





Creative adolescent experiences of education and mental health during COVID-19: A qualitative study

Lauren M. Zaeske¹  | Taylor P. Harris¹  | Amanda Williams¹  | Gretchen Scheibel²  | Haiying Long¹  | Barbara A. Kerr¹

¹Department of Educational Psychology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

²Department of Special Education, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

Correspondence

Lauren M. Zaeske, Department of Educational Psychology, School of Education and Human Sciences, University of Kansas, Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 W. Campus Rd., Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.
Email: lauren_zaeske@ku.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated creative adolescent perceptions of their educational and mental health experiences during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Participants were 25 English-speaking adolescents from the Midwest in the United States. They were identified as creative by their teachers according to known creative profiles. Participants attended an all-day creative career workshop in the Spring 2021 semester. The five focus groups guided by semi-structured interviews conducted for this study occurred during the workshop. This study was phenomenological in nature with constructivist and transformative paradigms, and transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by the first, second, and third authors. Creative adolescents' education during the pandemic was marked by classroom changes based on COVID-19 policies, experiences of disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment, as well as feelings of empathy and appreciation for their educators. Creative adolescents experienced mental health challenges related to adjustment issues, powerlessness and hopelessness, and isolation. Implications of results are discussed.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, creative adolescents, education, mental health, qualitative design

1 | INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are an understudied population in psychology and education research. Despite this, adolescents offer a unique understanding of their educational and mental health experiences, particularly during a global pandemic. Though coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)'s effects on student mental health are still largely unknown, emerging research suggests cause for concern. Recent research on this topic suggests adolescents who exhibited difficulty engaging in online learning were more likely to demonstrate an increase in depressive symptoms after COVID-19 government restrictions were implemented (Magson et al., 2021). Additionally, Kerr et al. (2021) suggested creative adolescents are uniquely more prone to experience anxiety and depression as a response to socio-environmental stressors; the pandemic, then, as a source of socio-environmental stress, was found to negatively affect their mental health (Kerr et al., 2021). These findings indicate further investigation into this topic is warranted to better understand how creative adolescents perceived their education and mental health during the pandemic, which few studies, to our knowledge, have conducted in a qualitative manner.

1.1 | Literature review

1.1.1 | Educational changes during COVID-19

The educational landscape since the onset of COVID-19 has drastically varied. Though most districts in the United States moved to remote learning at the start of the pandemic in early 2020, decisions to continue with remote learning or return to in-person learning has varied across the country (Parks et al., 2021). When in-person learning was attempted by districts, many experienced sporadic shifts throughout the pandemic, often switching to remote learning or accommodating staff and student quarantines throughout the year (Parks et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, this shifting landscape resulted in negative experiences for students, who found remote learning one of the most prominent challenges during COVID-19 (Scott et al., 2021). Not only did students who experienced remote learning receive significantly less time to engage with peers and teachers on an academic level (Kaden, 2020), they were likely to receive online instruction of less quality than what was previously received in the classroom environment (Knipe & Lee, 2002). Despite being globally accepted and widely used, remote learning was a hasty and necessary solution to the unknowns of COVID-19 (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) with potential unintended consequences for adolescent students (Kerr et al., 2021).

Children and adolescents faced more hardships at school, in addition to the change in educational landscape. The loss of typically available support from school systems, such as technological resources and social services, resulted in a widening gap of disparities among youth (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Youth with special education needs (10% of the population; Petretto et al., 2020) were at increased risk for experiencing higher negative affect and more difficulty concentrating with new modes of online learning (Becker et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). Furthermore, children and adolescents have been faced with new stressors when it comes to school while simultaneously navigating alternative methods of communicating (Kearney & Childs, 2021). Given that school modifications revealed negative psychological consequences on this population (Esposito et al., 2021), adolescents were able to utilize social media platforms to mitigate negative affect (e.g., boredom, anxiety, and sadness). Some adolescents coped by using social media for humor, which increased their happiness, while others used social media as an active means of processing the pandemic, leading to decreased distress and increased happiness (Cauberghe et al., 2021). As a result of limited real-life interactions during school, adolescents also used online technologies to engage interpersonally, using social media more for connection as a response to their own feelings of loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021). Social media, then, has served as a tool for adaptive coping during the pandemic (Cauberghe et al., 2021).

Extracurriculars are optional activities that focus on a specific interest. Since the implementation of social distancing as a result of COVID-19, students reported a drastic decrease in extracurricular engagement

(Ilari et al., 2022). Given that involvement in these types of activities have promoted peer interaction (Holloway, 2002), academic achievement (Akos, 2006), and positive psychological outcomes (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006), students were met with less opportunities outside of the classroom to prosper. Since participation in these activities has been associated with higher self-esteem (Holland & Andre, 1987), it could be concluded that students' identity development was hindered as a result of the pandemic. The loss of interpersonal connection and opportunities for success at school during the pandemic have also been considered to negatively impact the "disturbance-prone developmental and identity formation processes of adolescence" (Leuzinger-Bohleber & Montigny, 2021, p. 121). The restrictions put into place to keep children and adolescents physically safe from COVID-19 were also the same guidelines that fostered increased depression, worry, and anxiety (Shah et al., 2020). Children who experienced home confinement from school closures had elevated levels of emotional distress (Tang et al., 2021). The same study reported children exposed to distressing events caused by COVID-19 (i.e., death of a loved one, separation from friends or family, and constant worrying about illness) further perpetuated symptoms associated with mental illness.

