

# Adolescent exploration of identities in ‘third space’: Addressing holistic education and well-being through blended learning embedded in reflexivity

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## Abstract

This research studies the perceptions of adolescent students on online education in relation to the exploration of their own identity, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Education witnessed a radical shift from physical to virtual space. This migration to ‘third space’ sought to facilitate teaching and learning that could not occur in ‘first space’ (home, community centres, leisure activities with peers) and ‘second space’ (school) settings. This research studied the online experiences of young people between the ages of twelve and sixteen during the pandemic lockdowns. Students were invited to reflect on how their online activities shaped their ways of thinking about themselves in the present and the future through interviews, creative artefacts and productions, and focus group discussions. The data was analyzed through Paul Ricoeur’s method of interpretation combined with narrative and thematic analysis. The results show that students’ well-being can be enhanced through self-reflexivity and the cultivation of the cognitive, the affective and the conative learning domains. Moreover, technology can promote creativity, reflection and praxis, and provide opportunities for exploration and empowerment. Thus, third space could contribute to identity formation even in a crisis situation.

## Keywords

Online learning and teaching, third space, student perceptions, exploration, adolescent identities, crisis, reflexivity

## Introduction

Since the day schools closed on Wednesday 18th March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, children and adolescents have felt its profound effects on

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all aspects of their lives. In the upheaval wrought by the novel Coronavirus, a 'new normal' that was unclear and precarious prevailed. The isolating constraints of social distancing heightened everyone's awareness of the most basic physical, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual needs, many of which transpire from loving connections that are essential to thrive. In the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals and families experienced and are still experiencing an ongoing, pervasive sense of loss in many forms. Among the most salient of these are the loss of physical contact with family members and social networks, the loss of pre-crisis ways of life and threatened loss of hopes and dreams for the future, the tragic deaths and threatened loss of loved ones, the loss of jobs, financial security, and livelihoods, as well as the loss of a sense of normalcy in shattered assumptions about our lives and connections with the world around us. Children and adolescents are considered to be among the most vulnerable groups who were and are still being affected by the effects of mitigation measures such as family discord, school closures, social distancing and mandatory quarantines that disrupt their lives significantly (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Such disruptions include changes in routine, the loss of a sense of security and safety, a break in the continuity of learning with the closure of schools and missed significant life events (CDC, 2020). Moreover, all this led children and young people to spend much more time online, roaming virtual reality, engaging in various activities. This trend was already strong and ever increasing due to the rapid development of technology over the last decades, making 'third space' a very important habitat for adolescents. In this locus that is neither home nor school, often crystalized as space of virtual interactions, the affective and conative domains of learning become particularly significant for adolescents and young people, as they reshape their identities through complex interactions with a variety of online stimuli and voices, and learn how to engage critically with new meanings they encounter, leading to the formation and maturation of new meaning-making and creative processes that become possible through the refinement of higher-order thinking skills. Students could even potentially develop their Spiritual Intelligence (SI) through such thinking skills, as they roam the third space, building in the process a strong psychological resilience and a sense of creativity that empowers them for their future.

This paper shows how important it is for educators to provide opportunities to adolescents and youth to reflect on their whereabouts and activities in third space, to reflect upon the motivations for such movement and their impact on their own identity, and to engage the potential of the affective and conative

domains of their mind to activate meaning-making processes in difficult and challenging times. In this way, transcendental reflection can be facilitated and spiritual intelligence enhanced, resulting in holistic well-being that is a continuous source of hope, resilience and empowerment.

