


Changes in Adolescents' Peer Interactions and Friendships in the Era of COVID-19

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Abstract: *Grounded in the literature on peer social capital, this study examines middle school students' perspectives on COVID-19-related changes in their peer interactions and friendships. Qualitative analyses of 146 students' survey responses showed that a majority experienced changes in their peer interactions and friendships. These students reported: (a) lasting changes in social-emotional states impacted peer interactions and friendships (e.g., increased anxiety); (b) changes in relationships (e.g., loss of friendships); and (c) visible changes in peer interactions (e.g., reduction in sharing behavior). Conversely, a small group of students perceived the changes in their peer interactions positively. The author argues that this paper's findings have farther-reaching implications than the pandemic, given other types of educational disruptions. Implications for educators, schools, and communities are discussed.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted schooling with school closures, affecting at least 55 million students in the U.S. alone (Education Week, 2020). These school closures have led to disruptions in schooling, disproportionately impacting students of color or those from lower socioeconomic status (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2021). During COVID-19, the average scores in reading and mathematics declined (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and youths' mental health was negatively impacted (De France et al., 2022). Additionally, social distancing and isolation impacted youths' social capital (Dedryver & Knai, 2021). Building on the work on social capital, in this study, I examined middle school students' perspectives on COVID-19-related changes in their peer interactions, answering the following research question: *What changes in peer interactions and friendships did middle school students experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Although this study's analyses are focused on student experience and voice during the COVID-19 pandemic, I argue that this paper's findings have much farther-reaching implications given other types of educational disruptions at the community (e.g., natural disasters, facilities issues, and political upheaval) and individual level (e.g., long periods of illness, relocation). In the remainder of the paper, I will outline the framework guiding the study and offer methods, findings, and implications based on the data.

THEORY AND LITERATURE

This study is grounded in the theory of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Lin (2001) defined social capital as "*resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions*" (p. 25, emphasis in original). More recently, and focusing on students, Fisher (2018) defined social capital as "young people's access to and ability to mobilize human connections that might help them further their potential and their goals, as those goals emerge and inevitably shift over time" (p. 37). Social capital provides individuals with benefits, including access to information and the reinforcement of identity and recognition through the assurance of belonging (Lin, 2001). In a critical synthesis of social capital studies in education, Dika and Singh (2002) provided evidence that access to social capital was associated with increased educational attainment, educational achievement, and psychosocial factors. For example, social capital has been associated with social and emotional outcomes, including fewer depressive symptoms, less violence, school engagement, life satisfaction, and aspirations (e.g., Kuperminc et al., 2008; Ryabov, 2015; Shen, 2020; Ying & Han, 2008a, 2008b).

One important locus of social capital is individual peers and peer networks (i.e., peer social capital). Peers may provide youth important emotional, academic, and informational support (Fabiansson, 2018; Goldstein, 2003; Jørgensen, 2017; Reynolds, 2007; Ruth, 2018). Also, peers are relevant for social status and as socializing agents (Ryan & Shin, 2018). Friendships as a critical source of emotional and social support may provide social capital, and a friendship's dissolution may negatively impact youths' development, including depression, loneliness, guilt, and anger (Rubin et al., 2006). Changes in the environment, such as the transition to high school or relocation, often result in decreased friendship stability among adolescents (Poulin & Chan, 2010). Given this research, I argue it is crucial to further explore middle school students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about drastic changes in adolescents' environment.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this paper are based on a qualitative analysis of an open-ended survey question. The goal was to understand how middle school students experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their peer relationships. Qualitative research is warranted whenever an issue needs to be explored because, for example, we try to understand a specific group's experiences (e.g., middle school students) (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

CONTEXT

Data for this paper were collected through a survey in two urban fringe middle schools in the Western U.S. in the spring of 2022. The schools were attended by approximately 880 and 630 students in sixth through eighth grade. Both schools reflected the diversity seen in many schools across the U.S. They had a considerable proportion of Multilingual Learners (MLLs), 42% and 34% of the students, respectively. In both schools, more than 90% of the students identified as

Hispanic, and more than 90% were socioeconomically disadvantaged (i.e., they qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch; or had parents/ guardians who did not have a high school diploma).

These two schools offered online education for more than one school year. At the time of data collection, all students had been back to daily in-person school for around seven months. Shortly before data collection, the state lifted the mask mandate for students and teachers in schools. However, most students wore masks when the researcher visited the school to collect data.

