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Experiences of Parents of Pre-Adolescents Coping with Online Learning, Socialization and Navigating Critical Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 school closures necessitated shifts in how students engaged in learning and connected socially. For pre-adolescents and their families, these closures added urgency to an already identified challenge for parents trying to navigate their children's engagement with digital platforms. Researchers utilized interviews to explore parent and child experiences related to online learning and behavior. Online workshops provided parents with critical media literacy (CML) knowledge and skills for navigating media texts and platforms. This paper employed emergent design-based research methodology and interpretive qualitative case-study methods. Data from interviews, recordings, and field notes were analyzed thematically. The analyses identified that parents noted increased time spent online by their children due to COVID-19 lockdowns. They also highlighted concerns for child safety, issues connected to CML, acknowledgment of the benefit of a support community amongst parents, and parent-child conversations about online actions. This study affirmed the need for parent support regarding CML and digital tools in educational and social online environments and provided suggestions for ways to promote this type of support.

INTRODUCTION

How information is consumed and the technology with which information is accessed change quickly. Handheld devices, laptops, cell phones, and portable tablets are all tools where information, communication, and interactions can be engaged remotely in personal and public spaces (Currie & Kelly, 2022). People, including pre-adolescents, are constantly connected to the information circulating among peer groups and throughout the global world, which can challenge the understanding or perception of knowledge, rules, and expectations that are often set in place by parents, schools, and general society (O'Rourke & Miller, 2022). Currie and Kelly (2022) defined critical media literacy as an act of using "sound judgment during media engagement" (p. 16). Increasing parent familiarity with critical media literacy (CML) is essential as "parents' digital literacy skills have a direct effect on their children's ability to develop their digital literacy skills and consequently maintain their digital well-being" (Brisson-Boivin, 2018, p. 2).

During the 2020-2021 academic school year in Ontario, Canada, students were jostled between in-person and online learning as the COVID-19 pandemic forced lockdowns for the Ontario population's safety and the healthcare system's sustainability (Office of the Premier, 2021). In the province of Ontario, this impacted over two million elementary and secondary students who were accessing education through online platforms for 19 weeks in the year 2020 (Gallagher-Mackay *et al.*, 2021). With the unexpected interruption of COVID-19, most students had to access more information online for their schoolwork and distinguish credible sources of information (Gallagher-Mackay *et al.*, 2021). As schooling and work shifted to online learning platforms, it was a critical time for parents and their pre-adolescents to build their media literacy and manage their online activity (Conrad *et al.*, 2022). Children's learning was impacted in varying degrees, depending on such factors as their access to technology and the internet and whether adults could spend time with their children to ensure they were engaged (Whitley *et al.*, 2021). The social lives of pre-adolescents were also disrupted during the pandemic, at a critical time for their social development (Nandlall *et al.*, 2022; Rogers *et al.*, 2021), and many relied on digital platforms for peer connection (Larivière-Bastien *et al.*, 2022). Student mental health and well-being appear to have been impacted negatively over time due to the online learning environment and lack of face-to-face social opportunities (Tsujimoto *et al.*, 2022). These were all significant concerns for parents during this period of time.

This research project partnered with a major educational publisher and provided parents (including guardians and caregivers) and their pre-adolescents (10-13-year-olds) with technological devices (Chromebooks) for educational and social purposes. The goal was to enhance space for dialogue among parents and between parents and their pre-adolescents through materials, workshops, and conversations that explored, analyzed, and accessed content surrounding their online activity and CML.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As pre-adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of inappropriate and harmful information (Corsaro,

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2015), the stakeholders they engage with (i.e., parents and educators) benefit from learning to support and communicate with children regarding digital tools and CML (Brisson-Boivin, 2018). Due to the ever-changing nature of technology, it is sometimes difficult for parents to afford up-to-date devices and stay knowledgeable about current technological trends (Kesler *et al.*, 2016).

Potter (2022), in a historical analysis of different perspectives on media literacy, noted the tendency for scholars to take one of two approaches: protectionism and empowerment. The protectionist perspective in media education seeks to "protect students from what are assumed to be the negative effects of the media" (Buckingham, 1998, p.36). The empowerment perspective aims to prepare students by teaching them the skills and tools to navigate media (Potter, 2022). Potter's (2022) analysis suggests differences in the approach taken by instructors who see their role as either more protectionist or empowering. Potter (2022) considers parents as educators, so it is possible to consider that these findings apply to parents teaching their children media literacy. Like other types of educators, parents tend to see their role as to protect and empower and struggle to find the appropriate tactic for knowledge dissemination when accessing the online world (Bordeos *et al.*, 2022). Several contributing factors to the uncertainties of managing their children's online knowledge acquisition are a lack of access to technology, cultural and generational disparities, and the financial affordance of digital devices such as phones and computers (Gallagher-MacKay *et al.*, 2021).

