all been learning in the same room.

I didn't realize how much of a role I played in Gary's remote learning experience until reflecting upon it recently. Had I not tutored him, perhaps he would not have had the courage to raise his hand and participate in class. He certainly would not have been the leader he was, as he felt confident in the material I taught him he would try to assist other students. Similarly, if I had not talked to his teacher about Gary's want to speak in class more, his class would not have had their weekly share time. I didn't just affect Gary by reaching out, but I provided all of the students with an opportunity to communicate more. I prompted Gary to greet his classmates, which resulted in him leading every call right after lunch, as he greeted each classmate. Without my prompts, Gary would not have been as much of a leader in his class as he became. This leads me to think about the students who are unable to have an adult with them during the school day to help them navigate remote learning. What about the students who have no Wifi, and are unable to log into the call? What about the students whose parents can't afford a babysitter, and the parents are too busy working to be able to assist their child? Having a "helper" during the day helped Gary grow more confidence, which is something not all students have access to.

I had to stop babysitting Gary in January due to scheduling conflicts, but this spring he was able to attend more of his classes in person at school, rather than having all of his lessons remotely. Due to help and guidance in communicating with his teacher and peers, Gary was excited to return to in person lessons- whenever he picked up Gary from school he would say how much he longed to attend in person

classes. His sense of longing showed me that he did form relationships, and he wanted them to grow stronger in person as he felt the need to see his peers in person.

After observing Gary for half of the remote school year, I wonder what would the remote learning experience would be like for kids who did not have an adult to supervise them during their virtual lessons to help them navigate the technological and social issues that arise in remote learning. I can only imagine how difficult remote learning would have been for Gary if his parents or I were unable to supervise him during his lessons, he wouldn't know how to log onto the Zoom calls, let alone figure out how to voice his concerns with his teacher. I would at times see Gary's classmates sitting alone on the screen crying, but the teacher was unable to tell what was wrong as the student wouldn't communicate their thoughts to her. I wonder what remote learning has been like for those students who are home alone during the day, or left without supervision for the majority of the day, and if they were able to navigate all of these issues I found Gary face, though Gary had assistance throughout his virtual journey.

As I found Gary was still able to complete his homework and classwork while maintaining a sense of understanding on the subject, greet and occasionally speak to his peers in a non-academic sense, and communicate with his teacher through help of myself or his parents, I found that while remote learning put a strain on learning, that learning remotely is not impossible and can be successful when one makes an effort to enforce relationships between class members, they can maintain a successful education while learning remotely.

Community Results

As mentioned above, as Gary was able to successfully complete his schooling despite being in a different physical space than his class, this implies that his class's sense of community changed from the typical in classroom relationship, into something less personal but still valid. Gary showed me that one can still form connections with their teachers and peers when learning remotely, just to a different degree, as well as through a different process. While I would not identify Gary's classroom as a KBC, he and his classmates recognized each other as peers and enjoyed their conversations together. I wonder if they were older and able to communicate more clearly if they would have been able to turn their classroom into a KBC. Gary was able to form a connection with his teacher while learning remotely, but it took more effort than it would have had they been in the same physical space, as his relationship with his teacher heavily relied on emails and sharing things about himself through his homework.

Implications for Teaching

My intentions were to get an inside look at remote learning from a child's perspective, rather than the teachers' perspective, so that I could directly see how remote learning was affecting the child while in and out of class. Teachers do not get to see how remote learning affects their students when their class calls hang up, but I

was given the opportunity to know a student on a deeper level as his caretaker, and see how remote learning influenced his mood and actions. I found it frustrating that there has been no research on this for me to draw on so that I could have a guideline on how to assist Gary, but I can use the research I did to get a better understanding of how teachers can support their students while teaching remotely for the future.

Through this research, I have found that parents and caretakers should help their student foster a sense of communication with their teacher if they are unable to do so themselves. I found helping Gary speak with his teacher outside of class boosted his participation in class as he felt a stronger connection to his teacher. Similarly, educators should be aware of how important their relationships are with their students, and realize how much remote learning affects these relationships. Educators, and myself as a future educator, must put in the extra effort necessary to foster and help grow these relationships so that students are able to reach their full potential.

This research has shown me the importance of unstructured time within the school day. Students need field trips, recess, lunch, snack, and hallway time to communicate with one another and to have transitions within the day, so they are not sitting at desks all day. This unstructured time confused Gary, as he had no classmates to play with during these times, and rather he saw it as a random waiting period before his next class. As a teacher, in the future I will work to ensure my students have these transition times, to form relationships with one another.

Limitations I Faced

While I do find my research findings important, it is necessary to remember that I only observed one student, and cannot use Gary's experience as a representation of all students' experiences with remote learning. While I feel his remote learning experience is reflective of others in his class and age, to better understand the experience of remote learning there must be more research done on this regarding different students of different ages, races, and backgrounds in order to get a clearer idea of how learning in a different space than one's classroom affects their academic and social development. We also should have more statistical analyses to see perhaps more college students or high school students dropped out to being remote (something I have seen of Clark University students, as well as peers at other colleges). I would want to further look at student's grade point averages from two years ago, to now, to see how much they differ when one is in the classroom as opposed to learning remotely. And then we should also follow these students into the future to see how this year has affects their engagement with learning in the future. There is much more research to be done in the coming years on remote learning, but Gary has given me an insight on how this research may look.

. . .

While I hope remote learning will not be necessary in the future, this is important for teachers, parents, and students to consider, as it is unknown when in person classes will continue, and when remote learning will come to an end. Perhaps one day it returns; there needs to be research on it now while it is still occurring to help those who may experience this in the future better understand how to support themselves.

Despite learning remotely or in person, this research has proven the importance of the various relationships must hold in order to reach their full potential. It took remote learning for me to see the immense value that relationships within the classroom hold on its students, and how it can affect their attitude, behavior, and mindset, as well as participation within the classroom. After seeing how happy Gary was when he would get to share an item or a fact with his class during share time on Wednesdays, I could see how he much he needed to interact with his classmates and teacher in a non-academic way, where he could just talk about himself and form connections with the rest of his class.

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