

## **Schooling, Interrupted: A Critical Account of Motivation and Education During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Quebec**

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### **Abstract**

Among the concerns about youth wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, one well-documented impact is youth motivation, particularly in relation to schooling. Yet many questions remain: *How* are youth experiencing motivation? What factors affect their motivation? How are youth differentially experiencing motivation? This article addresses young people's experiences of motivation during the first wave of the pandemic as explored through participatory visual research. In Spring 2020, the Quebec private and public secondary school systems responded very differently to school closures. Private schools pivoted to distance learning within about two weeks, whereas public schools took almost two months to provide formal instruction. Bringing youth's accounts of motivation into conversation with youth's

concerns about the inequities across the private and public school systems offers a rich opportunity to revisit Self-Determination Theory as an established theory of motivation. Youth's analyses urge us to revisit the conceptualization of "structure" within this theory and how structure might offer a junction for accounting for more macrostructural inequalities within motivation research.

## **Introduction**

In Spring 2020, we conducted research with young people attending secondary school in different areas of Quebec to explore their experiences during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the province of Quebec was badly affected, with more cases than the rest of the provinces in Canada combined (Government of Canada, 2020). Strict public health measures to prevent and delay the spread of the virus had been in place for two months. The implementation of physical distancing—keeping one's distance from other people and avoiding crowded places and gatherings—included the closure of schools and recommendations to self-isolate by staying at home.

During this first wave, all Quebec schools closed their doors on March 13, and secondary schools remained closed for the rest of the academic year. This exceptional measure and prolonged interruption to schooling was disconcerting in light of evidence that summer breaks disproportionately impact the academic achievement of students from low-income households (Dupéré et al., 2020). Accentuating this concern, the private and public secondary systems responded very differently to school closures. Private schools introduced distance learning within two weeks of school closures, while most public secondary schools took almost two months to provide formal instruction.

Many months later, various organizations have documented the negative impact of the pandemic on Quebec youth motivation in relation to education and online courses (Academos, 2020; Beauplat, 2021; Fédération Étudiante Collégiale du Québec [FECQ], 2021; Réseau Réussite Montréal, 2020; Réseau Réussite Montréal, 2021). In May 2020, we launched a participatory visual project, "Picturing Life During the Pandemic," to explore how youth were differentially experiencing the crisis, youth agency and creativity in coping with the crisis, and youth hopes for the future. Motivation was a central theme as young people discussed their experiences during the first wave (Thompson et al., 2020). As an interdisciplinary group of five co-Chairs and a postdoctoral fellow with the MYRIAGONE McConnell-University of Montreal Chair in Youth Knowledge Mobilization, each co-investigator picked up on different elements within youth's narratives. Those of us more acquainted with psychological theories saw an association between youth narratives and the core components of motivation theory. Others, more familiar with sociological approaches, saw unequivocal issues regarding inequities among youth's experiences. Considering that our research chair aims to generate interdisciplinary knowledge with, for, and about youth to amplify their voices, we were curious to explore how these two distinct theoretical frameworks could inform one another to develop a more grounded model of motivation that takes root in the words and experiences of young people themselves. In a sense, the pandemic created a type of real-world experiment where youth lived very distinct conditions depending on whether they attended private or public schools, allowing for a deep reflection on how context impacts motivation. In this paper, we explore the accounts and analyses of motivation produced by 18 youth aged 13 to 18 years old who were attending secondary school at the time of research.

To begin, we introduce the context of public and private schooling in Quebec and these sectors' different responses to the pandemic. We then introduce Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

and social inequalities frameworks as established theories within education. In the findings, we organize youth's analyses of motivation around three themes: 1) The shared ways that school closures impacted youth's lives and motivation in general; 2) Youth's different experiences of motivation related to distance learning across the public and private school systems; and 3) Youth's shared attention to context beyond the school environment. We draw on Jennie Popay et al.'s (2020) distinction between an *inward* and *outward* gaze to explore how context and inequalities impact the key elements of SDT through structure. This allows us to reflect critically on the conceptualization and role of structure in SDT and ways of accounting for the more macro features of structural inequalities within education.