1.1.2 | Adolescent mental health during COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted individuals in many ways, including impacting mental health, though the long-term effects are unknown. The effects of quarantines, isolation, sudden changes in routine, and potential loss of loved ones were anticipated and found to significantly impact children and adolescent's mental well-being (Imran et al., 2020; Octavius et al., 2020). Specifically, adolescents have been considered a vulnerable population disproportionately affected by the socio-environmental stressors of the pandemic (Imran et al., 2020). Jiao et al. (2020) reported these stressors experienced by children and adolescents commonly manifested as changes in appetite or sleep, and increases in anxiety, irritability, and distractibility, to name a few.

Further emerging research into the broad effects of the COVID-19 pandemic suggested disruptions to family life, schools, and routines may have led to feelings of helplessness (Ornell et al., 2020). The compounding nature of these circumstances may have increased the presence of fear and stress within the general population, having even broader implications than the physical effects of COVID-19, as was the case in previous epidemics (Ornell et al., 2020; Reardon, 2015). These concerns were echoed by Galea et al. (2020) regarding both the short- and long-term mental health consequences of the pandemic. In addition to the likely rise of depression and anxiety, Galea et al. (2020) noted a likely related increase in substance use, domestic violence, and child abuse as a result of prolonged school closures. While mental health and COVID-19 pandemic research is still emerging, mental health consequences can be inferred by evaluating past epidemics, including traumatic, natural, and environmental. When looking at past epidemics, researchers noted an increase in depression, substance use disorders, and even posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., Lee et al., 2007; Neria et al., 2008; Vlahov et al., 2004).

Adolescents have been described as an especially vulnerable population during the pandemic (Rajkumar, 2020). A recent systematic review found COVID-19 to be associated with increased mental health symptoms in adolescents (Octavius et al., 2020). Additionally, Octavius et al. (2020) reported some adolescents who experienced loneliness coupled with a history of trauma were more prone to experiencing anxiety and depression. Interestingly, the researchers also found several protective factors against the adverse mental health effects, including physical-psychosocial support, accurate COVID-19 information, and motivation to comply with distancing strategies (Octavius et al., 2020).

In a longitudinal study, Magson et al. (2021) assessed 248 adolescents for anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction who were surveyed twice (i.e., once 12 months before the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, and once 2 months following implementation of social distancing and government restrictions). Their longitudinal study demonstrated that adolescents experienced an increase in anxious and depressive symptoms, and a decrease in life satisfaction. Additionally, social disconnection and COVID-19 related distress were most strongly related to mental

health symptoms. In particular, when adolescents had higher levels of COVID-19 distress, they experienced greater anxiety and depression, and less life satisfaction. This study indicated that adolescents have been experiencing extensive negative changes in their mental health and life satisfaction when comparing their pre-pandemic well-being to their quality of life amid COVID-19 (Magson et al., 2021).

1.1.3 | The present study

Creative adolescents have been considered an understudied population in psychology and education research (e.g., Torrance, 2018). This population has been characterized as having domain-linked traits of independent, impulsive, reserved, analytical, and expressive, setting them apart from their peers (Kerr & McKay, 2013). Creativity and the personality factor of openness to experience have been highly correlated in the literature (e.g., Feist, 1998; Puryear et al., 2017). Individuals who score high in openness to experience have been characterized as having heightened awareness of their own and others' feelings, holding unconventional attitudes, and showing responsiveness and curiosity with new ideas, imagination, values, and actions (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae, 1993). In light of their openness, creative adolescents have been described as more perceptive of impending social and environmental crises, but they experience anxiety and depression when they are unable to solve these global issues (Kerr et al., 2021). The unique characteristics described by Kerr and McKay (2013), as well as their openness and awareness of global crises, suggest creative adolescents have been especially susceptible to mental health concerns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. These adolescents may have had a unique and more heightened experience of COVID-19 and its impact on their mental health and education, as recently academics and mental health were cited as the top two self-reported challenges adolescents faced during the pandemic (Scott et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively examine the educational experiences and mental health challenges of creative adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study not only provides valuable insight into creative adolescents' understanding of the changes they endured but also suggests how to apply these findings in the present context, as the world figures out a new normal post-pandemic. The present study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What were the educational experiences of creative adolescents during COVID-19?
2. What types of mental health challenges did creative adolescents face during COVID-19?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Research design

A qualitative research design was conducted to address COVID-19's novel impact on mental health and educational experiences of creative adolescents. This study was specifically a qualitative reanalysis of existing interview data previously collected by the authors focused on creative adolescent experiences of creativity, technology use, and support during COVID-19. The present study's research questions were formulated based on the creative adolescents' spontaneous and salient discussion of mental health challenges and educational experiences without being prompted by the interviewers.

This qualitative study was phenomenological in nature, with constructivist and transformative paradigms (Mertens, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology's goal is to describe, interpret, and make meaning of the phenomena of interest, which in this case, is how participants experienced changes in their mental health and education during COVID-19 (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015; Usher & Jackson, 2014). Constructivism as a paradigm assumes truth to be subjective, allowing for multiple realities to exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994;

Morrow, 2007). Phenomenology accompanied by a constructivist paradigm, then, allows for the researchers and participants to co-construct meaning together, validating all lived subjective experiences and acknowledging the existence of multiple realities. The transformative paradigm adds an advocacy-based lens to phenomenology, focusing on the subjective experiences of marginalized populations (Mertens, 1999). Mixing paradigms has been cited as being appropriate depending on the interest of the research (Patton, 2002). The present study is interested in understanding the individual and contextualized experiences of creative adolescents amid COVID-19, with the purpose of advocating for adolescents as a marginalized population lacking positions of power in the United States. Adolescents often are not given positions of power or influence in the United States, and especially amid COVID-19, adolescents uniquely experienced challenges resulting from the pandemic (e.g., Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2020). Elevating creative adolescents' lived experiences through phenomenology with lenses of constructivist and transformative paradigms relevantly meets the needs of this study, particularly desiring to elevate an understudied population.