## Literature Review

Fostering empowerment and resilience, and nurturing holistic well-being in and through third space for adolescent 'prosumers'

The cultivation of the affective and conative domains of human learning and the engagement of spiritual/transcendental reflection have been found to enhance cognitive skills and abilities, and have also been significantly linked with holistic well-being, including that of children and adolescents. Such well-being transpires from and further strengthens empowerment for action and resilience, that contribute and lead to successful and happy lives (Costa and Kallick, 2008). This implies that if blended learning can really lead to understanding and catering for all of an individual's needs and stimulate and address all these domains of learning it can make really successful and happy people (in the sense of experiencing satisfaction with life) (Halverson and Graham, 2019). Blended learning, also referred to as the third generation of distance education systems (So & Brush, 2007), has been evolving for decades, combining the first generation of one-way models of instruction, such as television, with the second generation of single technology learning, especially web-based learning. Blended learning has always had as its main aim the optimization of learning outcomes and minimization of a programme's cost through every amalgamation of learning delivery method that frequently include face to-face teaching with synchronous and/or asynchronous computer technologies (So & Brush, 2007). However, the popularity and convergence of new student-centred pedagogies, social theories of learning, and computer- and World Wide Web-based technologies over the last few decades facilitated the development of learning models and paradigms and transformative teaching in relation to online environments (Daher & Shahbari, 2020; Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). For many researchers blended learning is not just a ratio of delivery modalities, but a pedagogical approach that combines the classroom's socialization and effectiveness opportunities with technologically enhanced active learning possibilities offered by the online environment (Lin et al., 2017; Schroder & Kruger, 2019).

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### Third space, blended learning, reflection and transformation

Another theory that greatly influenced this evolution and revolution in teaching and learning was third space. Moje et al. (2004, p. 41) define this space as that which *“merges the ‘first space’ of people’s home, community, and peer networks with the ‘second space’ of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as... school.”* In this context, Discourse with a capital D is likened by Gee (1996, 2000) to an identity kit with instructions on what to wear, how to act, and how to talk in particular roles in order to be recognized as a member of a particular community of learners. The main implication of Gee’s theory is that exclusion results from not being and feeling accepted in a particular group due to the way one’s language and actions are perceived.

Lefebvre (1991) states that the concept of first, second, and third spaces calls for a new conceptualization of binary spaces, either-or ways of thinking about literacy success and learning in school (Moje, 2004). Third spaces are hybrid, in-between spaces, generated from oppositional first and second spaces working together (Muth, 2005) to generate new third space knowledge, literary forms, and Discourses. This space is generated when people socialize together in and through language, blending academic with everyday knowledge. Third space could be ideal to explore various aspects of learning and how these can be bridges that take students through dynamic zones of proximal development (Gutierrez, 2008), from marginalized (e.g. everyday) to privileged (e.g. dominant) content academic knowledge and Discourses. It is space that potentially could also serve as a navigational tool to guide students across boundaries of various privileged content texts through their everyday funds of knowledge and Discourse. Finally, in third space everyday discourses and knowledge are constructed and applied in ways that *“challenge, destabilize, and expand literacy practices that are typically valued in school”* (Moje et al., 2004, p. 44).

Ample research shows that when all domains of learning are addressed through blended learning, third space becomes the seat of deep, reflective, transformative, lifelong learning, that permeates and positively transforms lives everywhere and all the time (Pane, 2009; Eagleton, 2016).

More specifically, research consistently shows that both the affective and conative dimensions of learning are significantly linked to various aspects of holistic education. When these are synchronized well with cognitive learning, they

effectively lead to the development of several skills, competences and positive attitudes: the enhancement of emotional literacy in all its facets and dimensions, the nurturing of empathy and compassion, stronger, more meaningful and long-lasting relationships (Schaber et al., 2010), evolving psychomotor skills (e.g., imitation, manipulation, precision, articulation, and naturalization) which equip students with the coordination, physical movement, and motor skills required to work in any professional environment, as well as the cultivation of will, desire, drive, effort, mental energy, and determination (conative skills) that allow students to perform at their best and bring out and develop their full potential. Thus, approaching education through a blended curriculum could provide educators with opportunities to create highly engaging and diverse learning environments through the integration of cognitive, affective, conative and psychomotor skills (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton, 2018; Eagleton, 2016; Tidmore, 2018).