## **Context: The Quebec School System**

In Canada, education falls under provincial jurisdiction. In general, Quebec's secondary schools stream students across vocational, general, and enrichment tracks. Following Grade 11, general or enrichment track students can go to *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel* [CEGEP], Quebec's general and vocational college system, for either a two-year pre-university program or a three-year vocational program, whereas vocational track students have limited access to post-secondary education. Quebec also has the highest percentage of private schools compared to elsewhere in Canada. According to Archambault et al. (Forthcoming), one in three Montreal adolescents attend private school. Private schooling contributes to how Quebec has the highest educational inequalities in post-secondary attendance and graduation outcomes in Canada. This is controversial because 65% of Quebec private schools receive government subsidies that incentivize access. At the same time, private schools employ selective admissions criteria, which further streams students in ways that systematically exclude disadvantaged students. Government financing of the private school system therefore has a direct bearing on reproducing inequalities.

Although both private and public schools must abide by the same ministerial curriculum, the different governance, decision making, and resources of the schools impact on the way they respond to the crisis. In the private sector, schools are better equipped and more flexible in providing their own directives to their teachers. Private schools generally have students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) families who are also better equipped at home in terms of access to technologies such as computers, tablets, and software and digital platforms. These conditions seem to have enabled private schools to pivot more quickly to distance learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, private schools also had to deal with parents expecting their children to receive some teaching based on the high tuition fees they were paying. Thus, these schools took up scheduled and mostly synchronous classes within two weeks of school closures, where teachers provided direct instruction. The public school system, on the other hand, adopted fragmented, disorganized forms of synchronous and asynchronous distance learning almost two months after schools closed, with students receiving little support or direct instruction from teachers. This public sector response reflects unclear and contradictory messages from the government. When schools first closed in March, the Minister of Education (2020a) announced that it would be like holidays. Teachers were not required to go into school, to work from home, or to assign student work because schools were not equipped for online teaching. While distance learning was not prevented and schools could opt to communicate with students, it was not required and therefore a matter of choice (Minister of Education, 2020b). This meant that thousands of public school students received little to no communication from their schools for weeks. Sometime in April, public school students began receiving weekly asynchronous *trousses* (learning kits). These kits contained optional activities like articles, videos, or worksheets (such as a math Bingo) that students could

complete independently. By mid-May, the public system got more organized; students began interacting with teachers online. At this point, the Minister of Education (2020c) attempted to engage secondary students who had been derailed by scolding them for “abandoning” school. At this point, homework became mandatory, and teachers needed to begin evaluating student progress. In the context of these different emergency responses, we acknowledge the enormous variation in how distance learning strategies varied from teacher to teacher and from school to school across Quebec. Yet there were clear systemic differences in how public and private school responses provided access to education.

## **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) emerged in the 1980s in the field of educational psychology and was predominantly developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017, 2020). Presented as a universal organismic theory, SDT is helpful for modeling and predicting motivation, has garnered a considerable amount of established authority within educational research, and informs educational policy, practice, and curriculum decisions.

Within SDT, “to be motivated means *to be moved* to do something” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). When supported by particular conditions, three basic components (psychological needs) produce motivation and wellness in general: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Here, “*Autonomy* concerns a sense of initiative and ownership and in one’s actions...; *Competence* concerns the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow...; and *Relatedness* concerns a sense of belonging and connection” (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 1). These needs are situated and interact with the social context in a way that recognizes how people are active partners in producing motivation. Within motivational models, social context often refers to more immediate environments such as home, school, and workplace. SDT emphasizes how these environments support student autonomy through how adults engage with young people and provide them with some level of guidance and structure.

Empirical studies suggest that youth who perceive themselves as autonomous, competent, and related with significant others, like teachers and peers, present higher motivation and engagement in school (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Jang et al., 2016; Mouratidis et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). Although student motivation is also prompted by many other factors, such as school climate or pedagogical practices (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Reeve et al., 2012), the school social context remains very important for different populations of young people, including those who attend schools in more privileged environments or in low-SES multiethnic communities (Archambault et al., 2020; Dotterer et al., 2011). Especially for young people from marginalized groups and communities, bonding with meaningful adults at school can support their autonomy and provide them with strategies to manage new or challenging learning situations. This support seems to be an effective way to promote a sense of security, increase motivation, and decrease inequalities.