Parents also indicate that they struggle due to the belief that their children are more competent in digital platforms, have more honed digital skills than they do, and feel less equipped to support their children in media literacy (Beilmann *et al.*, 2023). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a Canadian report (The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families) stated that "education interventions should focus on bolstering the digital literacy skills of both parents and children" (Brisson-Boivin, 2018, p. 4). This recommendation demonstrates an empowerment perspective to media literacy (Potter, 2022) and echoes Beilmann *et al.* (2023) in their thematic analysis of European experts. These experts advocated that "the educational system should afford digital skills enhancement not only to children but also to parents" (Beilmann *et al.*, 2023, p.10). The pandemic forced pre-adolescents online for various lengths of time throughout 2020. This research noted that parents became stressed about their child's media screen time because children were online for educational purposes for roughly six hours a day and then had increased time online for activities, sports, socializing, and downtime (Seguin *et al.*, 2021). The increase in screen time has also been noted by Nandlall *et al.* (2022), who mentions the physical strain for those learning online. While students had minimal other educational instruction and socialization options, online activity increased substantially for students worldwide (Winther & Byrne, 2020). Winther and Byrne

(2020) stated that parents should spend time with their children as they interact with their technological devices, games, and socialization tools to counter the 'fear of the unknown' often associated with children and adolescents using technology. The workshops associated with the current study aimed to unify parents and pre-adolescents in technological learning, critical conversations, and media exploration in educational and social spaces.

From an educational perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted how students accessed information, socialized in classrooms and digital playgrounds, and how teachers communicated with parents and students (Gallagher-Mackay *et al.*, 2021). Parents and pre-adolescents experienced additional challenges accessing their education, comprehending information, and safely participating in online activities. For example, less technologically competent parents often need their children as a support to buffer communication with teachers and may require schools to utilize innovative and flexible methods, such as parent-to-parent mentoring, to engage and connect with some families (Beilmann *et al.*, 2023; Correa, 2014). At the same time, some parents lack the comprehension to assist their children with assignments, including the ability to assess their child's proper use of technology (Hebert *et al.*, 2020). The difficulty here is that school districts frequently encourage parent engagement and interaction. So, how can this be done when the medium for this engagement may be foreign or financially unattainable for some parents? Furthermore, parental engagement and understanding of their children's online activity are necessary with the increasing importance of media literacies, digital devices, and online learning in schooling (Hebert, 2020).

The internet and access to information at the click of a button can be daunting for parents to monitor and ensure their children are safely engaging and exploring material and conversations with people they know. Chesney and Citron (2018) explained that portions of the Internet are set up to purposely project, disseminate, and spread fake news, images, and content, focusing on extreme ideologies, sexualization, and nationalism. Students have reported receiving concerning content (e.g., pornography, racist content) online (Brisson-Boivin, 2022). This lends evidence to parents' concern about the internet and what their children may be exposed to without their knowledge. Helsper and Smahel (2020) suggested two types of parental mediation strategies: restrictive, where parents limit children's access to online activity, and instructive, where parents engage and model safe online activity. These researchers found that digitally supportive parents have children who are more likely to take risks online but do not engage with the potentially harmful content they come across (Helsper & Smahel, 2020). Finally, Helsper and Smahel (2020) found that limiting time on the Internet is not beneficial for pre-adolescents with emotional problems or sensation-seeking behaviours.

Purnama *et al.* 's (2021) study hypothesized that children with poor media literacy had increased online risks

surrounding information sharing and safety. Purnama *et al.* (2021) determined that stakeholders, such as parents, need to be more involved in the media literacy education of their children to decrease the chances of online children. Parents who mediate and engage in their children's online activity have children who develop stronger self-control and self-regulation online (Purnama *et al.*, 2021). Mediation in the study looked like positive parenting, active co-use, and "guiding, bounding, and observing" (Purnama *et al.*, 2021, p.2). Providing children with support and strategies was a fundamental desire for the parents of this study.