## **The Research**

A five-month qualitative study: aim and rationale

The idea to conduct this short research study among secondary school students originally transpired from the initiative taken by two teachers, including myself, at St. Michael's school, to provide safe spaces for our students where to reflect upon their personal, academic, social and spiritual experiences, as well as their identity transformation, during the pandemic year between March 2020 and March 2021. Such spaces offered students opportunities to express and share emotions experienced, and to let such reflection enhance emotional literacy skills and intelligence. It was hoped that such spaces created in Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) and Religious Education (RE) lessons, would help students learn from their own and others' experiences, and re-imagine their lives in the near and more distant future, through imagination. This idea was shared and positively received by other colleagues, and so it was decided to extend it to other schools. This educational practice transformed into research could show us the way forward in adapting the PSCD and RE curriculum to students' needs, enhancing their holistic well-being in the process.

## The sample

The *convenient and purposive* sample consisted of students from five Church schools in which the PSCD and RE teachers are colleagues at the Secretariat for Catholic Education (Head of Departments), and so close collaboration was possible. All participating students were in the 12-to-16 age bracket (Year 8 – Year 11). The schools' management teams (SMT) were allowed to decide on which years to include in the research (for practical reasons related to the schools' timetable, exigencies and prioritization of activities), as long as they satisfied the age bracket. Students in one class were all invited to participate, provided that they handed in the consent forms required. Each teacher provided detailed data on how many students were invited to participate, how many participated, and how many were part of the lessons in which the focus group discussions took place. A total of 580 students participated in the focus group discussions that took place during PSCD and RE lessons, while 397 students returned the questionnaire (N=1275). Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 students from 3 different schools. Table 1 below shows the details regarding the questionnaires distributed and collected:

**Table 1: Sample details**

Schools	Boys	Girls	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
St. Michael's School	Boys			33/75	35/75	28/75
St. Paul's Missionary College (SPMC)	Boys			21/50	19/50	20/50
Our Lady Immaculate School (OLIS)		Girls	45/100	18/100	15/100	
Sacred Heart School		Girls		22/100	25/100	17/100
St. Monica School (B'Kara)		Girls		38/100	33/100	28/100

## Data collection

The research combined the use of a questionnaire, focus group discussions during PSCD and RE lessons, as well as individual in-depth interviews. The questions in the questionnaire were also prepared in the form of a visual presentation to be used in class, including even a short film. Some of the questions in the questionnaire also called for the students' sense of creativity and artistic expression in a free manner. The details about the data collection are in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Sources for data collection**

No	Source of Feedback	Feedback Collected
1	Questionnaire	397 questionnaires returned (N=1275), 212 online and 185 hard copies
2	Focus Group Discussions	During PSCD & RE lessons
3	Individual In-depth Interviews	23 students
4	Observations and Notes from Classrooms	By teachers facilitating lessons
5	Students' creative mottos, slogans, paintings and metaphors	Created during the lesson discussions and in questionnaires

## Thematic and narrative analysis through Ricoeurian interpretation

After receiving the parents' consent and the students' assent, the focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two schools opted not to record, instead presenting notes taken by the teachers. No student names were ever mentioned.

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was adopted, through the collaboration of educators involved and the use of NVivo for processing the data. Broad and related themes emerged from the data as the result of consensus reached after long discussions. These were subdivided into themes that came across clearly through words, phrases and expressions used frequently by students to express similar messages and imply similar meanings. This thematic analysis was combined with a narrative analysis of the participants' expressed

and articulated experiences that were then processed through Paul Ricoeur's stages of interpretation, namely: *distanciation*, *appropriation*, *explanation* and *interpretation* (Ricoeur, 1981). These increasingly deeper levels of interpretation and understanding occurred during online meetings that were held online, using MS Teams.

## Results and discussion

The following are the main broad categories (general themes) and sub-themes that came out of the data analysis and interpretation:

### *Self-reflexivity enhances well-being*

Reflection and self-reflexivity increase self-awareness and lead to action

Many students admitted that this was a wonderful opportunity for them to share how they felt about what they had gone through since the previous year. This was a space where they could articulate thoughts, feelings, insights and reflections that at first were quite personal and difficult to share.