## **Social Inequalities Framework**

From a more sociological perspective, social structures and education institutions affect students’ differential access to and experience of learning opportunities and outcomes (Hallihan, 2000). While school is important for reducing social inequities (Dove et al., 2020; Dupéré et al., 2020), the ways that school systems are organized also play a role in creating or limiting opportunities towards educational access, perseverance, and achievement. School systems divided into private

and public sectors, or even school segregation within the public sector, can structure and reproduce inequities (Archambault et al., Forthcoming). At the same time, school social contexts and practices can also act as a compensatory mechanism in reducing inequalities (Downey & Condon, 2016). Certainly, a range of factors influence inequities in education, including policy, curriculum, pedagogical practices, and social inequalities within a wider society based on, for example, class, race, and gender. Of particular relevance for this paper is how the public and private school sectors have differential access to resources, which in turn shape the school context and practices. In general, the organizational contexts for private schooling tend to include different economic accountabilities, a higher socio-economic status student body, greater parental power based on a client relationship with the school, larger and more diverse revenue sources, and smaller class sizes (Persell, 2006). From a social inequities perspective, increased (and conversely limited) access to resources such as technology and social capital within particular institutional contexts has a strong bearing on student opportunities and success.

Drawing on these sociological concerns about inequities within and across education systems and Popay's et al.'s (2020) outward gaze provides a more macro view of the structural nature of inequities that are shaped by education policies and school systems. We suggest potential for more synergy between established psychological theories that focus on individual motivation and established sociological scholarship about structural inequalities in order to better understand the range of complex factors affecting student motivation. A more integrated perspective bringing together psychological and sociological theories suggests that the focus of motivational theories on school structure, autonomy support, and relatedness can integrate a more macro understanding of how school environments influence inequalities within different education systems.

## **The Study: Picturing Life During the Pandemic**

### ***Recruitment and participants***

Our study involved youth from urban, rural, and Indigenous areas of Quebec, from public and private school sectors, and from secondary and post-secondary school systems. Reaching young people virtually in the context and urgency of the first wave of the crisis was challenging. Following our efforts to recruit youth in Montreal through our personal social media networks, we extended our recruitment Quebec-wide by partnering with a youth organization, *Regroupement des maisons des jeunes du Québec*, to facilitate recruitment through youth workers actively involved with youth at a distance. We struggled to reach private school students and so returned to our personal networks in Montreal and Joliette. We also recruited two Attikamekw youth from Wemotaci, where we had previously collaborated on a film project (Wapikoni Mobile et al., 2019). In this paper, we focus on the participation of 18 secondary school students between 13 and 18 years of age (10 girls and young women, eight boys and young men). In total, seven public and 11 private school students participated in the study.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Participatory visual methodologies at a distance***

Participants worked with photovoice or cellphilmimg, participatory visual methodologies that support participants to produce visual texts to identify, represent, and take action on the critical

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<sup>1</sup> The study was approved by the University of Montreal's *Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences et en santé* (CERSES-20-063-D) and the Wemotaci Band Council.

issues in their lives (Mitchell et al., 2017). Inviting participants to reflect on their experiences and participate in collective inquiry centers youth agency, knowledge, and voice in addressing the issues that matter to them. Participatory visual methodologies also provide opportunities for participants to “speak back” to the dominant norms and images in their lives (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013, p. 1).

