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'We can't lose you': social media and school culture during remote schooling

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures forced educators to seek new means of engaging students, especially in schools serving low-income communities hit hard by the pandemic. This exploratory virtual ethnography, part of a larger study on the culture of progressive (or student-centered) schools, follows one innovative urban high school as it shifted from in-person to remote schooling. It documents how the school attempted to use Instagram to reach students and counter the social isolation associated with the COVID-19 shutdown. We find the school used virtual spaces to enact culturally sustaining pedagogical practices in the absence of 'real world' interactions. The school's Instagram emphasized positive relationships, celebrated resilience in the face of challenges, and affirmed student cultures and identities. Our data suggest that this forum played an important role in sustaining school culture and student-adult connections during an extremely challenging period for the school community.

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Introduction

Nearly every Monday during the 2020–21 school year, Mr. Derek, a staff-member at Bell High School, opened Instagram Live sessions with a drum roll.¹ 'Yo, yo, yo!' he called, welcoming students, staff, and teachers to the weekly virtual meeting. For thirty minutes, during a year fraught with social unrest and declining student engagement, Mr. Derek encouraged students who had not entered the school building in months and were often struggling with financial insecurity, family illnesses, and social isolation. He ended the last Instagram Live of one semester pleading, 'Do not lose your fight. We are all in this together. If you feel like you are going to lose your fight, tap into one of us and let us support you, okay? We got you.' Meanwhile, Bell teachers extended deadlines and offered virtual office hours and other assistance, scrambling to provide bridges for students who fell behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures forced educators around the world to seek new means of engaging students. In the United States, decisions about closing schools were made locally, and schools in urban settings with large numbers of low-income students and students of color generally closed longer than other schools (Grossman et al. 2021; Leonhardt 2022). Additionally, students in these schools frequently lived in communities most affected by COVID-19 and its accompanying dislocations (Treglia et al. 2021). The danger of student disengagement – either because of alienation from remote learning or pressures to care for families – was real. In this context, social media was a potential vehicle for connection. Yet, despite social

media's importance for contemporary youth, educators have been slow to incorporate it into their practices, and the field of education research has only begun to grapple with its impact (Goodyear and Armour 2021; Greenhow et al. 2020). In particular, we know little about how schools *as organizations* use social media and to what effect.

This virtual ethnography explores how one urban high school used Instagram over a year of remote learning to maintain its in-person culture and connection with students. We show that Bell High School's Instagram activities emphasized positive relationships, celebrated resilience in the face of challenges, and affirmed students' cultures and identities. Building on research on student engagement in online environments (Martin, Sun, and Westine 2020) we find Instagram played a critical role in sustaining Bell's progressive school culture and promoting student-adult connections. We also raise questions about the new demands social media may place on educators, as well as the new means of access and behavioral control it engenders.

Theoretical framework: school culture and culturally sustaining pedagogies

Writing on school culture tends to define it broadly as the 'values, norms, and beliefs' of a school (e.g., Dupper and Meyer-Adams 2002, 356), or describe its elements (e.g., Lee and Louis 2019), but generally shows culture has a powerful impact on students' and educators' experiences. Recent work has elaborated upon the concept, showing it to comprise the following components: formal meanings (e.g., the school's mission statement), formal practices (e.g., disciplinary practices), informal meanings (e.g., student attitudes towards school), and informal practices (e.g., patterns of communication), all of which are also influenced by meanings and practices in the broader environment, such as patterns of race and class or district practices (Cucchiara, Golann, and Diehl 2023). Informed by this definition, we see school culture as constituted through the actions and perspectives of educators, students, and families, which are shaped by social context. Alignment between elements of a school's culture (such as educators' goals and students' own meaning-making) can determine whether a particular initiative succeeds or falls flat (Cucchiara, Golann, and Diehl 2023). While research on school culture focuses on *school buildings*, we extend the concept to virtual spaces.

Our analysis also draws on theories of *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (CSP). CSP counters deficit approaches to teaching and learning, and sustains multicultural communities in educational settings by promoting multilingualism and multiethnicism (Alim, Paris, and Wong 2020; Paris 2012). Studies show that teacher responsiveness to students' cultural and linguistic resources makes schooling more inclusive, promotes student belonging, and capitalizes upon lived experiences as assets for learning (Borck 2020; Wissman 2021). However, little work has examined how CSP can inform *online* student engagement.