When I speak I feel much better ... because for how long can you take it in? ... I prefer to get all my stress out when I am with my friends online.

Through reflection, life experiences do not remain unrelated and isolated. They are transformed into opportunities for learning, and new sources for how to construct and derive learning. Thus, meaning produces enhanced complex learning and insight through higher-order thinking skills.

It was a very challenging year and sometimes I felt broken ... but I also learnt a lot ... especially to appreciate what I never appreciated before. (In-depth interview)

### *Acquiring holistic well-being through all learning domains*

Enhancing cognitive intelligence through various abilities

Many expressed their satisfaction that schools and teachers had invested a lot of effort and energy to continue offering opportunities for learning. In total, 61% of students preferred physical learning, while 32% preferred online learning.

Another 7% preferred a blended type of learning. Many of those preferring physical classrooms specified aspects of learning which virtual environments lack. Many students acknowledged that such aspects were being gradually introduced on online platforms, making them more engaging, interactive and stimulating. Many of those who prefer online learning said that it is more flexible, self-directive, offers more pathways for accomplishing tasks, and encompasses many tools that can be used creatively. Online learning can also respect the various learning preferences and styles of individuals. Such affordances depend upon the competence, creativity, and commitment of educators and SMTs. Most students learnt more technological skills related to learning than in previous years, and they hoped to utilize these in the future. Those who academically did not perform so well acknowledged that that was either due to their uneasy relationship with technology or to other social and emotional factors, including the negative emotions affecting their motivation, volition and empowerment for action and initiative.

The computer tired me out and made me flip ... now I ended up hating school more than ever before ... frequently I felt so frustrated trying to find my homework and figuring out what to do ... (In-depth interview)

Satisfaction was expressed by many for the high level of learning engagement made possible by educators. In this way they learnt and enjoyed their learning more, experiencing positive emotions in the process of doing tasks assigned to them through the use of several digital tools.

When teachers used Kahoot and Wakelet I really enjoyed it ... and we used to end up editing and making videos and playing around with photos ... (In-depth interview)

### Emotional Literacy and Intelligence Through Reflection

Sadness, frustration, happiness, loneliness, anger, inner quietness, satisfaction, indifference, boredom, anxiety, encouragement, confusion, fear, hopelessness and positivity. These are the words that most students chose, in writing or otherwise, when asked to identify the emotions experienced during the pandemic. Most of them, present during the class focus group discussions, felt comfortable enough to share personal experiences that provided reasons for the trigger of such emotions. Many acknowledged that in itself this was already liberating, relieved them from a heavy burden, was an eye-opener (acquired

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increased awareness of their inner worlds, and of the causes of their discontent), and was empowering (feeling empowered to do something to feel better).

Not venting out your feelings maddens you ... when people show empathy, you can express yourself and share what you need to ... then you feel better and realize you are not alone (Class discussion)

Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) found that strengths more related to the affective domain, especially hope, zest, gratitude and love, and the conative domain, like curiosity, persistence and self-regulation, were increasingly likely to be associated with life satisfaction. Importantly, it transpires from ample research that gratitude is a notable component of life satisfaction for adolescents and could be greatly affected by school-based interventions (Bono and Froh, 2009).

#### Conative Domain Nurtured Through Reflection Empowering for Action and Identity Formation

Many students made it clear that such a year calls for many great adjustments that have a significant impact on one's emotions, volition, motivation, decision-making abilities and life vision, as well as on one's feeling of empowerment to act on desires, achieve targets and honour commitments. However, many students also reflected on how they adjusted to a new reality, and eventually how their attitudes, decision and meaning-making mechanics, and objects of motivation became transformed, resulting in new 'ways of being'.

Many acknowledged that some of the tasks they were given to complete motivated them more to work and feel more focused on what they were doing.