2.2 | Sampling and participants

The University of Kansas Institutional Review Board granted ethical approval for this study before being conducted. This study was conducted as part of an ongoing yearly research-through-service workshop through the Counseling Laboratory for the Exploration of Optimal States (CLEOS) project at the University of Kansas. This workshop takes place in the Spring semester on Fridays and is run by counseling psychology graduate students and faculty. The workshop provides creative adolescents with one-on-one creative career counseling individualized with personality and career assessments, a group mindfulness activity, a group psychoeducation session on creative flow, and a focus group on topics relevant to the creative adolescent experience. The present study's data was collected during the focus group portion of the workshop. The topic of the focus group was COVID-19 and its effects on creative activities, coping with COVID-19, and experiencing support during COVID-19. During the interviews, participants also reported significant changes in their mental health and educational experiences, which are the results reported in the present study.

Participants in this study were recruited using purposive sampling (e.g., Padilla-Díaz, 2015; Silverman, 2015), and were included based on being an adolescent in high school and being creative according to validated profiles of creative persons (Kerr & McKay, 2013). Some of the characteristics displayed in these creative profiles are having a high number of creative accomplishments, an interest in pursuing a creative career, and showing openness to experience and autonomy (Kerr & McKay, 2013). Teachers of English-speaking gifted students were contacted by email to invite their creative students for participation based on the inclusion criteria. Parents consented to their students' participation in the study, and creative adolescents assented to the study as well before participation. Participating students came from eight Midwestern high schools in the United States. Between February and April 2021, five focus groups were conducted at the creative career workshop based on the availability of teachers and their consenting students.

Twenty-five adolescents participated in five focus groups ($n_1 = 7$ participants; $n_2 = 2$ participants; $n_3 = 8$ participants; $n_4 = 2$ participants; $n_5 = 6$ participants). Seventeen participants were male, seven were female, and one was nonbinary. Participants were, on average, 15.72 years old ($SD = 1.10$, range = 14–17). Most participants were in ninth grade in high school. One participant was Black/African American, one was Asian American, one was Hispanic, five were multiracial (Hispanic/White, $n = 1$; Black/White, $n = 4$), and 17 participants were White. Twenty participants reported GPA, and their GPAs ranged from 1.57 to 4.26, with a mean of 3.69 on a 4.0 scale ($SD = 0.61$).

2.3 | Data collection

Before attending the creative career workshop, participants completed a Qualtrics survey consisting of demographics, and measures of creativity, personality, career, and values. This data was implemented by master's

and doctoral level counseling students in the one-on-one counseling sessions with participants. The data collected via survey relevant to the present study were student demographic information (i.e., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, grade level, and GPA).

The authors chose to conduct focus group interviews due to their creation of a comfortable and empowering environment for participants, fostering nonhierarchical dynamics for them to engage with their peers (e.g., Liamputtong, 2007, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants in the present study shared that the focus groups were a safe space to vulnerably share their experiences with their peers, find community, and feel understood by the authors. The empowering nature of these groups align with the transformative paradigm, promoting advocacy and empowerment of disempowered populations (e.g., Liamputtong, 2007, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013).

A semi-structured interview was selected to provide structured questions that still allowed for adaptation to respond to and interact with participants, which promoted deeper discovery (Heppner et al., 2016). The interview protocol consisted of rapport building, interview, and wrap-up questions. Open-ended interview questions addressed topics pertaining to COVID-19 and its effects on creative activities, coping with COVID-19, and experiencing support during COVID-19 (e.g., "How have others supported your creativity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?"). Though the interviews were originally conducted with primary interest in learning about the pandemic's effects on creativity, as well as creative coping using technology during the pandemic, the authors noticed that participants continually wove changes in their education and mental health experiences throughout their narratives. The spontaneous and unprompted changes reported by participants in their mental health and educational experiences were extensive, leading to the conceptualization of the present study to continue advocating for creative adolescents by sharing their salient lived experiences.

All focus group interviews were conducted on Zoom, and the first and second author, staff assisting with the creative career workshop, sponsoring teachers, and consenting students were present. The first and second authors facilitated the interviews, following the semi-structured interview protocol. In instances when participants were not as responsive, the authors would directly invite them to share their thoughts to ensure all focus group participants had space to share their perspectives and experiences. Interviews typically were 35–50 min long, with interviews with more participants typically running longer.

2.4 | Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used for data analysis by the first, second, and third authors for its "theoretically flexible" nature (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 178). TA has been reported as an acceptable form of analysis for focus groups (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Three to six focus groups have been cited as being sufficient for analysis using TA, justifying the five focus groups conducted in the present study (Braun & Clarke, 2013; see also Guest et al., 2017).