Given the changing learning landscape for pre-adolescents and their families during COVID-19 school closures and now in the current years following, there is a need to explore and understand ways to support the development of CML, not only in schools but also in homes. Children have access to media in ever-changing ways, some of which are concerning to both them and their parents. Parents want to protect and empower their children but need help with how to do so. Providing families with the skills and knowledge to navigate the unknown and changing media landscape will support children to become critical consumers and creators of media, to be able to navigate and advocate for themselves safely, and to be confident members of society. This study sought to provide opportunities for parents and their pre-adolescents to do just this. The research question was as follows: How can parents of pre-adolescents be collaboratively engaged to enhance their knowledge of critical media literacy and support their children's online learning and socialization?

METHODOLOGY
This study, including interviews and parent workshops, was conducted via an online platform from October 2020 to May 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergent design inquiry (Gay & Airasian, 2003) allowed for a transitional research process that flexibly altered the investigation as the researchers learned from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and catered to the ever-changing pandemic landscape. This study used interpretative qualitative case study methods (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018) to understand the complexity of participant experiences that may not be well-interpreted using other research designs (Barone, 2004).

Design-Based Research and Participants
After initial interviews with parent participants (n=19) and a sample of their children participants (n=7), their responses and feedback about the pre-adolescent children's online activities generated the development and topics for five workshops. The flexible structure of this research model follows the basis of design-based research methods (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Design-based research uses interventions to support the "interactions between materials, teachers, and learners" through innovative learning spaces (Design-Based Research Collective,

2003, p. 5). Design-based research also seeks to find collaborative partnerships between multiple stakeholders to enhance the learning outcomes for participants and add to the level of engagement with the intervention (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003).

In this study, there were four phases to enhance participant interactions with either digital material, subject experts, or other parents, with some of the interventions including opportunities for child involvement. In the first phase, during the Fall of 2020, each family received two Chromebooks (from a corporate organization) and access to a library of digital resources from this corporate publisher. Parents and their children were shown how to access educational information and multimodal digital texts through the database. The Chromebooks gave parents and children devices that provided access to a variety of curriculum- and interest-related digital media texts, ultimately supporting home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial parent interviews generated common concerns surrounding their children's online activities, including critical media literacy (CML), device use, types of apps used, strategies for parent-child navigation of digital texts, and digital safety. Four researchers (and one research assistant) collectively designed, implemented and reflected on five workshops for parents to attend online (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). These five workshops ran from October 2020 to April 2021. The workshops were created based on parent concerns and areas of interest, further modelling design-based research and covered the following topics:

Chromebooks and Multimodal Text Resources Workshop
Parents were introduced to their new devices and learning platform and practiced basic device skills such as accessing apps and saving material.

Adolescent Online Activity & Parent Interactions Workshop
Covered strategies for engaging with children, setting boundaries for time spent online, and building positive digital footprints

Safety and Surveillance Workshop
Addressed online safety and security through tool and app use, parental monitoring and safeguards, and considerations for children's social and emotional well-being and personal responsibilities.

Critical Media Literacy Workshop
Emphasized building parent knowledge of CML by providing activities for parents to complete with their children surrounding topics of 'fake news' and best resource choices when using search engines.

Advertising Targeting your Pre-Adolescent Workshop
Included information on how companies and brands target children in advertising.

Data Collection and Analyses

This study commenced in Fall 2020 with initial interviews with all parents (n=19) and some participating children (n=7). Interviews were generally 30 minutes, and participants were asked questions involving CML, experiences with devices and technology, how they currently supported their child's device use and CML, and personal desires for learning. Transcriptions were made of all interviews. Following these interviews, the researchers coded, regrouped and compared the common expressions into findings to determine similar themes and areas of concern or interests that the parents brought forward. Finally, positioned within the existing literature on pre-adolescent technology use and CML, the researchers interpreted the feedback and findings from the parents and pre-adolescents to design the workshops. The researchers used their time together at the beginning of each workshop to check in with parents. During workshop 4, parents were asked if the study was meeting their needs, if they had questions, or if they had new concerns. Anderson and Shattuck (2012) suggested that these continuous interactions fuel the design-based research methods. Tilley (2016) argued that participant reciprocity is the backbone of respectful research methods.