Literature review

Progressive education

Drawing from a long tradition rooted in the work of early twentieth century philosopher John Dewey (1990), progressive schools emphasize experiential learning, student ownership over educational processes, and nurturing interpersonal relations. These approaches may be effective with students of varied race and class backgrounds, and, indeed, there is extensive evidence documenting widespread benefits of positive relationships (e.g., Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder 2004). However, most progressive schools are private, largely serving affluent students (Cohen and Mehta 2017). There are few studies of students' and educators' experiences with progressive education in schools that serve low-income students (but see Tyner-Mullings 2014).

Student engagement and remote learning

This study builds on literature on virtual schooling and student engagement. A review of online learning research found that of 619 recent research articles, the plurality addressed academic student engagement (defined as presence, communication, participation, collaboration, or community building), suggesting scholarly interest in how digital technologies can improve classroom participation (Martin, Sun, and Westine 2020). By contrast, the study found limited research on organizational topics, such as culture and inclusion.

Meanwhile, research on COVID-19 and remote learning in the U.S. shows that low-income students of color were more likely than other students to disengage from school during the pandemic. National student and teacher survey data indicate disparities in virtual attendance between low and high poverty schools (Kurtz et al. 2021) and suggest that anxiety and boredom were important causes of repeated absences. Data on student learning show the negative impact of this decreased engagement, especially for students who spent extended periods online (Fahle et al. 2023). However, there is evidence that some high school students had positive experiences with online learning, in part because of support they received from teachers (Oinas et al. 2022), though we know less about the role other school actors played. Indeed, our data show that the work of increasing engagement in remote learning need not fall on teachers alone.

School culture and social media

Even before COVID-19, scholars explored the utility of social media for student engagement, with a recent review of teachers' social media use indicating its benefits to classroom culture (Greenhow et al. 2020). Moreover, while social media is often seen as a source of distraction and low self-esteem, some studies show adolescent social media use can positively impact reading performance (Hollis and Was 2016; Hu and Yu 2021). Scholars have documented adoption challenges for teachers constrained by curricular demands, technology restrictions, and worries about student misconduct and legal liability (Ahn 2011). Meanwhile, ethnographies of students' social media use document high levels of creativity on the part of students, especially students of color (Watkins et al. 2018), and racial inequalities in educators' responses (Rafalow 2020). Though useful, this work has not explored how educators can use social media to extend into digital spaces schools' efforts to create positive social environments.

Yet there are reasons to believe schools should consider embracing social media to support organizational goals. Deal and Peterson (2016) describe school websites and social networking sites as places that can reinforce school values and foster increased engagement. Other studies show educators can use online platforms, such as Instagram, to collaborate with community stakeholders and colleagues and seek social support (Bordalba and Bochaca 2019; Greenhow, Lewin, and Willet 2023; Richter et al. 2022). Moreover, positive school cultures and effective social media use are mutually reinforcing. Niemi, Kynäslahti, and Vahtivuori-Hänninen (2013) found schools that actively used information and communication technologies also supported student-centered teaching and educator creativity and risk-taking. We extend this body of literature by asking:

- (a) How does one innovative urban high school attempt to use social media to maintain student engagement during the COVID-19 crisis? (b) To what extent and in what ways does social media activity reflect and extend school culture? (c) How do various stakeholders participate in the school's social media efforts?

Methods

This study is part of a larger ethnographic project exploring culture in progressive urban schools. We focus on Bell High School, which serves 350 students, 88% of whom identify as Black (8% identify as Hispanic, and the rest as White or 'Other'). The majority live in low-income households. Bell opened in 2014 as an alternative to traditional schools. It strives to center students' needs and

interests, rejects exclusionary discipline practices, and emphasizes student agency. While students choose to enroll, Bell is non-selective.

Research at Bell began in fall 2019 and concluded in June 2022, yielding nearly 300 h of observations and 36 interviews. For the first six months, we conducted classroom observations and interviews with teachers, students, and school leaders. In summer and fall 2020, when it was clear learning would continue online indefinitely, we pivoted to what Górsalska (2020) dubbed *anthropology from home*. Drawing on Hine's (2015) work on *virtual ethnography*, we used a multi-modal approach that does not treat an online/offline boundary as a principled limit for field sites. We attended virtual events, including professional development sessions and schoolwide meetings, and conducted interviews over Zoom, remaining in close contact with school leaders and staff. Bell was closed for most students during the 2020–21 school year. In-person data collection resumed in fall 2021.

When we learned in fall 2020 about Bell's robust social media activity, we began collecting data there, defining our virtual field site as the school's Instagram account. Bell's account was managed by Mr. Derek, a Black man in his 30s, who was Bell's Director of Student Support and Family Engagement (unless otherwise specified, all participants were Black). Before the pandemic, Mr. Derek led in-person Monday Morning Meetings (MMMs), in which the entire school gathered in the auditorium to celebrate achievements, play games, and share news.