Reflexive TA is appropriate to be used when research questions are interested in understanding lived experiences in their broader socio-cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which is relevant in the present study with research questions concerned with mental health and education embedded in the context of COVID-19. Reflexive TA consists of six steps that lead to the systematic identification of themes from the interview data: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing up the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Data was analyzed top-down, meaning the research questions guided the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019) was the software used to organize, code, and analyze the data, as it allows for the annotation and coding of transcripts, and organization and rearrangement of codes to formulate themes.

Phase 1 of TA involves familiarization with the data, including assembling transcriptions, listening to interviews, and reading the transcript data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding team members (i.e., the first, second, and third authors) noted and discussed their reactions (e.g., what their emotional response was to the data), and initial

observations and ideas (e.g., noting patterns and other information that stood out from the data) in coding team meetings.

Phase 2 involves the generation of initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding team members used the research questions as filter for coding and coded each transcript individually, making sure to code any data that related to the research questions. The coding team met over Zoom to discuss their reactions, biases, assumptions, ideas, and observations to a transcript. The first author shared her coded transcript from MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019), and the coding team would come to consensus on codes, either expressing agreement, disagreement, or suggesting additional or reworded codes. Each coding team member would then record their responses to the research questions based on the data gathered from the transcript, and this information was stored on a shared virtual document. This process was repeated for each of the five focus group transcripts.

Phase 3 involves searching for themes, where individual codes were collated into candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding team's recorded responses to the research questions from Phase 2 were analyzed to find commonalities shared across each transcript.

Phase 4 involves reviewing themes, where the candidate themes from Phase 3 were brought back to the codes and raw data set to determine whether they reflected the meaning conveyed by the participants. At this phase, themes were consolidated, or dropped if they did not reflect the data, requiring flexibility of the coding team. For example, the theme "Disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment" was originally two separate themes (i.e., "Disconnection" and "Disengagement and Disappointment") that were consolidated, as they could not justifiably remain separate.

Phase 5 involves defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where the themes and subthemes identified in Phase 4 were defined as it related to the data, representing patterns of recurring ideas, phrases, and keywords from the five focus group transcripts.

Phase 6 involves producing the report, where the first and second author selected data extracts that answered the research questions and reflected the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.5 | Positionality

To establish research credibility, it was a priority of the authors to acknowledge the shared and different multicultural identities of the coding team, and how coders' identities, biases, assumptions, and worldviews may have affected interpretation and analysis (Patton, 1999). Given the coding of qualitative data is an active process involving the researcher, it is necessary to share relevant personal and professional information that affected data analysis, particularly since reflexivity in TA values reflection on these standpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 1999). Note that the following information is limited in its precision of representing the complex multicultural identities of the authors.

The first author identifies as a Christian White cisgender heterosexual able-bodied female from the Midwest, who is a first-generation college student. The second author identifies as a Jewish White cisgender heterosexual able-bodied female from the Southeast. The third author identifies as a White cisgender heterosexual able-bodied female. Each author on the coding team has been involved in CLEOS researching creative adolescents and provided guidance in the form of mentoring or counseling adolescents. The fourth author has extensive experience supporting adolescents with mental health concerns in education settings. The fifth and sixth authors are experienced creativity researchers, with the sixth author being the founder of CLEOS.

2.6 | Trustworthiness of results

To improve the quality and validity of the data and demonstrate trustworthiness, the authors not only utilized a diverse coding team, but also a number of other strategies. In particular, the authors aimed to meet the eight criteria

for quality qualitative research put forth by Tracy (2010), which included: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence.

The authors searched for rival explanations when developing themes, which was a process of finding opposing evidence that other theme schemas could be applied to the data (Patton, 1999). By making this effort to find rival explanations, the final themes presented in the results were ultimately informed and refined by this process. The first and second authors received feedback from an independent external auditor and adjusted results based on their suggestions and or agreements (Glesne, 2006). Negative cases were also identified and analyzed in comparison to the results (Patton, 1999). For example, most creative adolescents reported disengagement with their education, but one participant from Focus Group 3 (FG3) reported having more educational opportunities amid COVID-19 because a precollege workshop in California moved their event online, making it feasible for the midwestern student to attend. The negative cases identified were outliers and not representative of the sample but were important to identify to establish the trustworthiness of the data.

3 | RESULTS

The following results presented are the findings based off recurring patterns of ideas communicated across five focus groups, with answers presented as themes and subthemes specific to the research question (see Table 1). Each theme and subtheme description will be defined, described, and accompanied by evidence (i.e., quotes) shared by participants. These results were formulated from the spontaneous discussion of creative adolescents without prompting by the interviewers, providing a unique insight into the salient educational and mental health experiences of creative adolescents.

3.1 | Education

3.1.1 | Changes in class format

The theme "Changes in class format based on COVID-19 policies" points to the ways schools adapted to either a remote, in-person, or hybrid format. Teachers utilized different online platforms to disseminate class materials and host class (e.g., Google classroom and Zoom), and protective measures (e.g., masking and social distancing) were put in place to protect students. Many participants recounted an understandably long list of changes they endured in their educational format. For example, "kids with last names from A through K go on Monday/Wednesday, and kids from, um, all the rest of the letters go on... Tuesday/Thursday, and then everyone is virtual on Fridays" (FG1). Other participants reported being fully back in-person and "basically like completely back to normal" (FG4). Another participant had recently switched from hybrid to full time in-person: "it was, like, a really weird jump and transition from, like, hybrid into full time" (FG4). Some participants reported their schools "take [masking] pretty seriously, like the teachers will not let you take your mask off, and they will tell you to put it above your nose if it's under your nose" (FG3). Other adolescents were completely remote at the time of interviewing, and others had to choose to either go entirely online or entirely in-person. Schools also transitioned to providing classes on Zoom or Google Classroom for remote or hybrid learners. Some participants commented on how it took time for educators and students to get used to the new platforms, as was the experience of a FG3 participant who shared how they taught themselves class content using YouTube when they were remote at the start of the school year:

There's some teachers that are still not good with, um, Google classroom, and I think, um, YouTube helped me learn a lot of that information, um, 'cause they- there were, um, a lot of amazing videos on

TABLE 1 Summary of findings.