Each workshop was recorded through a video conference platform and transcribed. In addition, two researchers collected field notes and observations. During the workshops, parents communicated through the platform chat feature, providing the researchers additional questions or commentary if they did not want to participate orally in the video conversations. Furthermore, after the workshops, the researchers refined the fieldnotes and debriefed with each other, providing additional space for researcher reflection and insight. Here, researchers discussed any potential revisions that may need to occur before the next workshop to ensure that the workshops were addressing parents' needs, including technological support and workshop content. In the Spring of 2021, final interviews took place with the parents (n=19) and children (n=6) and two parent-focus groups (n=2 and n=3) were held. These focus groups allowed parents to reconnect and establish any final thoughts or concerns regarding the study and for the researchers to garner culminating data and project evaluation.

The researchers used NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2015) to analyze the workshops' interview transcripts and researcher field notes. Analysis began with the creation of word frequencies, and through open-ended coding, the word frequencies provided the basis for identifying the expected nodes (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Then, collectively, the researchers agreed upon the nodes to run through NVivo; at this point, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to develop the themes by which the nodes were categorized (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Finally, the findings were interpreted through inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006). All researchers agreed with this analysis process and collaboratively contributed to existing supportive literature. The following section will present the findings using direct quotes from the parent participants listed under pseudonyms (for findings related to their pre-adolescents, see (Gallagher *et al.*, 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Major Findings

Parents were eager to discuss their experiences during the interviews and also when they connected during the conversations in the workshops. Over the seven months from the Fall to Spring interviews, the data gleaned from the parents generated six main themes: child safety; strength of CML; physical and mental health; affirmations, developing support and confidence; considerations around social time online; conversations building bonds. The findings below are enhanced using direct quotes from the parent participants.

Child Safety

First, parents were overwhelmingly concerned with the safety of their pre-adolescent children as they enacted the roles of a consumer and a producer of content while socializing online through social media or gaming. As their children took on the role of consumers, parents wanted to ensure that their children were not exposed to harmful information or engaged in virtual spaces where strangers could interact with them. Danielle expressed concerns about her son turning 13 and having more online access. She asked the researchers to understand the "limitations and restrictions" she could put on their family's digital devices (Danielle, interview, Fall 2020). Parents acknowledged that during the COVID-19 pandemic, their pre-adolescents had spent more time online and, therefore, felt the need to increase online monitoring (Jenna, interview, Spring 2021). Specifically, parent Justine was concerned about her child potentially being targeted with harmful or inappropriate communication through social media apps such as Instagram (Justine, interview Fall 2020). Parents seemed to be concerned about unintentional access to potentially harmful content online.

Furthermore, as some pre-adolescents took on the role of content producers, parents were concerned about what their children posted content and the potential impact of their online activity on their futures. Parent Krista explained, "... this posting of these pictures on things like Snapchat... and not realizing what the ramifications of that post could be like 10 or 20 years from now" (Krista, interview, Fall 2020). Parent Katherine preferred that her child checked with her before posting online, which was further represented in the child's interview when the child (Wolfie) asked for clarification about how her interview responses and commentary would be used or posted online (Wolfie, interview, Spring 2021). Many parents seemed eager to continue to bring attention to their children about how posting online could be done safely. For example, parent Greg mentioned that he rarely uses Facebook to post publicly but will share family pictures

and highlights of his children with designated family and friends using the app (Greg, interview, Fall 2020).

After the workshop on safety and security, parent Angela mentioned she learned so much and had to "get to work" right away to change everything (Angela, interview, Spring 2021) regarding her passwords and firewalls. Angela explained that she "implemented some tools like external hard drives… to kind of protect myself… just realizing how easy those threats can come and how often in frequency" (Angela, interview, Spring 2021). Parent concern for child safety seemed to stem from parents' uncertainty about their child's understanding of being critical of media and interactions online. From the Fall to Spring interviews, the participants' knowledge of online safety either remained the same or increased.

In the Fall, many parents indicated that they felt overwhelmed and lacked the knowledge they needed to ensure their children were safe online. Amber noted, "I don't know what firewalls and protection there are, and … I don't know what I should have as far as settings" (interview, Fall 2020). Dina was looking to build her skills as she commented, "I also need to learn how to teach my kid to protect her privacy online, you know, how to protect her own, when she's using [the] internet (interview, Fall 2020)." Moira seemed to sum up what many parents felt as she mentioned, "It is overwhelming to think about how much information children have access to" (interview, Fall 2020).

