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## Students' Lived Experiences During the Pandemic: Their Expressions through Art and Poetry

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## **Students' Lived Experiences During the Pandemic: Their Expressions through Art and Poetry**

### **Abstract:**

*Blake, a language arts teacher, and Susan, a visual arts teacher, were both committed to connecting students' lived experiences of the pandemic with their academic learning in our new virtual classroom environments. Through this inquiry cycle, we were reminded of the critical role teachers play in addressing the social and emotional needs of their students, and seamlessly integrating those needs with academic goals. We chose to make our remote instruction platforms work for the individual needs of students rather than use a standardized curriculum enacted on an online platform (McQuirter, 2020). Our students responded, as evidenced in this essay, with meaningful works of art, communicating their pandemic experiences through poetry and photography. Teaching and inquiring into teaching through the pandemic provided us with an even better understanding of using students' lived experiences to achieve academic goals, rather than the other way around.*

### **Who We Are**

At P.K. Yonge (PKY), Blake taught sixth grade language arts, and Susan taught visual arts for 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Prior to the pandemic, Blake was engaged in a cycle of inquiry to study her students' self-regulation skills, while Susan was inquiring into her students' development of a growth mindset. When these cycles were interrupted by our school's unexpected shift to emergency remote instruction, it was clear that we had to respond to the abrupt changes our students were experiencing in their everyday lives.

As PKY teachers, we had taught by placing our students at the center of instructional decision making. We were guided, in part, by principles derived from Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), embraced by our school and embedded in our Professional Learning Plan. CSP instructional practices honor the assets that each child brings to the educational setting, endeavoring to focus on students' linguistic and cultural heritage (Alim, H.S. & Paris, D., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Paris, 2012). This approach is consonant with Universal Design for Learning or UDL, a framework for planning and delivering curriculum designed to remove barriers that might exist for any student (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014).

### **What We Did**

As our students reacted to the school lockdown amidst the pandemic, we both recognized the range of students' social and emotional responses and posted our observations on *Remote Learning Inquiry (RLI)* (see the introductory piece to this journal for detailed information on how the process of inquiry was adapted in response to the global pandemic). We turned to the process of inquiry to help us explore students' expressions of isolation and fear as well as their courage, humor, and resiliency during the pandemic through art and poetry. Together, we collaborated to explore the question, "In what ways can we transform our curricula and instructional strategies to support our students during the pandemic, enabling them to express their lived experiences through the creative arts?"

Using the *RLI*, we collected data including samples of student work; our grading rubrics and feedback to students; and informal interviews with students. Our first step in our pandemic-revised inquiry was to reflect on our students' social and emotional needs as they transitioned to virtual at-home, rather than face-to-face (f2f) in-school instruction. We developed lesson plans enabling them to describe and express their experiences through the arts. Those lessons grew to include sharing and responding to their peers' artwork.

### **Expressing Their Pandemic Experiences Through the Arts**

Blake's curriculum was reading and writing, so she felt lucky that her pre-pandemic lessons were already supporting the social and emotional aspects of students' lives. Many of her students were choosing to write about their lockdown/quarantine experiences or used writing as an escape from pandemic pressures. Blake capitalized on this observation by focusing on her students' pandemic experiences in the unit on poetry she had planned to teach. She believed that poetry could meet the kids where they needed to be met emotionally. For example, through a poem, students could choose to express a heavy emotional day they had experienced as the country went into lock-down, and they were forced to spend days at home without seeing friends. Or, students could explore a lighter topic, such as writing about a snake found on a nature walk the students' family had taken to get out of the house during the pandemic.

Blake organized this unit as a series of lessons, each focusing on one or more structures and strategies used by poets to make their work more compelling to readers. Each lesson typically included the reading of a variety of poems to note the kinds of literary and stylistic choices that poets make to convey their thoughts, feelings and sensations, within the poetic structure they have chosen. For example, in one lesson, students focused on the literary technique, "repetition," where poets purposefully repeat the same line of a poem in their writing. After reading and

discussing several poems that employed this technique, students applied it to their own pandemic poetry writing. To illustrate, one student expressed the oddness of living under quarantine conditions and her sense of loss, irritability, boredom, and frustration in a poem with the repeat line: "In the life of quarantine."