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes
What were the educational experiences of creative adolescents during COVID-19?	Changes in class format based on COVID-19 policies (5)	
	Disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment (5)	
	Empathy and appreciation (5)	Mutual empathy between teachers and students (4)
What types of mental health challenges did creative adolescents face during COVID-19?	Issues of adjustment (5)	Stress and anxiety (4)
		Lack of motivation and boredom (5)
	Powerlessness/Hopelessness (5)	
	Isolation (4)	Loss of/changes in coping mechanisms (4)

Note: Numbers in parentheses next to themes and subthemes indicate the number of focus groups, out of five, which endorsed the theme either directly or as interpreted by the authors.

Abbreviation: COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

how to- how to do stuff, so it was nice to teach myself some of it when some of the teachers, um, were not the best at using Google classroom.

3.1.2 | Disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment

“Disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment” as a theme represents the reported ways creative adolescents experienced disconnection from their teachers, coaches, and peers, disengagement with their schoolwork and classroom environment, and disappointment from the changes in the quality of their education. The disconnection, disengagement, and disappointment experienced were often reportedly due to the transition to online learning at the start of the pandemic, remote or hybrid learning throughout the 2020–2021 academic school year, and COVID-19 policies put in place (e.g., social distancing and masking). For example, one participant from FG2 shared about their experience attending school remotely while some of their peers were in-person:

It's really weird, especially, like, when there are in-person kids and remote kids, the teachers gravitate more towards the in-person kids, because even if their reaction to the teacher is bad, you can see a reaction, and um, it's really hard to, like, connect with people if, like, they try to put us in, like, breakout rooms, and be like, “We're doing a group project, here's your two online, like, group partners.” And I'll, like, turn on my video and unmute, and be like, “Hi, what do you want to work on?” And they both just sit there and, like, don't do anything, and it's really weird.

Multiple students shared similar experiences, feeling as though they did not receive the same attention as their in-person peers. They even reported feeling as though it affected their engagement and quality of education received. For example, at the start of the pandemic when some classes never resumed, students never learned the rest of their course content, making it difficult for them when they moved into higher-level classes: “I know I personally missed out on a quarter of BIO 1, and I'm taking BIO 2 now with, uh, 75% of BIO 1, so it's an interesting experience” (FG3). An FG5 participant also described feeling disengaged and disappointed in their pandemic education:

Cause my brother and I, [name omitted], like, we're both doing online school, and as a result, like, we're just watching classes. We haven't really received, like, education, we've just been, like, following along in class and doing the homework. We haven't actually been, like, in class per se. And it felt, like, that's, like, an area where the support hasn't been given where it should be given.

This same idea was reiterated by another student (FG3) who shared that not being assigned homework hurt their education at the start of the pandemic:

One way I feel we could have been more supported is- well after, um, that first quarantine, after spring break of last year, we did absolutely nothing class wise. Like they didn't even give out, um, like not require- they could have, like, put out stuff that was like, "Hey, yeah, optional stuff if you wanna continue your learning, um, you can go ahead and uh do this stuff if you wanted to," but they didn't even do that, so I think that really, um, it really hurt our education.

Some students even articulated how they have difficulties with online education as a result of lacking connection:

Sometimes the teachers, like, will let you out, like, early, and it's almost like they are just cutting you off and, like, almost like you can't...when you're, like, in person you have that physical connection that you can see the teacher, you can ask them whatever you want, but, like, when you are online it is almost like they just forget about you, teach the class and then just put you aside and stuff... it just feels like for me - someone who struggles with doing school in general, online or in person, it's just, like, you don't have that connection when you don't have someone to be there and actually, like, being able to look at you and you be able to look at them, and having that connection while teaching. It's almost like... it just gets even harder you know? (FG5)

Participants also expressed feeling disconnected from their classmates, feeling as if they've moved away, as a participant from FG5 described:

There is some people that, uh, have been online the entire year. And it's almost like, to me, a feeling that they've, like, moved away cause, like, you never get to see them, and like, half the time I am like, "They still go here?" When they've been online like the entire year. And it's like, it's just kind of, like, disconnected. Like you have a friend one year and then the next year, it's just like they're completely gone. I know four or five people that I didn't even know still went to this school.

3.1.3 | Empathy and appreciation

Empathy and appreciation as a theme represent the ways creative adolescents felt exceptional gratitude for their educational journey and educators during the pandemic. Findings revealed adolescents experienced large amounts of empathy for the difficulties the pandemic caused. Participants often expressed gratitude for the efforts made by their schools, as seen in FG3:

Um, I know for me, just our district making an effort to make sports programs at least, like, still doing competitions, even if we don't do the same amount, still getting to compete was definitely a good thing for us, and they really made an effort to do it in a safe way.