SAMPLE

Of these students, 146 answered the survey question about COVID-19's impact on their friendships. These participants were between 11 and 14 years old ($m = 12.6$ years). A majority of the students were Hispanic (69.2%), female (52.7%), and belonged to the second immigrant generation (39.7%) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Survey Participants' Demographics

Demographics	n	%
Grade level		
6 th grade	55	37.7
7 th grade	35	24.0
8 th grade	56	38.4
Gender		
male	53	36.3
female	77	52.7
other gender identities ¹	8	5.5
missing or prefers not to say	8	5.5
Race and ethnicity		
Hispanic/ Latinx/ Chicanx	101	69.2
White	8	5.5
Asian American/ Asian	5	3.4
Black or African American	2	1.4
American Native/ Alaskan Native	2	1.4
Pacific Islander/ Native Hawaiian	0	0
multiple races/ ethnicities	18	12.3
other (i.e., Filipino, Middle Eastern)	2	1.4
missing or prefer not to say or doesn't know	8	5.5
Immigrant generation		
1 st generation	17	11.6
2 nd generation	58	39.7
3 rd generation or higher	26	17.8
missing or prefer not to say or doesn't know	45	30.8

¹ Other gender identities include non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and other gender identities.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In spring 2022, the participating students completed an online survey on their demographics, aspirations, friendships, and connectedness with their teachers. The analyses in this paper are based on the open survey question, "Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed how you

interact with peers? How?” The students could write as little or as much as they wanted. I piloted the survey, including this question, with middle school students prior to the study. I qualitatively coded the text responses in two steps using an inductively developed codebook (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) (see Table 2). Throughout, I discussed the data analysis with colleagues to get additional perspectives on my coding and improve the quality of the findings.

Table 2
Codebook

Code	Description
Step 1:	
Changes in peer interactions	Statements on whether participants experienced changes in their peer interactions and friendships, including temporary changes. Students’ responses were coded as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 if they indicated they did not experience any changes, • 1 if they described lasting or temporary changes, • 2 if they indicated they did not know or were unsure whether they experienced any changes in their peer interactions and friendships.
Step 2:	
The responses of students who experienced lasting or temporary changes were then further classified into one or more of the following categories that emerged inductively from the analyses:	
Changes in participants’ social-emotional state	Statements on changes in participants’ social-emotional characteristics (e.g., being shy, getting angry more easily, feeling insecure or anxious) and how these changes shaped their friendships, peer relationships, and peer interactions.
Changes in and dissolution of relationships	Statements on changes in and the dissolution of peer relationships, including their explanations for these changes (e.g., no mobile phone to stay in contact, friends changed).
Visible changes in peer interactions	Statements on visible changes, including temporary changes (e.g., the need to isolate and socially distance during school closures), and ongoing, visible changes (e.g., no hugging, masks that make communication more challenging, no snack sharing)
Positive changes in peer relationships	Statements about positive changes that students experienced during COVID-19.

Findings were qualitatively described and illustrated with quotes by students. Additionally, the results for different groups of students were tabulated, as illustrated in Tables 3 and 4.

FINDINGS

Most students experienced changes in their friendships and peer interactions (n = 78, 53.4%). A smaller proportion (n = 60, 41.1%) replied that they did not experience any changes, and eight students (5.5%) wrote they did not know whether their peer interactions changed through the pandemic (see Table 3). These percentages looked different for different groups. For example, 61.0% of female participants reported they experienced changes in their peer relationships,

compared to 43.4% and 50.0%, respectively, of male and other gender identity¹ participants. Also, 67.2% of second-generation immigrants experienced changes, which was higher than 46.2% and 29.4% of students belonging to the third or higher generation and first generation, respectively.