After participating in the workshops, parent Andrew felt more confident and knowledgeable about being able to monitor their family's online safety, explaining, "I'm taking away knowledge, confidence, just that I've learned these few things and … there's ways to look at things and you can control things and so it doesn't have to be so scary" (interview, Spring 2021). Parents indicated their increased understanding as they described actions they planned to take with their children. Parent Taylor noted they revisited the workshop slides and explained, "I wouldn't mind putting some filters in to prevent some of the kids from playing games when they're supposed to be doing work" (interview, Spring 2021), demonstrating an understanding of ways to monitor and provide some types of control to keep their child safe and focused.

Strength of Child's CML

The next theme saw parents recounting that when their children came across different content online, parents were unsure of their child's literacy and ability to comprehend the material. Parents explained that their children interacted with media literacies, including YouTube videos, games, social conversations with friends, images, and written texts. One parent stated that her son would "…sometimes believe at face value what his favorite YouTubers are saying, or you know what they're talking about (Haley, interview, Fall 2020). A second parent commented that she had, on more than one occasion, talked to her child about the fact that not everything could be taken as fact and felt she lacked the

ability to be critical. This parent noted, "I tried to go there with my daughter but I don't know that …she's ready to …recognize that just because someone says something doesn't mean it's true" (Moira, interview, Fall 2020).

Parent Dana explained that because technology is everywhere, she thinks it is essential for her child to be critical of the information they access to ensure it is true (Dana, interview, Fall 2020). Another parent described how she addressed this when helping her child with a school project and observed how the child seemed to take the information found in Google searches at face value. She commented:

I was helping my son do a project and he was getting some information but he … would Google and then pick out pieces of information that he wanted… I had to push him and say, well, how do you know that he missed this article is real? How do you know if what they're saying is actually true? So, we ended up learning that some of what they were saying was not true. (Taylor, interview, Spring 2021).

The parents were acutely aware that their children have access to so much information and misinformation online, which can be challenging to process and comprehend - they appreciated the necessity of CML.

Physical and Mental Health

With maneuvering through online information, parents showed interest in their children's mental well-being and lack of physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic with the additional hours online. Parent Angela was concerned that her son was spending too much time online, "between like 7 and 8 in the morning [to] 2-3 in the afternoon, and then … after dinnertime, 6-7," but acknowledged that her work life also changed to an online platform. She was experiencing an increase in time online, "I run a business, so for research development, networking and I guess, sourcing, is what I would use" (Angela, interview, Fall 2020). Parent Allison knew that her child's time online with schoolwork was expanding past her comfort levels and previous rules in place for screen time, so Allison printed her child's work to be completed offline (Allison, interview, Fall 2020). Furthermore, Allison mentioned encouraging her children to use their free-time online to research things they are interested in rather than absorbing material that did not pertain to their interests offline (Allison, interview, Fall 2020).

Parent Molly admitted that she attempted to prevent her child from accessing socialization with friends online. Still, with the strict limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, Molly began allowing her child to socialize online, "But then he might have had like an activity that he was going to where he would see other friends... where that doesn't happen as much anymore because of our smaller circles of association (Molly, interview, Fall, 2020). The stressors of parenting children during a pandemic were evident in the parent interviews, but parent camaraderie during the workshops allowed for sharing experiences, questions, and strategies for hurdling any obstacles.

Affirmations, Developing Support, and Confidence

During the workshops, parents connected through conversation. They bonded over shared experiences in discussions of online activity and their children "...to know that I am not alone, there are so many of these other parents that are in this exact same boat" (Krista, interview, Spring 2021). Parents talked about the support they received from each other during the workshops. The feeling of not being alone in maneuvering through this uncharted territory with their children was familiar, and parent Danielle stated, "...it's just interesting to hear other parents have the same concern, you know you're not alone in this" (Danielle, interview, Spring 2021). These connections between parents also helped some parents develop a sense of pride and appreciation for their work and dedication to improving their learning. Parents were vocal about feeling supported throughout the seven months and also mentioned a level of confidence in their own CML "I am very happy I participated because I definitely learned a lot, there were some "aha" moments and eye-opening moments as well" (Krista, interview, Spring 2021). Finally, one set of parents mentioned they became more aware of their behavior when speaking to their child about online safety, CML, and online habits:

I've been kind of… thinking through how hard I come down on what she's consuming on her technology, and so I'm trying to be mindful of that and notice when I may be pushing too far in terms of say[ing] no or controlling it (Allison & Greg, interview, Spring 2021).