During the 2020–21 school year, the first author conducted over 15 h of online observations over Instagram and collected about a hundred posts, which we supplemented with school-based observations conducted before and after COVID-19, interviews, and observations (over Zoom) of other meetings. Because Instagram does not grant mutual visibility (Hine 2015), the first author made their presence known by direct-messaging Mr. Derek for approval to follow the account and occasionally commenting and 'liking' posts. Bell's Instagram account was public; posts were visible even to those without an Instagram account. We extracted content using 4kStogram and collected screenshots of posts, likes, views, and comments. Finally, after the synchronous session on Instagram Live, we reviewed the posted video to confirm the accuracy of fieldnotes. This ability to revisit interactions without the imposition of a researcher with a recorder is a unique benefit of social media data.

For the analysis, we first re-read data and wrote analytic memos, identifying themes and connecting them to findings from in-person data collection. We then coded the data and conducted a further round of analysis focused on patterns and meaning-making. We also tracked participation (i.e., likes, views, comments, etc.) from different sectors of the school community, in line with prior virtual ethnographies (Doney, Wikle, and Martinez 2020; Trust et al. 2020).

While most participants identify as Black, neither researcher does, which limited our understanding of participants' beliefs and actions. The first author, who collected all social media data, is South Asian. Her work as an urban educator informs her interest in affirming practices for culturally and linguistically marginalized students. The second author, a White professor, has a long-standing involvement with other progressive schools in the city, had conducted fieldwork in the prior schoolyear, and was well-known to Bell staff and many students. Because neither of us were insiders with the school community, we conducted member checks (Creswell and Miller 2000) with Bell staff (including Mr. Derek) to assess the degree to which our conclusions represented their goals and experiences.

Findings: Instagram lives as culturally sustaining spaces

Our data reveal that Bell used Instagram intentionally to enact and extend the school's interpersonal culture in the absence of 'real world' interactions. We begin with an overview of Bell's culture as it existed in the building. We then describe a typical Live session and provide an analysis of Instagram content and engagement over the school year. Finally, we briefly discuss differences in student

engagement between in-person and virtual settings, highlighting the promises and challenges associated with social media.

Culture at bell high school

Bell's mission statement and core principles emphasized 'nurturing relationships' and 'interconnectedness.' Cultivating a caring school culture was central to its design (or, formal meanings and practices). Bell used an advisory system, keeping students with the same advisors for four years, and employed a large 'culture team' (staff who paced hallways and visited classrooms, intervening if problems arose and talking and joking with students). As one of the founders explained in an interview, 'We build on a foundation of very strong relationships in this building. Children are well-known. We work really hard to make sure everybody is connected to somebody in the building.' This emphasis shaped school routines, from regular use of 'shout outs' – in which educators spotlight student accomplishments – to the daily reminder closing morning announcements, 'Remember, we push you because we love you.'

During in-person fieldwork, we were struck by Bell staff's respectful and caring treatment of students. Students almost universally described educators as willing to provide additional academic and emotional support. For example, Octavia, a 9th grader, observed: '[Bell] is a school where it makes you feel like you're in a big family. You could tell your teachers care about you. I would describe it as a really loving school that just cares about the students they have.' Octavia contrasted teachers at Bell with those at her middle school, who were 'really rude' and only cared about 'getting paid.'

Staff-members were also intentional about affirming students' home and community cultures and connecting them with Black leaders and institutions (e.g., churches, historically Black colleges and universities, and fraternities and sororities). Images celebrating Black history and proclaiming, 'Black Lives Matter' lined classroom walls. Popular culture also featured heavily in school routines and informal practices. For example, in-person MMMs began with popular music and frequently included staff-student dance or sports contests. These informal meanings and practices were an important part of Bell's culture and were intended to help students feel connect at school.

Bell's emphasis on community shaped its response to COVID-19. When schools closed in March 2020, Bell leaders promptly delivered Chromebooks to all students. Bell held a 'drive by' graduation that spring, with teachers and school leaders visiting graduates' homes, waving signs, and honking horns for students and families who stood, beaming, outside their doors. And, of course, Bell turned to social media, using Instagram and other platforms to reach students throughout the shutdown. Ms. Jaz, a member of the culture team, explained how she and her colleagues came to embrace Instagram:

We first tried Google Meets, and then we tried Zoom, and we noticed ... a big relationship between social media and [students] connecting with staff. We didn't want to pull them and try to get them used to a different platform. We wanted to go into *their* platform

To Ms. Jaz, Mr. Derek, and other staff, Instagram was a way of meeting students where they were, keeping them connected while schools were closed.