*The Life of Quarantine*

What has happened to the world?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why can't we go play?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why can't we see anybody else?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why can't we go to school?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why are people losing their jobs?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why did someone bring us 24 pounds of bananas?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why do we get so bored?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why do we want to rip the people that we live withs hair out?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why is it so hard to stay away from the fridge?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why is it so hard to stay entertained?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why won't people stay in side?  
In the life of quarantine.  
Why do people not take this seriously?  
In the life of quarantine.  
What has happen to the world?  
In the life of quarantine.

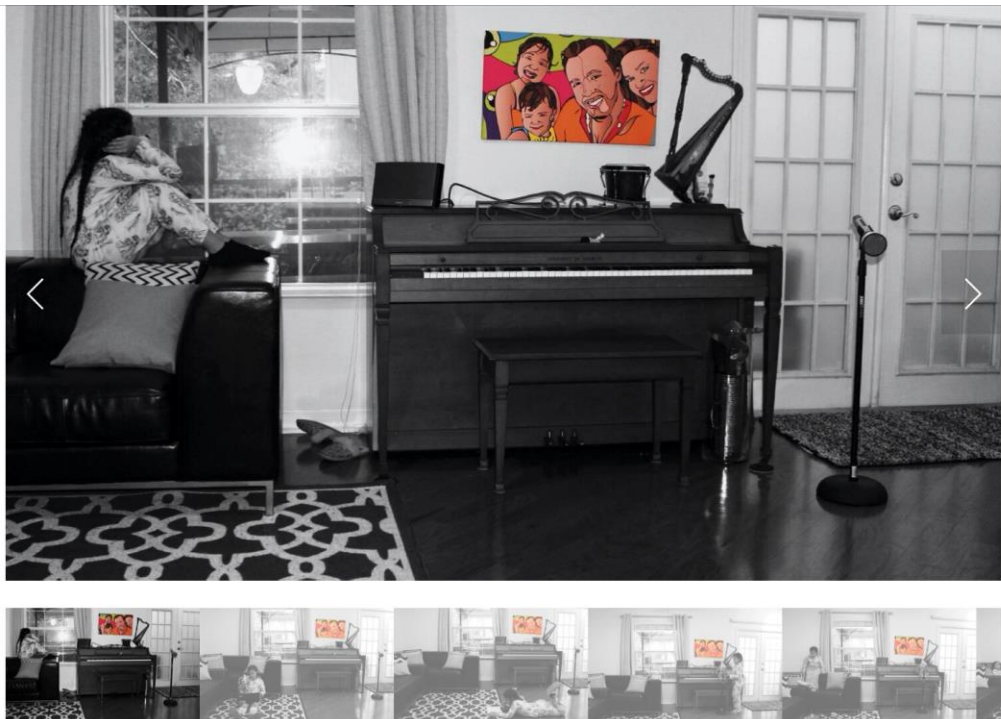
These pandemic poetry assignments brought students' lives into their academic work.

In a similar fashion, Susan wanted her art lessons to be meaningful and relevant to students' lives. She created art lessons that supported students in finding their way through the pandemic, beginning with a lesson plan that could be done simply with a cell phone that had a camera. For this first lesson, students were asked to practice a documentary style of photography by taking photos during a 24-hour time period in their lives during lock-down and create a piece entitled "A Day in the Life of COVID-19."

The lesson plan included steps for preparation and maintaining an artistic focus in the photography as a path towards expressing what was happening in their lives through visual imagery. Students were first asked to explore their environment, family and pets, activities that they were passionate about, as well as their normal routines throughout the day. After the exploration phase, students were asked to commit to a sustained daylong photo shoot, with the goal of producing 100 images or more focused on one object shot from different angles and using a variety of compositional tools. Finally, students were tasked with editing in Photoshop before posting their final images and writing guided reflections to submit along with their assignments. For example, one student took photos to illustrate her sister's day in quarantine (see Figure 1. *A Day in the Life*).