Table 3
Changes in Peer Interactions Overall and by Subgroups

	no changes	changes	don't know
Overall	60 (41.1%)	78 (53.4%)	8 (5.5%)
Grade Level			
6 th grade	21 (38.2%)	32 (58.2%)	2 (3.6%)
7 th grade	9 (25.7%)	22 (62.9%)	4 (11.4%)
8 th grade	30 (53.6%)	24 (42.9%)	2 (3.6%)
Gender			
male	29 (54.7%)	23 (43.4%)	1 (1.9%)
female	25 (32.5%)	47 (61.0%)	5 (6.5%)
other gender identities ¹	3 (37.5%)	4 (50.0%)	1 (12.5%)
missing or prefers not to say	3 (37.5%)	4 (50.0%)	1 (12.5%)
Immigrant Generation			
1 st generation	11 (64.7%)	5 (29.4%)	1 (5.9%)
2 nd generation	17 (29.3%)	39 (67.2%)	2 (3.4%)
3 rd generation or higher	13 (50.0%)	12 (46.2%)	1 (3.8%)
missing or prefer not to say or doesn't know	19 (42.2%)	22 (48.9%)	4 (8.9%)

Notes. Chi-Squared statistics were nonsignificant and, hence, not displayed.

¹ Other gender identities include non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and other gender identities.

As a next step, the responses of students who experienced changes in peer interactions and relationships were analyzed. Some of the perceived changes were negative and can be described as (a) lasting changes in social-emotional states that impacted peer interactions and friendships; (b) changes in relationships, including the dissolution of friendships; and (c) visible changes in peer interactions, such as reduction in sharing behavior, reduced physical contact, and changes in the ability to read social cues due to masking. Conversely, (d) a small group of students perceived the changes in their peer interactions positively due to, for example, being introverts. The following sections describe these perceived changes in peer interactions in detail.

CHANGES IN PERSONAL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL STATES THAT IMPACT PEER INTERACTIONS

Several students described how their social-emotional characteristics changed, making it more challenging to interact with peers and make friends. Students in eighth grade reported such changes more often (35.7%) than students in seventh and sixth grades (26.1% and 22.8%,

¹ Other gender identities include non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and other gender identities.

respectively; see Table 4). Also, 33.3% of the female participants experienced these changes, more than male students and other gender identity students (17.4% and 25.0%, respectively).

Table 4*Types of Peer Interactions Changes Overall and by Subgroups*

	Changes in social-emotional states	Changes in/ dissolution of relationships	Visible changes	Positive changes
Overall	23 (28.0%)	20 (24.4%)	35 (42.7%)	4 (4.9%)
Grade Level				
6 th grade	7 (22.8%)	4 (12.9%)	20 (64.5%)	0 (0.0%)
7 th grade	6 (26.1%)	5 (21.7%)	11 (47.8%)	1 (4.3%)
8 th grade	10 (35.7%)	11 (39.3%)	4 (14.3%)	3 (10.7%)
Gender				
male	4 (17.4%)	7 (30.4%)	12 (52.2%)	0 (0.0%)
female	17 (33.3%)	11 (21.6%)	19 (37.3%)	4 (7.8%)
other gender identities ¹ or missing data	2 (25.0%)	2 (25.0%)	4 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Immigrant Generation				
1 st generation	1 (20.0%)	2 (40.0%)	2 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2 nd generation	11 (26.8%)	11 (26.8%)	17 (41.5%)	2 (4.9%)
3 rd generation or higher	3 (21.4%)	3 (21.4%)	8 (57.1%)	0 (0.0%)
missing or prefer not to say or doesn't know	8 (36.4%)	4 (18.2%)	8 (36.4%)	2 (9.1%)

Notes. Some students reported several of these types of interaction changes; hence, the counts do not match the counts in Table 3. Chi-Squared statistics were nonsignificant and, hence, not displayed.

¹ Other gender identities include non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and other gender identities.

Notably, talking to and with others was a challenge for several students. One student, reflecting the experience of many students, explained: “I really hate talking to people I’m not close to. I have become more restricted.” Other students described that staying home during the pandemic had “made [them] more scared to talk to people,” “not want to communicate that much with people,” or made it more difficult “talking in front of a class [...] (even if you[re] popular), talking to new people, [and] ordering.” Also, some revealed that they had become “very socially awkward since the pandemic.”

These communication challenges reported above were also connected to having difficulties making friends and expressing themselves: “I stopped talking to a lot of people. It’s hard to talk to people or make friends.” Another student explained that now, “it [was] harder to make friends because of being alone these past 2 years.” Some students described how they became less extroverted. For example, one student wrote: “before covid, I was more extroverted and [...] would talk/be friends with anyone.” Now it was harder for them “to start a conversation with new people.” Similarly, several students described that they had become more shy during the pandemic (e.g., “I’ve gotten way more shy.”), or that it was more challenging for them to trust others (e.g., “it[’s] also harder for me to trust [new people]”). Overall, many students attributed changes in their peer interactions to shyness, trust issues, and/ or challenges to talk with others, which all were heightened during the pandemic. One student succinctly described the overall theme: “I got more shy. I have also been having trouble talking to others. It takes me time to trust.”