Bell's Instagram live sessions

For most of the year, MMMs on Instagram Live functioned as vibrant sites for conversation, humor and engagement. Sessions typically began with Mr. Derek at home, playing music to set the tone. For example, one Monday, in honor of International Women's Day, Mr. Derek played women and nonbinary Black musicians, such as India.Arie and Janelle Monae. He then invited women to describe what they believed was their superpower. A 10th grade student declared hers was her mindset. A teacher exclaimed in the comments, 'You are indeed brilliant and have a strong

mind and voice!' An English teacher described her superpower as her ability to love. Mr. Derek nodded and, choking back tears, recalled this teacher giving his grandmother a gift and personal note. He later posted a picture of his grandmother, smiling with the gift, captioned, 'I'll never forget how it made her feel.' In these interactions, we see the school's ability to replicate aspects of its in-person relations in an online setting, essentially using Instagram to transmit its culture to students no matter their location.

The number of people who tuned into MMMs on Instagram Live ranged between 29 and 93 synchronous viewers. It peaked in November 2020 and then declined. In March 2021, per district mandate, some students returned to classrooms, complicating efforts to engage online. However, Mr. Derek continued to host MMM sessions on Instagram throughout the year.

Instagram live and school culture

Our analysis reveals three themes weaving throughout the virtual MMMs: a focus on relationships, an emphasis on encouraging students, and an embrace of students' identities as Black youth. Each of these reflected elements of the school's culture but manifested in particular ways online.

'I love y'all': building and maintaining relationships

According to Mr. Derek, Instagram could help keep strong relationships and a sense of community alive during the long, lonely year. Sessions typically included appearances from teachers and staff, and exchanges, often teasing, with student participants. Conversations were informal and covered non-academic topics, such as popular culture or extracurricular activities. When educators logged in, they invariably expressed support and encouragement for students. Mr. Fairbanks, a popular Social Studies teacher, joined often. In February, he urged students to participate in activities scheduled for Black History Month. Another time he displayed tomato seedlings germinating in his garage, musing, 'It's growth. It's going to take some time. You may not see it right away, but before you know it, it's going to be producing things. I know it's stressful out there now, but you have to find something positive, find something to release your stress in a positive way.' Such exchanges, intended to provide students with tools to cope with adversity, demonstrated the staff's commitment to students' well-being.

In keeping with the school's progressive orientation, Mr. Derek was intentional about facilitating these informal student-teacher interactions. In an interview, he observed, 'my mantra as an educator is I have to know the *person* before I can create the *student*.' He saw MMMs as a time for students to 'have fun, at least for one moment in a day.' Mr. Derek believed they gave students a 'sense of belonging,' explaining, 'they love to feel like someone is able to see what makes them smile, what makes them happy.' To that end, he appreciated how teachers' appearances on MMMs allowed them to relate with students:

I love the fact that they can come and not be a teacher They talk to them in the chat about random stuff that has nothing to do with school. I love the fact that it gets to be a space where students and teachers can just be free. Especially with what we're up against with this virtual learning thing. It feels good to be that breath of fresh air for people.

These instances show the blurring of traditional boundaries and roles that is possible in online settings. Whereas in schools, even at Bell, teachers generally function as authority figures and focus on academic content, here the role was intentionally altered, as teachers shared more of themselves and engaged with students on non-academic topics. In this way, Instagram facilitated interactions consistent with Mr. Derek's goal of helping students and teachers see each other as people first.

An MMM in mid-November exemplifies the glee with which participants interacted around nonacademic topics. Mr. Derek started by saying he was having the 'most profound time' talking to his advisory about cereal and that, 'for the record, Honeycombs are straight trash.' Students immediately responded. One exclaimed, 'Honeycombs are number one,' to which Mr. Derek

responded, 'You eat plain chips and have no friends if you eat Honeycombs.' Another culture team member, Mr. Hall, commented that he ate Honeycombs. Mr. Derek shook his head sadly, 'You can't be trusted, Hall. I'm sorry to hear that.' In the comments, students chimed in about other cereals and debated which goes first in the bowl, cereal or milk. This conversation continued for about 15 min, with other staff appearing live or adding comments, and students responding with mock outrage. Ms. Jaz observed that Honeycombs were always the last box left on top of the fridge, a small intimacy that implied shared experiences with students – of storing cereal atop the refrigerator, with tastier ones consumed first. Playful teasing continued when a student accused Mr. Derek of cooking eggs incorrectly, and another commented, 'you need to creep into those cookbooks, Der.' Though the topic was mundane, this extended exchange offered opportunities for humor and fostered familiarity.