Parent engagement in the workshops and conversations ultimately aided their self-development, skill-building, confidence, and interactions with their children regarding online activity, safety, and critical media literacy.

Considerations Around Social Time Online

Parents who were hesitant to offer their children additional online time to play and connect with friends evolved in their expectations. In the Spring of 2021, it was clear that parents' tone changed to become more understanding and softened to the experiences and mental stressors that online learning, COVID-19, fear, and isolation were playing on their children. Marcia mentioned that her daughter Charlotte spent six hours online for schoolwork each day, and because of COVID-19, many children and their activities still were not up and running, so her daughter socialized online more frequently, talking with friends online and playing games because there were no other alternatives. Although parents were more understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on their children, some parents still had their concerns. Marcia explained her parental guilt for having her daughter utilize an online platform for extended periods, "I'm going to be shameless because she uses a lot of screen time. She talks to her friends all the time and they do play games on the laptop. I mean, she's been six hours on class… I always feel guilty but she does have a lot" (Marcia, interview, Spring 2021).

In contrast, Allison and Greg mentioned that they persistently get their children active outside between online schooling and online socializing. Their children sometimes fight until they get their bodies moving and enjoy physical activity (Allison & Greg, interview, Spring 2021). Allison and Greg mentioned that their daughter's time online had increased substantially between socializing and academics. As the children's online activities contrast the desires of the parents, Allison and Greg's children expressed their concerns about their parents' overprotective rules. Allison mentioned that after the workshops, she has "been kind of listening to that and thinking through kind of how hard I come down on what she's consuming on her technology, and so I'm trying to be mindful of that and notice when I may be pushing too far in terms of saying no or controlling it" (Allison, interview, Spring 2021). The researchers anticipate that the workshops aided in parent conversations surrounding time online and helped parents find reasonable compromises to their regular habits, primarily through the unknowns of a global pandemic.

Conversations Building Bonds

When acknowledging their role in their child's CML, parents indicated that communication and conversation were necessary to ensure their child was informed, aware of general online safety, and more critical when accessing information. One parent stated, "I think the biggest thing I guess I would have to say is I guess you just have to keep those open lines of communication" (Krista, interview, Spring 2021). When parents actively communicate with their children, they may also reap the benefits of conversation, as one parent explained:

I want me and Charlotte to evolve together with the speed of this digital age…both parents and children should be aware of what is out there, how scary it is, how informative it is and [the] possibilities that it can give to both child[ren] and parents too. (Marcia, interview, Spring 2021)

Showing children you can grow as a parent can be empowering, and reminding children that they too should be who they are in the online world was one parent's belief:

I always tell her that, and whatever she sees on YouTube or what the other kids do on TikTok, I always tell her you don't copy them, you don't follow them, or you don't believe what they say, research it, look into it (Marcia, interview, Spring 2021).

Finally, when asked to sum up her experience in the study, parent Danielle stated that she needed to "...continue to have these conversations with my kids… to have more transparency as to what they're doing you know they're just spending so much time online right now that you can't babysit them 24/7" (Danielle, interview, Spring 2021). Conversations contributed to a powerful connection between parent and child, providing support and information.

Recall that the research question was: How can parents of pre-adolescents be collaboratively engaged to enhance

their knowledge of critical media literacy and support their children's online learning and socialization? The findings suggest that parents acknowledge an increase in their pre-adolescents' use of digital tools for educational and social purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing need for CML in school and home learning settings. With increased time on digital devices came more frequent discussions surrounding safety and activity and balancing online and offline habits to ensure physical, social, and mental well-being. The parents appreciated conversations with other parents during the project and the time to connect with their pre-adolescents on topics covered in the workshops. These findings are now followed by a discussion to situate them within the literature.

DISCUSSION

The parent and child interviews yielded examples of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the changing landscape of online learning and socialization and the need for strong CML skills. After participating in the workshops and the study, parents talked about their enhanced confidence in engaging in technology and a shift in the type of guidance they were giving their children. Some mentioned that learning to navigate technology and media has been challenging; however, with the resources they had access to and the support and relatable discussions with other parents, they could self-reflect and implement new strategies to discuss online use with their children.