When you enjoy working on a project you learn a lot from it, good that nobody tells you all the time what to do ... as long as you follow instructions provided by the teacher ... then it's up to you! (In-depth interview)

#### Enhancing SI and Intelligence through Transcendental Reflection Increases Meaning-making, Empowers Transformation and Resilience

The most frequent questions students asked throughout this crisis year were related to the categories 'Life and Meaning to Life' (53%), 'Religion and

Faith' (46%), 'Education' (41%) and 'God' (32%). They reflected on how life could be better or worse, expressing a sense of hope and optimism for the future, or doubt and pessimism that could negatively impact their lives. The struggle was evident, especially in the older ones, to discern meaning in such a tragic situation characterized by multiple losses taking many forms, and to overcome fear and uncertainty that were pervasive. However, many, including the declared atheists or agnostics, still transmitted a strong underlying desire for a meaning-making source that empowers action and inspires hope.

I don't believe in God, now even more ... because all that is happening in the world and around us does not make sense at all, sick and dying people everywhere ... and what will my belief change after all? (Class discussion)

SI and the need for transcendental thinking came out clearly as important factors determining meaning, especially in adverse situations. This includes the generation of purpose and meaning in life to connect to the sacred outside or inside, growing in self-awareness to have a better quality of life, and creating personal and deep relationships with self, others, nature, and universal unknowns.

### Creativity Enhances Reflection and 'Praxis'

Creative human beings always come up with different solutions to problems; they feel motivated to explore and examine alternative possibilities from various perspectives (Sternberg, 2006).

Really enjoyed editing videos with friends on our hobbies, and sharing them ... I discovered new talents in me ... now I am looking for different things online. (from Class discussion)

Upon reflecting on their virtual whereabouts, many students acknowledged their increased creativity. Searches increased considerably on search engines, online tubes and channels, not only in relation to their previous interests and preferences, but also to newly discovered ones. Motivation increased to experiment more in developing new competences, through new knowledge applied. These learnt skills were related to both online exploration (such as learning editing through easy editing tools), as well as outdoor activities (e.g. sports activities, ecological activities and appreciation, specific hobbies,

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representing aspects of nature through painting, socializing through playful activities, and so on). Students related creativity to problem-solving, time-planning, and different roles explored. They learnt how to do things differently and more efficiently, both as a result of experimenting and due to acting on others' feedback (teachers, friends, websites, online communities, etc).

We were introduced to many learning apps that taught me how to do many things ... and really enjoy them (Questionnaire)

### *Inhabiting and Re-Inventing Third Space: Opportunities, Challenges and Risks*

#### Technology as a Potential Source of Both Empowerment and Inhibition of Imagination

Increased activity online empowered students to imagine new and diverse pathways in life that they strive to achieve success in, but also inhibited their imagination and motivation to plan ahead due to the negative emotions they experienced.

Technology for some was a catalyst to re-interpret past life experiences and assimilate better strategies to move ahead in life, pursuing their dreams. For others, this empowering process encompassing all domains of learning and feeling was blocked due to the negativity online permeating many online platforms.

I spent quite some time editing photos ... in the process I thought and reflected a lot about so many beautiful experiences with friends and family ... now I appreciate them much more ... (Class discussion)

#### Awareness of the Limits of Technology in the Quest for the Satisfaction of Basic Human Needs

Apart from the benefits of technology for education, leisure and gratification, career opportunities, and socialization through social networking, students are also aware of its limits and risks. They understand more the importance of physical contact in friendships, the power of physical space to shape dialogue in more personal ways, and the beauty of freedom to move in physical space. During online activity one can just utilize the possibilities given, and agency

requires much more effort.

How long can you spend in front of a computer? Gets sickening at some point! I couldn't miss my friends more ... playing, running, exploring and doing things that we really enjoy doing ... (In-depth interview)

## Recommendations

Enhancing teaching and learning as holistic experience, encompassing and promoting the cognitive, affective and conative learning domains

It is crystal clear that students need and crave holistic learning experiences that tap into the various aspects of the mind. Educators must realize that for real and deep learning to occur, they must always strive to facilitate the full development of their students' intellect and personality, since bodies, minds and emotions need to be all synchronously transformed.