Staff also used the sessions to emphasize their availability to students. For example, Ms. Garr, a White English teacher, first praised her 10th graders' journal entries and then asked students to reach out if they need anything. Similarly, when the social worker, Ms. Kara, joined in March, she thanked Mr. Derek for hosting the sessions – 'you get my week going!' – and then said, 'And for Bell students, I love y'all. Email me, anything that you need.' Educators likely highlighted their availability due to worries about student disengagement during remote learning. But, like other aspects of the school's online messaging, their stance was consistent with elements of Bell's culture. Indeed, fieldnotes from before and after the shutdown include many examples of teachers providing extensive support to students. As Ms. Jaz observed, the very nature of the school's use of Instagram was emblematic of the school's approach: 'What I've heard is, "No other school is on Instagram like that." I think that makes them feel how much we care, and shows how much we will put out to be part of their world.'

The virtual sessions also served to extend, and showcase, another feature of Bell's culture: positive, affirming bonds between adults. Every Bell staff meeting began with 'shout outs,' a ritual in which people recognized other staff-members for everything from quality teaching to providing emotional support. These carried over into virtual MMMs. For example, a member of the culture team, Mr. Sparks, observed in March that he had worked in several schools but that Bell teachers 'go above and beyond.' He concluded, 'A big shoutout to every teacher that works here.' At another session, after a young teacher, Ms. Ngobi, praised several students, Mr. Derek stopped her from logging off, launching into a glowing description of the students' affection and respect for her. Other teachers added comments: 'You are definitely the model of strength.' 'Thank you, Ms. N. You are awesome.' Here we see that alignment across formal and informal elements of the school's culture, which was evident in the building, extended online.

'I'm so proud of you': encouraging students, promoting positivity

MMMs also functioned as a virtual extension of a school culture that sought to promote positive thinking and foster resilience. When educators joined MMMs, they generally provided words of encouragement, emphasizing their affection for students and sometimes sharing their own challenges. Thus, when Mr. Fairbanks joined one day in October, he shared, 'I miss y'all but we're gonna make do with this situation. We're gonna make it positive.' Occasionally, educators described their struggles and how they overcome them. One day, a member of the culture team discussed obstacles she faced as a Black lesbian, proclaiming, 'Be who you are. Don't let nobody take it from you.' The comments echoed with support from students and staff, such as, 'Talk ya talk, Queen!' In these occurrences, virtual MMMs gave Bell students and educators a non-judgmental place to reveal and perform their multiple identities, modeling cultural dexterity and using lived experiences as a medium for social connection.

As the year went on and students increasingly disengaged from remote schooling, raising concerns about widespread school failure, Bell's focus on student perseverance took on new urgency. During staff meetings, teachers reviewed grades and attendance, devising new strategies to promote engagement. For example, in April, Ms. Taylor, a White special education teacher, introduced 'May

Madness,' a system whereby students could win prizes for completing work or participating in class. Ms. Taylor explained that the system was designed for students on the cusp of passing: 'This is about wanting to pull in the fence-sitters, the ones that have a chance. For some, there is no way to salvage their year. But for others there is.' Her comment is telling. On the one hand, she was resigned to the fact that many students were likely to fail. On the other, she and others were investing in a last-ditch effort to improve engagement for those who still had a chance.

This same spirit animated Bell's Instagram activities. In mid-December, Mr. Derek created the #pushthrough campaign and posted videos from eleven teachers and other staff members on the theme. For example, the assistant principal, a White woman, proclaimed in her video:

I know this year you have been met with challenges you have not expected or anticipated. I know that is pushing us all to our limits, but my words to you is that you can do hard things. It may not be easy to get up every day for virtual learning. I know you miss your classmates, your school, your sense of normalcy, but this *will all end*.

The most watched (419 views) #pushthrough video featured Ms. Whitman, a young, charismatic teacher who told students she was proud of them for staying engaged, 'and if you haven't started keeping up that good work, you'll get there. I know you will.' Comments for her post were filled with heart emojis from students and colleagues. As was often the case, Ms. Whitman did not chastise students for disengaging from school. Instead, she used empathy as motivation. Of course, the teachers posting videos, like those joining MMMs, were likely also facing their own challenges. Yet, in an important example of emotional labor, they generally put these concerns aside, projecting instead positivity and confidence.