Students also experienced insecurities, anxiety, and anger, which constrained them from connecting with others. For example, the participants' insecurities revolved around showing their faces and physical selves. Students explained that their peer interactions changed because they felt "uncomfortable with [their] mask off" and had "become really insecure about [their] face" or because they were "less athletic." Additionally, some students stated they or other students had gotten more anxious during the pandemic: "Covid has [...] given me a lot more anxiety," and "more teenagers started to have depression [or] anxiety." Further, anger impacted one adolescent's peer interactions: "Ever since the covid-19 pandemic, I've been getting angry easily."

In sum, students described challenges in interacting with peers and making friends due to changes in social-emotional characteristics due to the school closures and being separated from their friends. Eighth-grade students and female students reported such changes more frequently than other groups of students. Since peers provide adolescents with necessary emotional, academic, and informational support, attending to these social-emotional changes after school closures or long absences is essential for schools and school personnel.

CHANGES IN AND DISSOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Some students in this study experienced lasting changes in their friendships and peer relationships, with some differences in frequency across different student groups (see Table 4). For example, eighth-grade students (39.3%) reported such changes more frequently than seventh and sixth-grade students (21.7% and 12.9%, respectively). Also, male participants (30.4%) reported such changes more often than female and other gender identity participants (21.6% and 25.0%, respectively).

Several students felt less close and more distant from their friends. One student explained: "We are not that close anymore. Because of what happened." Another student described that they "did get a bit more distant" with their friends, and others wrote that their friendships became "weird." More specifically, some students described that they felt the pandemic had "separated" them because now they, for example, did not "really talk to each other no more or tell each other things like [they] used to." One student attributed the reduction in close relationships to the school closures: "Because we stopped talking, we didn't know each other that well anymore."

Some changes in their peer relationships were also attributed to personal changes among their peers. A student described: "I feel almost all my friends before changed a lot during the pandemic." These individual changes among friends also led to changes in relationships. For instance, someone described that their peer relationships had changed because "everyone changed and because of that [they had] to treat all [their] peers differently." Similarly, another student saw "how different old friends became," which "shifted relationships."

Furthermore, several students' friendships were discontinued during the pandemic. One student explained that "the covid bs [had] destroyed several friendships." Several students did not speak to their former friends anymore, as illustrated by these quotes by two students: (a) "my friends from elementary school [don't] talk to me since covid started," and (b) "some have forgotten about me." As a student described, these losses were also related to sad emotions: "I did lose some of my friends sadly."

However, some students also described only fleeting changes in their interactions, showing that friendships at this age could be resilient even during year-long school closures. These students experienced school closures as harming their friendships and peer interactions but only short-term. One student explained: "I couldn't talk to almost any of my friends *at that time*," referring to the

past. And another mentioned that during the school closures, they “haven’t gotten to talk to them as much.”

In sum, some students experienced temporary isolation during the school closures, whereas others continued to experience changes, distance, and even isolation from their friends and peers. These changes were more often reported by eighth-grade students and male students than other groups of students. During future school closures, educators could create opportunities for interaction among students so they can build and maintain friendships.

VISIBLE CHANGES IN PEER INTERACTIONS

During school closures and after schools re-opened, students experienced visible changes in how they interacted with their peers. Again, differences between groups of students could be observed. Sixth-grade students reported visible changes more often than students in seventh and eighth grades (64.5% versus 47.8% and 14.3%, respectively) (see Table 4). Also, male and other gender identity students reported these changes more often than female students (52.2% and 50.0% versus 37.3%).

During school closures, students described that they “had to take precautions” and meet peers online instead of in person. During that time, they also “weren’t able to meet in large groups for [their] safety,” and some students “didn’t hangout anymore.” One student explained that “during the pandemic, [they] and [their] friends couldn’t go over to each others houses so [they] would talk over text instead.” During this time, students with a phone could more easily connect with their friends than students without a phone. One student described how they “naturally disconnected” from their friends during the school closure because they “didn’t have a phone at that time.” The dependence on the phone to maintain friendships continued after the school opened, with one student describing that they spoke “with old friends who fear covid on the phone.”