Addressing multiple intelligences in innovative ways

Since the publication of Gardner's *Multiple Intelligence Theory* (1983), many educational researchers and psychologists became convinced, due to the findings of a number of research studies, that there are multiple ways of knowing, learning, and expressing knowledge, and that all types of intelligences can be nurtured in all human beings. Although individuals do have preferred forms, through proper experience and mediation all students can continue developing these capacities throughout their lifetime (Costa and Kallick, 2008).

Providing educators with professional and pedagogical development in 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogies, skills, competences and values in relation to blended learning

What must be invested in is not just the learning of new skills and tools, but their effective use in the context of new pedagogies that nurture all domains of learning and the various intelligences and potentialities of the human mind. Blended learning should not only be understood as an amalgamation of physical and online educational activities with the risk of adding stress and anxiety in students' lives, thus reducing their motivation for and commitment to learning.

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Addressing holistic well-being through a third space that satisfies basic human needs

This research amplified many of the students' physical, social, spiritual and emotional needs. Many have really missed and are naturally craving physical and social activities in which they could play, socialize, physically experience the warmth of relationships, and through such moments also express and share emotions and meaning-making insights.

Thus, educators and schools must learn and reflect more on how to better utilize technological tools, virtual learning environments and online learning platforms to educate and incentivize students more for a lifestyle that makes them healthier physically, socially, relationally, spiritually and emotionally. In this way the newly created third space would effectively blend each student's first and second spaces through the mediating role/s of technology.

Nurturing gratitude, empathy, agency and compassion for empowerment and resilience

Student-centred pedagogies must always promote mutual empathy and reciprocal compassion through emotional literacy and expression and narrative pedagogies, which then in turn bring about agency and empower action. The result of all this will always be resilience, such a crucially important life skill that it not only helps us to survive but to live fully. When lovingness towards and a passion for learners become an integral part of an epistemology of compassion, and these are integrated into the act of teaching and learning, teachers would manage much more efficiently to actively involve learners in the learning process and simultaneously foster social cohesion.

Building, nurturing and educating for communities of and for learning

Last, but certainly not the least, educational third places and spaces, through the contribution of educational institutions and educators, must always seek to build, nurture and educate for communities of and for learning. It has been consistently found that in online environments, the more learners feel a strong sense of belonging in communities, interact, nurture new positive relationships through which they learn new things and explore various aspects of their identity, and find humanness and spontaneity in face-to-face instructional

activities, the more their satisfaction with and motivation for learning increases, and their engagement is enhanced (Means et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

Computers and technology are inevitably crucial now more than ever in education, but they can never understand and create relationships. Neither can they explore and attach meaning to new situations, as these are distinctly human activities and goals. This paper sought to emphasize the holistic approach that education and pedagogies should take in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to really help students become successful, fully developed and fully alive. It was argued that this greatly challenging but beautiful endeavour is also possible through blended learning that is intelligently and wisely designed to create a third space which provides our students with the new basic skills to be successful and happily leading healthy lifestyles. This necessarily requires all educators to nurture all the domains of learning by using digital tools that are facilitated through a 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset. It is only by strengthening the emotional and conative domains of learning that the cognitive realm of our mind could acquire knowledge that is permanent and relevant. Our young people need to be prepared for work and life, and empowered to succeed and become integral in an ever-changing world. The reality of virtual third space is full of risks that range from environmental challenges and political unrest to a myriad of social issues. Thus, educators must always explore new ways of providing students with the support they need, especially in challenging times. They must build the foundation of their identity development by educating them to be creative, caring and confident people who can face the constant challenges of a complex world, thus becoming agents and catalysts of positive change, and in this respect, true heroes.

## Notes on contributor

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