In the Fall of 2020, many parents believed their children spent too much time online, and frustrations arose around online gaming and socialization; there is confirming evidence from current literature regarding an increase in time spent online and related parental concerns (e.g., Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Sequin et al., 2021). The participants in this study reflected on what Potter (2022) elucidated as different perspectives (protectionist or empowerment) to media literacy that could be observed in parents as instructors for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concerns and stressors expressed by parent participants and their desire to protect and monitor their children's online behavior illustrate a protectionist perspective.

In the Spring 2021 interviews, parents admitted that although their children were still spending what they believed to be too much time online, socialization and free time for online exploration were necessary. Parents understood that the COVID-19 pandemic gave their children minimal options for doing activities and seeing friends offline. Most parents discussed the boundaries or additional time limits on their child's social time online, which some said they did not have before. In this way, they seemed to lend evidence to the suggestion that limiting time online tended not to be helpful (Helsper & Smahel, 2020). In contrast, other parents explained that they still try to incorporate offline physical activity with the opportunity to return online for free time.

An integral finding echoed the importance of conversation between parents and their pre-adolescent children. Parents mentioned that they continually discuss with their children and are learning to navigate what to confront and what to pass up concerning online content. Most parents referenced the strategies they gleaned from the resources and workshops they attended as helpful in navigating the dialogue, attitude, and approach to talking with their children about all online activities. Many parents suggested that the topics of conversation with their children were usually around safety, but also that there needed to be a separation between time online for schooling and socializing. Parent discussions shifted to a more empowered perspective (Potter, 2022) in the way that they began having some conversations and shared experiences online. Collectively, they could navigate these conversations with less struggle in the tactics they were using to guide their children. They tended to be more engaged in these conversations and co-learned with their children (Hebert et al., 2020). Parent-child communication around boundaries and expectations online proved positive for both parties while building parent confidence in their children and showing children adapting responsibly to greater autonomy online.

CONCLUSIONS

This study affirms the need for parent support and dialogue with their pre-adolescent child(ren) regarding CML and digital tools in educational and social online environments. Providing parents with this type of education through workshops and giving parents opportunities to mentor one another (Beilmann et al., 2023) continues to be important as pre-adolescents continue to learn and socialize in online spaces. Therefore, parental engagement in their pre-adolescents' online activities is crucial to minimize the digital learning gap and increase parental support for media literacy and online safety.

Parents' primary concern from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021 was how much time their children spent on devices and a genuine uncertainty of how much time online was 'too much.' In the Spring of 2021, after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents seemed to lighten their intensity of rules surrounding socialization online, understanding that the pandemic may have changed the way the world operates, including their children's educational and social lives. Claesdotter-Knutsson et al. (2022) noted up to a 75% increase in children's media use, including gaming and excluding homework, in countries like the United Kingdom, which coincides with the parents and pre-adolescents feeling attached to their devices. These researchers also note that including outdoor leisure and physical activity was often left up to the parents to monitor and introduce (Claesdotter-Knutsson et al., 2022). Some parents in this study ensured their children remained active via online sports and clubs or by setting rules expecting outdoor play each day.

The results of this study echo others that have similarly

found an increase in child activity online (Werling *et al.*, 2021; Winther & Byrne, 2020), highlighting some concerning factors regarding the potential faults within the online learning structure. For example, Gallagher-MacKay *et al.* (2021) explained that student success in online learning is directly tied to teacher effectiveness in online instruction. Gallagher-MacKay *et al.* acknowledged that during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were challenged by their working conditions, the contexts of their educational delivery, and the abrupt changes to their teaching via online learning, wherein many educators needed additional training. A second factor many parents and pre-adolescent participants brought up was the level of (dis)engagement children experienced with online learning. This finding could be helpful as a potential consideration for school districts regarding the effects of online education on children, future potential lockdowns or policy changes to online learning.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. The study shares a similar limitation to other case studies in that it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study to other contexts and populations. The sample size of the pre-adolescent participants was modest (n=7), making it difficult to know whether the responses from this sample would be representative of other children of the same age. Collecting data through virtual interviews and online workshops may also be a limitation. The method made field notes and participant observations challenging, given that some participants could only connect with audio. The lack of visual feedback and the inability to see how participants responded may have influenced the type and richness of the data gathered.

This study highlights the lengths parents will go to ensure their children's safety, security, and happiness. These parents remained dedicated to their children by learning about their interests and the technological safety features for their families. They showed growth by turning conversations into strategic action, resulting in deeper and more frequent communication with their children. Pre-adolescents felt heard through conversation, and parents supported each other through dialogue and sharing strategies.

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