Nevertheless, the situation at Bell often felt dire. Thus, Mr. Derek ended one meeting by pleading, 'We can't lose you. You stay positive. Don't give in. Don't give up.' Indeed, in a video created a week earlier, Mr. Derek pushed students to recognize their own strengths:

A few of you are sitting here not understanding the fullness of what you have to offer and what you bring to the table, the greatness that's within you, the greatness that *you have* to give to this world. A few of you are sitting there wondering, 'What do I do well? What is something good about myself?' Let me tell you this, *you*—yeah, *you*—have everything you need right now in this moment to be successful, to be great Know that you are strong. Know that you are wise. Know that you are smart ... Go do it. I believe in you.

To Mr. Derek, motivating students meant more than just offering generic words of support. It meant asking students to recognize their own strengths and interests and build from there.

While many students participated in MMMs by teasing Mr. Derek and other staff, others adopted staff-members' positivity. For example, in November, a student named Dasan joined, saying COVID rates were back up but 'we can get through it as long as we have each other's back.' He continued, 'there is always someone at Bell to get you through.' Similarly, in early March (and in honor of Women's History Month), when Mr. Derek asked viewers to reflect on lessons they learned from the women in their lives, Faraji, a 9th grader, shared his perspective. Making himself comfortable on his bedroom floor and adjusting his camera so viewers could see him, he explained, 'Every day is a lesson, and we have to take it as one. Every day there is a situation, there is a bright side with a solution.' Comments came quickly, with another student writing 'Wisdom' and a teacher adding, 'He is adorable and insightful!' Ms. Diallo asked in the chat, 'Does anybody know the name of that 9th grader? He always has something positive and wonderful to say, and I wanna be sure to shout him out!' Students also used Instagram to thank their teachers. Thus, Tamara, a 10th grader, joined one day in May to thank the entire 10th grade team, including Mr. Murray, a White, notoriously brusque social studies teacher who 'gets on [her] nerves.' But he pushes her, she noted, so she 'appreciates him.' These comments suggest that educators' emphasis on remaining positive helped students develop coping skills during this challenging time (Oinas et al. 2022). Of course, not every Bell student was eager to take up the mantle of persistence and positivity. But the culture created through Bell's Instagram activities was one that affirmed efforts in that direction.

'Know your history': affirming student cultures and identities

Bell's Instagram presence was infused with references to Black culture, building upon and amplifying shared meanings and experiences. Music by Black artists featured prominently and was a frequent topic of conversation. On one occasion, Mr. Derek started a session by playing TLC's 'Creep' and spent much of the meeting urging students without internet access at home to 'creep' to their grandmother's house to use her WIFI and complete their work, or 'creep' into their student portal to track their grades. Black beauty, especially hair, was another recurring topic. Thus, when some students were mocked for appearing on-screen wearing bonnets (hair coverings rarely worn outside), the school secretary, a beloved member of the community, came online to defend them, proclaiming, with her own hair in two protective braids, 'Beauty comes from within, so don't let the outside get you messed up, 'cus the inside is golden, all day.' Similarly, participants shifted in and out of African American and Mainstream American English dialects (see Maher et al. 2021). In a playful meeting themed around an imaginary cookout, attendees envisioned playing games and music and piling their plates with food. A staff-member teased students for forgetting 'mac and cheese' but added that she was 'just chattin'', a phrase students employed liberally to say they were joking. Such use of references familiar to students created a space of cultural pluralism and linguistic dexterity (Paris 2012). Social media's pervasive presence in students' social worlds and its informal register make it especially conducive for creating these sorts of spaces.

Staff also used Instagram to urge students to see their Blackness as an asset among their other identities. This happened in sessions focusing on Black History Month and in casual conversations between students and staff. Thus, Mr. Derek prompted a freshman student, 'Black man to Black boy, don't you ever forget the power you possess. Own your intellect and always choose to be you, no matter what.' A teacher, Ms. Diallo also emphasized the value of students' identities as Black Americans. Speaking seriously into the camera, she said,

[People of color] have been lied to, have had their histories taken away from them. It is important, especially now more than ever, that we have access to so much that has been stolen and taken from us, that we not take for granted our history.

Students generally responded positively to these sentiments, especially when they came from staff they held in high esteem. For example, when Ms. Ayad, a middle-aged history teacher whose elegant dress and demeanor were central to her teacher persona, joined to remind students about Black History Month, explaining that she taught the history of Africa because 'Black people are descended from a rich lineage,' the comments were quickly flooded: 'Ayaaaaad!', 'You better talk!!!', 'Preach Ayad!' and 'Period!! Know your history' To Ms. Ayad and other teachers, being Black Americans was a source of pride they hoped to instill in their students.