After schools re-opened and students returned, they still experienced visible changes in peer interactions. Not being able to see their friends continued after the schools re-opened, as one student explained: “People were getting sick, and I couldn’t talk with my friends or see them.” Another student described how they could not see friends due to quarantine and isolation measures: “Some of my friends got Covid so I can’t see them for 2 weeks. And their family members had an interaction with someone with Covid-19, so I can’t see them for 2 weeks.”

Another visible change was wearing masks for the students’ safety, which impacted the participants’ peer interactions and the ability to read social cues and understand their friends. To begin with, the masks influenced communication by impairing hearing. One student said it was “hard to hear and talk to people with the mask.” Further, another student wrote that they did not like “seeing [their friends] with their mask because they don’t look the same if they are not wearing it.” For others, it was hard to “recognize each other easily” with the masks. One student wrote they did not know their peers “outside the mask.” Even though masks might be challenging to peer interactions, students were considerate of their peers’ feelings, as shown by one participant’s quote: “When they take it [mask] off the[y] look completely different but I don’t make fun of them.” Conversely, other students did not think the masks impacted their peer interactions. They wrote that the pandemic “not really” changed how they interacted with friends, but it was “just a bit odd with masks but that’s about it.” Others were just happy to be with their friends again: “Even though I can’t see their faces with the mask it’s still pretty cool to see them.”

Furthermore, students reported a reduction in sharing behavior and reduced physical contact. A student explained that they could not “share snacks with [their] friends at school” or

“help [their] friends with homework sometimes due to social distance.” Others described how they could not “give each other hugs” anymore. Also, the rules on how to move around in classrooms changed. One student described how they used to “walk up” to their friends, “say hi” and then go to their seats. But now, they first “sit down and then talk to them.”

Overall, many measures introduced due to the pandemic were still in place after school reopening and impacted students’ peer interactions and friendships. While many of these measures were necessary to keep the students and their communities safe, they still resulted in visible changes in peer interactions, such as reduced sharing behavior and physical contact. Younger students (i.e., sixth and seventh grades), male and other gender identity students reported such changes more often than other groups. Awareness of these measures’ impacts can support educators to react and still create conditions for students to connect, build, and maintain friendships.

POSITIVE CHANGES IN PEER INTERACTIONS

Four female students experienced the pandemic and related measures to keep them and their families safe as positive to their friendships and peer interactions. Some students associated their positive feelings with having matured during the school closures. One student explained that she “used to be more shy,” but now she did not care anymore about “what people say about” or “think about” her. Another student perceived herself as “more outgoing” and trying to “understand people” and their “perspective of things.” This student “matured more throughout the pandemic and learned when and when to not say something.” One student explained that she used to be “cringy ... one of those pick me girls” (“pick me girls” are girls who say certain things and behave in a certain way to get chosen by someone over someone else), and she was glad this time was over. Also, an introverted student described the school closing as a positive experience. She self-identified as an introvert and explained: “quarantine just made my life so much happier [...] i was the happiest i have been in years.” She continued to describe how she also changed throughout the pandemic and now “can talk to people and not get uncomfortable.”

These examples demonstrate that, while most students’ social capital was negatively impacted, some students grew in their social skills when they were out of school. The data also indicates that the school environments might not be the perfect fit for every student – some students socially thrive out of school, or being out of school helped them grow to thrive socially in school.

DISCUSSION

This study showed that the majority of students experienced negative changes in their friendships and peer interactions during and after the temporary school closures, quarantines, and measures to keep everyone safe. Specifically, these students reported: (a) lasting changes in social-emotional states impacted peer interactions and friendships, including increased anxiety and anger and decreased trust; (b) changes in relationships, including loss of friendships, increased social distance, and isolation; and (c) visible changes in peer interactions, such as reduction in sharing behavior, reduced physical contact, and changes in the ability to read social cues due to masking. Conversely, a small group of female students perceived the changes in their peer interactions positively due to being introverts or having matured during the pandemic. While seemingly counterintuitive, this finding is supported by earlier research showing that for some students, including friendless, rejected, or victimized youth, school is not a context that likely promotes well-being (Rubin et al., 2006).