Many participants shared that they believed in their teachers and knew that the demand placed on them to conduct remote and in-person learning was unreasonable:

Our school board decided to have it set that teachers were expected to teach two classes at once. That is just not really possible, so all of these teachers are forced into this situation where they have to prioritize the majority and focus on the kids in person and just hope that the kids online can follow along. (FG5)

This theme also reflects the understanding and solidarity that creative adolescents received from their educators. Thus, this theme is accompanied by a subtheme reflecting the mutual empathy between both teachers and students amid the pandemic. Creative adolescents reported the ways their teachers provided them with positive educational experiences that helped them feel more engaged with their classes:

My – my, like, main gifted teacher, [Teacher Name], she is a very, very, big like - I don't know how she does it - but she can tie anything back to English in a very concerning manner. Um, so she can tie anything she wants to together, and so when it all started, she had a very big issue with like, not being able to see us and – 'cause like, we are a very close-knit class, and we all pretty much like each other, but even if we don't like each other, we like the conversation that flows, and she started this thing called "[Teacher Name] Talks" and it was a Google Drive folder that she shared with all of us, and she made one every single day for months, and it was just like, "Today's Earth Day! What do you do to celebrate Earth Day?" And we all had different, like, fonts that we used to respond, and we sit there and, like, type out stuff. Um, or when Tiger King was, like, a really popular Netflix show, and like, just all of these different Netflix things, or like whipped coffee, we would sit there and, like, go through all of these trends together, but, like, far apart. Um, and it was like, I have my whole classroom supporting me, but I really had like [Teacher Name] and my other gifted teacher, like, actually talking with us and, like, creating conversation, and it made it feel a lot less like, lonely, and like, they really understood what all were going through. (FG2)

A FG4 participant voiced how they felt mutual understanding from their teachers, as everyone experienced the pandemic together:

Um, I think for the most part, like at least one or two or, like, a few of my teachers have been, like, really helpful in that sense, 'cause, like, they understand, and, like, most of them have kids, and so, like, they do care...they understand too, 'cause like a lot of times you feel like you can't associate with your teachers, but, like, it was kind of nice 'cause we everyone is going through the exact same thing and so you know everyone is alike and so you can really talk about things with every single person.

3.2 | Mental health

3.2.1 | Issues of adjustment

The theme "Issues of adjustment" refers to the ways creative adolescents experienced a wide array of mental health concerns as they dealt and coped with the changes caused by COVID-19. Specifically, two subthemes of "Stress and anxiety" and "Lack of motivation and boredom" were formulated to reflect the numerous forms of concern and challenges faced by creative adolescents as they adjusted to the new culture of the pandemic. For example, several

participants described feeling anxious about their loved ones contracting COVID-19 or concern about spreading COVID-19 to others. An FG4 participant described how they felt after their parents had “close calls” with getting COVID-19:

Um, and it kind of, like, shook me up a little bit, and I got a little scared, but then- and like I- I didn't- I was like determined that, like, I wasn't gonna do- I wasn't going to, like, put anyone in harm or anything, and, like, yeah I don't know it was- it was really scary when they had to [get tested].

In addition to the concern for the health of others, participants often reported needing to find creative ways to cope with their stress. One FG3 participant shared their response to their pandemic stress:

Um, I know, it was stressful for me, just because I kept worrying about, like, all of my, like, different athletic things, and I got to the point where to cope I would bike five miles a day, which isn't that much, but like, I mean, it was also quite a bit to do every single day, because I just couldn't sit in my house and do nothing, like had to do something.

Though creative adolescents dealt with a wide array of stressors and anxiety amid the pandemic, they still found adaptive ways to deal with their stress. For example, an FG2 participant started therapy during the pandemic:

After COVID started, I started therapy, which really like, brought to light new things I should try doing. Um, and I've also learned how to, like, manage stress better I think, because I've been like- I've had to handle a lot of it myself, and so, I've learned how to, like, be like, “Okay this sucks, but at the same time, this sucks more, so we're gonna, like, push that off to the side, and it's okay,” and, like, I learned not to freak out over small things as much, and just like appreciate that it got to happen in the first place. Even if it went very horribly wrong.

Additionally, all five focus groups referenced either dealing with boredom or lacking motivation throughout the pandemic. Increased boredom was often referenced as participants described their time isolating at home. Lack of motivation often referred to disengagement with schoolwork, extracurriculars, or hobbies that were meaningful to them. For example, one FG3 participant described playing video games during school to cope with boredom. Another participant from FG1 described how they filled their boredom with social media:

It fills, like, the boredom I have during the summer, but now when I need to do something, why would I do that when there is TikTok there? you could be watching TikTok instead of doing work, which obviously one is better than the other.

3.2.2 | Powerlessness and hopelessness

The theme “Powerlessness/Hopelessness” refers to the demoralization experienced by creative adolescents while they navigated the pandemic. As participants shared the following quotes, they often sounded frustrated, exhausted, conflicted, or disenchanted with their circumstances amid the pandemic. For example, after being asked how they're doing, one FG3 student responded that they'd “given up”:

I kind of stopped caring. It's COVID, it feels like the normal now, and it sucks, and I want it to go away, but like, we, as kids, are not going to be able to change a single thing that's going on around us right now.