**Figure 1.**

*A Day in the Life of COVID-19.*



In the original submission, viewers could click on arrows to scroll through a set of photos (now depicted in the smaller inset). The student said the following about her photo essay:

These images show my little sister's everyday life so far. Notice how she is doing different things in the same place. I took these photos of her off guard one day because I wanted to see if she would do the same things that she has been doing for the past few weeks still. So, these photos represent isolation. In some you can feel and relate to the way she is feeling but in others you just see her trying to be active, while being in quarantine. (Susan, FR, June, 2020)

The "A Day in the Life of COVID-19," and similar assignments that followed, enabled students to create artistic expressions of their "new normal."

### **Students Sharing Their Pandemic Lives With One Another**

We created online forums for students to respond to one another's works. On the PKY *RLI*, Susan reflected on the requirement she had for her students to upload examples of their work to Canvas along with written guided reflections about their work to be available for viewing by their peers:

Students are required to respond to two peers in our Discussion Board, so they are able to see their peer's sketches and read their stories.... I didn't expect students to enjoy the virtual classroom as an opportunity to interact socially with each other through their responses. I didn't expect how much this activity allowed the sharing of stories to grow deeper relationships with one another. (Susan, Prompt 2, April 2020)

Echoing Susan's general reflection on the ways sharing art contributed to relationships in a virtual space, on the *RLI*, Blake reflected on one of her Zoom sessions when students were asked to voluntarily share a piece of their pandemic poetry with the class through screen share:

When students volunteered to share their poetry, we had a student, who at school, had negative relationships with her peers. In the Zoom session, she received genuine and well-deserved praise from her peers that surprised her in a good way and hopefully may lead to more positive peer interactions when we return to campus. (Blake, Prompt 3, May, 2020)

We believe that learning in a new virtual environment under stressful conditions made our students' interactions with one another more straightforward and more authentic. Sharing their work on virtual platforms had enabled students to reveal their pandemic stories to each other, and in turn, relationships deepened and developed.

### **What We Learned**

In this unique, pandemic cycle of inquiry, we both created lessons that purposefully connected our students' lived experiences outside of school with their academic learning in school, all within our new virtual classroom environment. These students were experiencing profound changes in their lives due to the pandemic. We addressed our students' social and emotional needs, a critical step to engaging them in their academic learning as the pandemic unfolded. Sharing those experiences with their peers seemed to lessen their sense of isolation and create a sense of community to our virtual classrooms.

### **Important Take-Away**

As the COVID-19 pandemic turned our teaching worlds upside down, we survived by placing our students and their lived experiences at the center of our instruction. While we strove to do so prior to the pandemic, through this cycle of inquiry we were reminded of the critical role teachers play in addressing the social and emotional needs of their students, and the ways these needs are just as important (and can be seamlessly integrated with) academic goals. In this era of high-stakes testing and accountability, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of personal relationships, as academic learning overshadows social and emotional learning. Students' performance on tests can become the focus of teaching our students. Teaching and inquiring into teaching through the pandemic provided us with a stark reminder to begin unit and lesson planning with our students in mind, using their experiences to achieve academic goals, rather than the other way around. Similar to other teachers' approaches to emergency remote instruction, we chose to make our remote platforms work for the individual needs of students rather than load a standardized curriculum onto an online platform (McQuirter, 2020).

Integrating the UDL and CSP frameworks guided our planning for student engagement, representation, action and expression as students interact with academic content. Through the UDL framework, students are viewed as more important than the systems, curricula, and even the teacher's own personal instructional preferences (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). UDL and CSP have originated from different places but are positioned to naturally align in their shared purpose: to ensure all students are supported to become expert learners in our pluralistic society.

This is a particularly salient goal as we wrote this essay in 2020 when every public-school teacher's context was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While a review of CSP and UDL is beyond the scope of this essay, we recommend readers learn more about these approaches to teaching. CSP honors each student's linguistic and cultural heritage while UDL is grounded in research

on how the human brain engages in learning and how schools do or do not support learning. As we face continuing challenges in education and increased usage of remote technology, we hope that the teaching profession does not lose sight of the lived experiences of students. While it should not take a pandemic to focus educators on students rather than testing, we are grateful for the opportunity that our inquiry during the pandemic provided – to return our gaze first and foremost to our students.



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