While changes were experienced by all student groups, sixth-grade and seventh-grade students and female students reported more frequently that they experienced changes in their peer relationships and friendships. Also, differences in the types of change could be observed. While female students more often reported changes in their social-emotional states, male students and other gender identity students more frequently reported visible changes. Further, eighth-grade students more often reported changes in their social-emotional states and changes in/ dissolution of their relationships. In contrast, sixth- and seventh-grade students reported visible changes more frequently.

The findings of this study are aligned with previous research showing that changes in the environment, such as transition to high school and relocation, are, on average, associated with changes in friendship (Poulin & Chan, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with large shifts in middle school students' environment, including prolonged school closures, online school, and quarantining. This study confirms that middle school students experienced changes in friendships during this time. The paper adds nuance to the changes by describing the students' experiences in detail. Further, this paper's findings that girls and boys reported changes in friendships at different rates, are supported by previous research that has established that boys' and girls' interpersonal relationships differ in many aspects (Poulin & Chan, 2010).

Although not universally true, this study highlights the importance of the social conditions that brick-and-mortar schools provide for students to interact with peers, make friends, build social capital, and potentially mitigate the harmful impacts of social isolation. Schools are the most frequent environment for peer interaction, where students not only acquire academic knowledge but also learn how to interact with people outside their families (Rubin et al., 2006). While online schools mitigated some barriers to peer interactions during the pandemic, this study highlights that many students experienced changes in their peer interactions, primarily in negative but also in some positive ways.

The findings of this study must be seen in the light of some limitations. First, the study is not representative, as the sample was small, participants were drawn only from two schools with similar demographics, and not all students in the two schools filled out the survey or answered this specific survey question. The small sample also resulted in small cell sizes, making it challenging to, for example, compare the type of change across, for example, immigrant generations. Second, the differences between groups (e.g., between genders and grade levels) were only descriptive. While Chi-Squared statistics were run to evaluate differences between groups, they were nonsignificant. The nonsignificant results might be related to the small cell sizes, and future research should further evaluate differences between groups. Third, the participants were asked about changes in their peer interactions in hindsight. They might not remember all changes in peer interactions and friendships that they experienced over the two pandemic years at the time of data collection. Finally, as the sole author, I could not co-develop the codebook with co-authors or engage in the establishment of intercoder reliability. I discussed the data analysis with colleagues to mitigate this potential limitation and improve the validity of the findings.

Despite these limitations, I argue that schools and educators must focus not only on academics in mitigating school disruption but also on the loss of social capital and peer relationships, particularly for female students and students in lower grades. Schools are contexts that provide opportunities to practice social skills, interact, collaborate, and (re-)make friendships in this new and changed world. Educators create and shape the context in which students relate to one another and develop a sense of belonging (Walls & Seashore Louis, 2023). Teachers can support these developments by conveying norms and creating opportunities for interactions (Ryan

& Shin, 2018). Toward that end, Ryan and Shin (2018) argued for teachers to create a classroom climate that is characterized by (a) positive peer relationships, including cooperation, respectful behavior, and equity; (b) an absence of negative peer relationships, such as aggression and social hierarchies; (c) facilitation of friendships and guidance in addressing social problems. Beyond schools, communities can promote youth clubs that offer structured activities and spaces to connect, such as sports, music, and girls' and boys' clubs (Lansford, 2018). Finally, participants mentioned their means of communicating with friends during this time and how, for example, mobile phones helped maintain friendships. During school closures, schools could provide ways of communication to families who do not have access to mobile phones, computers, and the Internet.

While particularly important in the aftermath of COVID-19 school closures, these measures are relevant beyond these unprecedented times. Societies must grapple with brick-and-mortar schools' relevance in peer relationships because they are associated with, *inter alia*, adolescents' academic outcomes (Lee & Lam, 2016; Ryan & Shin, 2018), mental health (Dedryver & Knai, 2021; Snel et al., 2022), and quality of life (Rubin et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2022). While the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on schools worldwide, other disasters (e.g., epidemics, weather, and natural disasters) also lead to school closures (Wong et al., 2014), and individual students might become disconnected from their friends due to prolonged absences (e.g., due to illness) or school change. By highlighting the loss in social capital, this study contributes to understanding schools' vital role in providing space for peer interactions and relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on schools' social role for students.

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