Other participants expressed feeling frustrated with their peers when they wouldn't follow COVID-19 guidelines while in school, but they felt powerless to do anything about it:

I knew I didn't want anything to happen, and so I was really cautious, and it's I- I try and be safe during school too, and it's sometimes frustrating 'cause some people don't really care, and, like, I don't know like I- I don't want to be rude but like I also don't want to be sick so. (FG4)

An FG3 participant described their frustrations and hopelessness as mask mandates were not taken seriously and their grandparents became ill with COVID-19:

The worst part was at that time, they um, they really kind of, like, dragged their feet on like, um, ensuring that a mask mandate was present, so there'd just be people walking around with absolutely no masks, and that was pretty, um, I would say annoying, um, and really frustrating, because at the same time, I, um, one of my grandmas, well both my grandma and my grandpa got it, and I was really worried about it, um, and they ended up being okay, but I was really worried about like other peoples', um, like, families that could, like, not be okay due to COVID, and I just thought it was, um, not okay of them to just not wear a mask, especially when it was like really big here.

For one FG4 participant, hopelessness took on the form of grief after losing a loved one to COVID-19:

COVID, um, took a person who was very close to me, and so like, I completely cut off the world and just wrote for a really long time, and it was really hard because I don't deal with those things very well, and then not being able to leave or go be around other people, and his funeral was outside, and it was raining, and it was awful, and so I feel like after that, like, it was just purely emotion in my writing.

3.2.3 | Isolation

"Isolation" as a theme refers to the manner in which creative adolescents were often staying at home and not engaging in their typical forms of socialization with others. An FG4 participant described their need to isolate to protect the newborn in their home:

My mom had a baby who is three months old when we first went into complete lockdown. So, I was like, "Wow, I'm not going to be the one who brings it home to her," because she had- she was a preemie when she was born. She had a whole bunch of health issues at the beginning, there was no way she was going to be able to fight it, so it got to the point where, like, I wanted to push back against my parents, just be like, "I at least need to go see one person," but then on the other hand I'm like, "Is it really worth it? At this moment can I suck it up for the safety of the baby?" And so it was kinda-kinda little bit of both, and my friends were going out, living it up. They didn't care, so I was kinda like stuck in the middle.

In spite of the isolation and social distancing, an FG5 participant shared how the isolation made them more appreciative of in-person time with others:

I mean, I guess for me like the pandemic has made me kind of more, like, appreciative of, like, in-person time. So, like my brother said, like we've been remote all year, so, like, we don't really see a lot

of kids that often unless we are doing, like, activities like forensics and debate and, like, track and stuff, but, like, we'll see kids then when we're doing stuff, but, like, we don't see them, like, walking in the halls or at lunch or stuff. So, like, whenever I am, like, in person with other kids, just maybe like, put your phone away and like- like actually spend time with people. Instead of, like, in a normal year, like, maybe I would just, like, play on my phone or something whenever I'm, like, at school, like walking through the halls or something like- like that coping thing, like, when you're bored, but, like, now I'm like, "No, I don't want to be doing that because, like, I could go do that at home." Like let me actually, like, spend time with the people when I am with people. I think that's something that, like, it's made me more appreciative of, like, spending time with people that I wouldn't normally get, like, because of the pandemic.

One subtheme, "Loss of/changes in coping mechanisms" reflects the ways that, due to isolation, creative adolescents reported either losing their typical forms of coping or needing to find different avenues of coping throughout the pandemic. For example, one FG5 participant described feeling stressed when school shut down and they still had to complete assignments while their typical school-based coping activities were taken away:

You get the same amount of work that we did before our school shut down, and you're expected to complete it in roughly the same amount of time, but we have all of these activities and things that we use to, um, like, let out stress and calm down are all being shut down or moved online which is not the same effect.

4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine creative adolescents' educational experiences and mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic through qualitative methods. Creative adolescents reported that their educational experience during the pandemic was characterized by changes in class format, disconnection from their teachers and peers, disengagement from classes, disappointment in the educational changes, and empathy and appreciation for their teachers. The mental health challenges creative adolescents experienced were issues of adjustment, hopelessness and powerlessness, and isolation amid the pandemic. As the creative adolescents offered these reflections on their education and mental health without prompting, it is possible that these results point to more deep-seeded, prevalent, and meaningful representations of their experiences that they felt strongly about sharing.

4.1 | Education

The results were both positive and constructive reflections of creative adolescents' COVID-19 educational experience. As these responses from the creative adolescents arose organically and without prompting in the interviews, it reveals that these topics were important to them in recounting their pandemic experiences. The value creative adolescents seemed to place on their education was surprising and was noted by the authors through the ways they seemed disappointed, had more difficulty engaging in class online, and felt that they didn't glean much from their education amid the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time as grieving their lost education, creative adolescents were also expressing sincere empathy for their educators. Adolescents recognized the demand placed on educators that was beyond their control and difficult for them to manage. The participants seemed to hold both truths in tension, feeling both frustrated, yet understanding of their educational experience throughout the first

year of the pandemic. It is possible that creative adolescents' empathy and sense of understanding may be a protective factor to aid in their coping while navigating the changes in their education.

4.2 | Mental health

Creative adolescents reported numerous issues of adjustment such as anxiety, stress, motivation issues, and boredom. Interestingly, the most predominant depressive symptom was perceived hopelessness and powerlessness, which was exacerbated by the lack of control or influence creative adolescents had amid the pandemic. These feelings seem to reflect the social status of adolescents, particularly their lack of control or influence over the environments they find themselves in (i.e., school, home, or work environments). This sentiment of being “kids” that can't change what's going on around them was pertinent and reflects the need of including adolescent voices in the decisions that affect them. In contrast, however, the times adolescents reported feeling the most positively throughout the pandemic were in moments of connection with others, or empowerment. For example, when creative adolescents would find community with others on social media platforms, they often felt empowered to voice their experiences and opinions. Their experiences of connection seemed to help them endure the isolation that has been a common experience throughout the pandemic. Contrary to popular perceptions of adolescents, many participants reported that they valued their time in-person with their friends and teachers more after the pandemic, putting their phones down and being mindful to be fully present.