Finally, affirmations acknowledged the diversity of the Black experience, emphasizing students' individuality. Staff who joined MMMs celebrated Black American achievement in multiple domains and praised students for a variety of interests, from art to entrepreneurship. Consistent with the school's focus on agency and self-discovery, Bell educators urged students not to succumb to peer pressure or other people's expectations, but to remain true to their own emerging sense of themselves. Thus, in one session, Ms. Jaz urged students to 'embrace the weirdo side of you.' Mr. Derek reiterated the point, 'You don't have to fit societal norms. Stay true to yourself.' In this way, Mr. Derek and other school staff promoted an inclusive, accepting vision that allowed students to craft their own identities.

From in-person to Instagram live

As noted earlier, MMMs, designed to build community by bringing students and educators together each week, had existed at Bell before the COVID-19 related shutdowns. The meetings were held in the auditorium and attended by approximately 200 students. They typically started with music and 'shout outs' and then moved to games. For example, in January 2020, Mr. Derek threw three large

rubber balls to the students (one for each section of seats in the auditorium), telling them to keep them in the air as long as possible. After he led cheers for the winning section, he made a few announcements and moved onto the next game – wrapping two teacher volunteers, who stood at the front of the room, bouncing to the music and laughing good-naturedly, in toilet paper.

The mood during these meetings was generally raucous. Students mostly participated in large-group games but were distracted, often talking loudly to peers, during announcements or less participatory activities. Teachers and staff spent a fair amount of time trying to quiet students so that whoever was speaking could be heard – a task made more challenging by the unreliable sound system.

As we have seen, though online MMMs had a similar goal of building and sustaining community, participation looked quite different. Even at their peak, when nearly 100 students logged on, Instagram Live sessions never had the number of student participants that in-person MMMs did. They also could not generate the same energy and sense of solidarity that in-person sessions, which brought people into close proximity, could (Durkheim 1995). However, Instagram Live MMMs were rarely disrupted by student behavior, and, assuming there were no technical barriers, it was always possible to hear the audio or view comments. Notably, the structure of Instagram facilitated this unique combination of openness and control: it is intentionally interactive but allows the host to direct whom and what the audience observe. This power represents a new, and potentially invisible, type of access and social control that merits further exploration.

There were other differences too. Whereas in the in-person MMMs, school staff rarely engaged with students as *individuals*, instead interacting with them as a group, interaction in the virtual MMMs was more personalized. Students could add comments to the chat or chime in verbally and expect a back and forth with educators. Engagement was not private, because everyone who was logged in was a witness, but (overlooking for the moment questions raised above about social control) it was aligned with the values of democratic participation and active learning espoused by progressive schools. Undoubtedly, many who logged into the MMMs were passive observers, just like they were during in-person sessions. Overall, though not without some losses, the shift to virtual MMMs created new possibilities for personalized interaction and relationship building – possibilities upon which Bell staff were eager to capitalize.

From remote to in-person

It appears that Bell's use of Instagram during remote schooling had lasting effects on its approach to social media. In January-February of 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, Bell posted nearly forty times on Instagram. About half were images of students and teachers during exhibitions, when students showcased their learning over the semester. These posts had sparse captions and attracted about a dozen 'likes.' By comparison, during the same months in 2023, after Bell had been in-person for over a year, the school posted only sixteen times (a combination of informational posts and images of smiling students and staff) but seemed to generate increased engagement. For example, the post celebrating counselor appreciation week garnered 135 likes. Thus, while Bell's social media use declined in frequency after the shutdown, both the content of posts and student responses indicate that Bell had become more effective in using Instagram to disseminate information and celebrate community members.

Discussion

Scholars and policymakers are only beginning to reckon with the impact of COVID-19 on student learning. Research shows that, on average, low-income students of color experienced the greatest learning losses, largely because they were most likely to attend schools closed for extended periods (Fahle et al. 2023; Kuhfeld, Soland, and Lewis 2022). In schools like Bell, the situation often felt especially grim, as growing numbers of students stopped attending online classes or completing assignments.

This virtual ethnography examined one school's use of social media to promote student engagement during this difficult period. We find that Bell intentionally used Instagram to extend its progressive school culture into virtual spaces, ultimately creating a space that – like the school's in-person meanings and practices – emphasized relationships and resilience. Furthermore, Bell's social media activities celebrated students' cultural resources and modeled cultural and linguistic dexterity, exemplifying culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris 2012). Consistency between the school's official goals in this regard, educators' efforts, and students' cultural meanings and practices likely contributed to Bell's vibrant virtual MMMs.