4.3 | A note on sociopolitical challenges amid COVID-19

The authors noticed the extent to which participants were affected by grief and fear caused by the pandemic, as well as other relevant sociopolitical issues occurring within the context of COVID-19. As the present research questions specifically investigated educational and mental health experiences during COVID-19, these negative experiences that are socio-politically charged are inexplicably interwoven in their responses, particularly when they involve interpersonal issues between classmates, and the authors believe sharing the broadened context of participants' experiences is crucial to understanding these adolescents. Participants discussed how they were negatively impacted by the social injustices that occurred within the time of the pandemic. Specifically, one participant of color shared an experience where they created a TikTok video in response to a racist video posted by a classmate:

We made this video 'cause, like, this one White dude - he goes to our school actually - he's a... sophomore, yeah, sophomore, and he was all, like, “Y'all Black people suck”...and I was, like, laughing, and he was like, “Why are you laughing? You know, I am going to make you my slave.” I said, “Excuse me?”...We made a whole TikTok about that, and then [TikTok] took it down. 'Cause my bestie, she texted me, she was like, “Did you know [TikTok] made me take down my video?” and I said, “What? When this dude over here, like, making a whole video and posted it on TikTok talking about...he hates us and stuff. Like, sucker please.”

As one goal of this study is to advocate for adolescents, it is important to acknowledge that students of color were exposed to these forms of injustices, in addition to experiencing pandemic distress. FG1 participants also critiqued shadow banning, an algorithmic issue that disproportionately affects creators of color or other marginalized identities. The policies of technological platforms still disproportionately affected students of marginalized identities. After sharing this experience, the teacher involved in the focus group expressed concern and encouraged the students to bring these experiences to the attention of teachers and administration, and peers

offered their support and solidarity. Educators would benefit from empathic, open conversations with students about the how these experiences of systemic injustices may be emerging in online platforms as well as among peers whether in the classroom or over Zoom, as well as exploring ways to educate, advocate, and protect students of marginalized identities. These conversations would not only enable students to feel seen and advocated for in their experiences of marginalization, but they would also provide students a seat at the metaphorical “table,” creating pathways for equity and inclusion in school settings.

4.4 | Limitations and future studies

One limitation of the present study were the inconsistent sizes of the focus groups, with particular concern for the two focus groups which consisted of two participants each, whereas the other three groups had seven, eight, and six participants. This limitation reflects one of the challenges of the recruitment process, in that certain high schools invited and received consents from a larger number of their creative students, whereas the focus groups of two were a result of fewer creative students recruited and consented. Future studies may consider sampling more consistent numbers of participants or interviewing individual creative adolescents to learn more extensively of their experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that participants' spontaneous responses about mental health and education only represent the experiences of creative adolescents from eight Midwestern high schools in the United States. Due to the vast array of policies and decisions made by school districts all across the nation, it is important to not generalize the experiences of these creative adolescents to those of all high school students in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future studies could not only interview a diverse population of creative adolescents from cities, suburbs, and rural areas across the United States, but also could inquire about the different phases of the pandemic (e.g., the current study asked participants to recall their experiences since the pandemic started, from March 2020 to the time of interview in Spring 2021).

5 | CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide valuable insight into the perceived experiences of creative adolescents, which may inform educators' approaches with creative adolescents as the education system continues to navigate the pandemic. First, these results suggest that creative adolescents hold much value in their education. Though some students found that they felt less stress at the start of the pandemic when many schools closed or lessened their schoolwork expectations, the majority reported that the pandemic hurt their educational experience, and it caused them distress to not learn as effectively as before the pandemic. This value of education may serve as a protective factor for creative adolescents as the pandemic continues. Continuing to uphold academic expectations may provide a sense of normalcy and stability for students. Further, creative adolescents may benefit from open conversations about their feelings towards their educational experience. Giving creative adolescents a chance to voice feedback about the quality of their education, as well as to collectively grieve the changes caused by the pandemic thus far, may not only cultivate community between educators and students, but also encourage student buy-in to their educational experience.

Second, these results suggest that the sensitivity and openness of creative adolescents served as both a protective factor and risk factor. Creative adolescents demonstrated empathy and appreciation for their teachers and the challenges they faced throughout the pandemic, and this empathy helped the creative adolescents feel solidarity with their teachers and peers, feeling less isolated throughout the pandemic. Their sensitivity and openness also served as a risk factor, in that they felt increased stress and anxiety as they navigated the pandemic, particularly managing moral dilemmas of social distancing and attempting to protect loved ones from the virus.

Educators may validate and encourage their creative students by aiding them in recognizing their sensitivity and openness as a strength that allows them to have compassion for themselves and others, while also encouraging healthy coping mechanisms that may improve their psychological adjustment as the world continues to navigate the effects of the pandemic.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Lauren M. Zaeske  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8856-0285>

Taylor P. Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8243-2015>

Amanda Williams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3163-6303>

Gretchen Scheibel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3047-910X>

Haiying Long  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6563-5291>

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