While the story of the work Mr. Derek and his colleagues did during the 2020–21 school year is heartening – after all, these educators demonstrated extreme devotion and skill when it came to keeping students connected to school – it also raises questions about the ways in which the use of social media can potentially transform student-teacher relations and, especially, teachers' roles (Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter 2021). On the one hand, research shows that engaging with educators outside of school can be a beneficial experience for students, often leading to greater investment in school (Wang and Hofkens 2019). On the other hand, developing and maintaining a social media presence could represent a new form of emotional labor for educators, who, at least in this case, had to put aside whatever emotions they were feeling to perform positivity for students. We know teachers regularly engage in emotional labor *within* the school building (Horner et al. 2020). Our data suggest that, as a site for emotional labor, social media may create its own set of demands around a particular sort of performance. Additionally, Bell's Instagram Live sessions were designed to blur boundaries between teachers and students, just as they blurred boundaries between home and school. Some teachers may welcome this development (Trust et al. 2020), but for others it could be unappealing. In particular, teachers who embrace a more formal role may feel uncomfortable with the expectations for intimacy Instagram Live sessions seem to demand.

Our study has several limitations. First it is difficult based on our data to ascertain whether Bell's social media activities had a demonstrable impact on student morale or academic performance. The district prohibited interviews and surveys with students during the 2020–2021 school year. Our data on participation suggest that, while sometimes quite robust, it faltered at other times. Second, whereas approaches to discipline are important to school culture, we do not have data on this issue in the virtual setting and can only speculate about the new forms of social control such settings engender. Finally, we cannot claim that Mr. Derek's approach would be easily replicable. Bell delegated social media moderation to an especially effective communicator, who modeled positivity, and who skillfully shifted dialects, celebrating student and staff identities and cultures.

Conclusion

By taking advantage of a unique opportunity for extended virtual data collection, our study contributes to several bodies of knowledge. First, whereas the literature on school culture has focused on culture *within* the school building, we extend this conception, showing how shared understandings, expectations, values, and patterns of behavior can manifest in *virtual* spaces. This virtual culture ultimately shaped the ways participants interacted online, just as school culture shapes in-person interactions. In doing so, our study also answers Martin, Sun, and Westine's (2020) call for more research on how digital technology can be used at an organizational level to promote student engagement. We show that when multiple educators collaborate to use social media in a way that is consistent with the school's in-person culture, it can create a new site for engagement that advances the school's organizational goals. Similarly, while literature often emphasizes the harmful effects of social media (e.g., Douglas et al. 2023), our findings are consistent with the work of scholars who argue that social media can be a valuable site for building and sustaining positive student-educator relationships and ultimately, supporting student academic engagement (e.g., Goodyear and Armour 2021). Indeed, our data indicate that social media presents unique opportunities for culturally sustaining educational practices (Paris 2012). Further, and unlike other work that has found that technology can exacerbate inequality,

(e.g., Rafalow 2020), we suggest that, when educators meet students where they are in online settings, skillful use of technology may actually ameliorate inequality. Finally, our findings are consistent with Oinas et al.'s (2022) conclusion that teacher encouragement and support during the COVID-19 crisis helped students develop coping skills.

We know that many students disengaged from remote learning during the 2020–21 school year, often becoming overwhelmed with loneliness and anxiety (Elharake et al. 2023). However, we know far less about the extent to which virtual spaces met students' needs for connection during this period. We argue that, at least for those who participated, the Instagram Live sessions were a source of moral and emotional support, connecting students to the school and the values and goals it promoted. Of course, any analysis of social media's efficacy with respect to culture-building should consider the for-profit nature of platforms like Instagram and attendant concerns about students' rights, well-being, and data privacy (Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter 2021).

Our study also has implications for practice. As school districts set social media policies, across the country and the globe, they could explore its unique possibilities for community and student engagement. Certainly, popular platforms like Instagram make it easier to engage students. In the process, schools can empower students to develop their digital voices and critical thinking skills instead of alienating them from sources of support and cultural sustenance (Bibizadeh et al. 2023; Paris 2012).

Yet, social media is no panacea. Even savvy social media use cannot make up for the losses associated with months of online school, and it can create new burdens and tensions, as well as new opportunities. However, if educators do move to integrate social media more fully into the daily life of schools, our data show they can and should be intentional about creating online spaces that are engaging, reflect and sustain students' home cultures, and extend positive aspects of the school's culture beyond the school's walls. It is also clear that there is more to learn about how social media sites such as Instagram blur boundaries between home and school and, ultimately create new ways for educators and students to engage with one another.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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