Eleven interactive group sessions (1 to 1.5 hours each) with two to five youth each (depending on participant availability) were co-facilitated by two research assistants in French on Zoom in May and June 2020. Two cohorts of public school students and three cohorts of private school students each participated in two workshops. When participants were not available to attend their cohort’s second session, we conducted supplementary sessions. Prior to meeting, we emailed participants video tutorials, *How to Make a Cellphilm* (Thompson et al., 2020). In the first Zoom session, participants had an opportunity to meet each other and the facilitators, to view and discuss some photovoice and cellphilm examples, and to brainstorm possible topics for their creations. Participants then worked individually to produce photos or a 1-minute cellphilm over approximately one week, during which we provided support as needed. In a second Zoom session, participants shared and co-analyzed their photos and cellphilms by identifying the themes and areas of concern they saw emerging in the work. This analysis was informed by discussion prompts: What themes do you see in the data? What are the similarities and differences? What is missing? What lessons have you learned from the pandemic? What messages might you want to share with decision makers? How was your experience participating in the study? The Indigenous participants (from the smallest and most remote community in the study) faced internet restrictions for streaming video and therefore took photos and participated in individual audio interviews. In total, the secondary school youth produced 13 cellphilms and 12 photos with co-analysis. We refer to participants either by name, by pseudonym, or anonymously, based on their expressed wishes.

### ***Analysis***

Our analysis involved several phases informed by a participatory framework: 1) We began with youth’s analyses of their experiences as produced in their individual cellphilms and photos, as well as youth’s collective analyses about their visual creations; 2) Three researchers watched youth’s visual creations and the workshop recordings and then went through the transcripts to identify the broad themes emerging in youth’s analyses; 3) One researcher extracted the youth’s analyses specific to education; 4) We then conducted co-analysis sessions with the research team (including researchers who had not previously seen the data) in order to identify theories relevant for the education data; and 5) We organized the findings around the similarities and differences in how youth from public and private schools experienced motivation in order to reflect on SDT as a cornerstone of motivation theory. Careful attention was paid to the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also allowing for other motivation-related themes to emerge.

### **Findings: A Focus on Motivation**

Youth provided rich accounts of motivation during the first wave of the pandemic, including analyses of *why* they did not feel motivated and *how* they coped with the resources available to them. As one girl (15) titled her cellphilm, “Motivation malgré COVID” (Motivation despite COVID). We organize youth’s discussions of motivation around three areas: 1) Youth’s shared experiences of motivation in general related to the disruption around the closure of schools and cancellation of activities; 2) How youth differentially experienced motivation related to the

different school systems approaches to distance learning; and 3) Youth's shared focus on the wider context beyond the school environment.

### ***Part I: Shared experiences of interruption and disruption***

All youth spoke about how school closures abruptly and drastically changed the structure of their lives. When the government first announced that schools would be closed for two weeks, many youth admitted they were happy about not having to go to school. However, this happiness was short-lived as the uncertainty, duration, and implications of lockdown became more significant and youth struggled with a lack of structure normally provided by school.

*Learning activities cancelled.* Youth described a collective grief about the cancellation of both curricular and extracurricular learning activities that structured their lives in and around school. Many youths missed going to school and were discouraged about having to abandon interesting school projects. One class working on a documentary film about mobilization in Venezuela had recruited 200 participants and collected interview material but did not have the equipment to finish the film from home. Class trips were cancelled. Group physical activities were cancelled. The cancellation of end-of-year activities, like ceremonies and sports tournaments, particularly affected the motivation of youth graduating from secondary school.

We want to be recognized, like "Hey, we are graduating." ... For me, the ball, like, I don't really care.... It's just the aspect of recognizing that "Wow, you did a good job for five years and here are your friends... go talk about it." It's just recognition I guess ... they threw it out the window. They were just, like, we don't care about you. (Sophie, 17)

Some youth experienced closure through, for example, graduation events outdoors that involved signing yearbooks with peers and teachers (and a poutine truck!). However, many youth were disappointed about the interruptions to the graduation activities that contribute to a sense of relatedness and belonging to school. Youth's vested efforts and accomplishments were not collectively acknowledged and celebrated.

*Changing relationships around school closures.* Youth also described how school closures changed their social lives: specifically, *which* connections became more significant. Experiencing loneliness and isolation, youth missed their friends, felt the distance between themselves growing, and appreciated connecting with friends online. However, more nuanced conversations about relatedness also emerged, for example, around peer conflict. School closures provided a break from the drama among cohorts. At the same time, youth could not resolve peer conflicts before the year ended. School closures changed the significance of in-school and out-of-school friendships. This change in structure allowed youth to realize which relationships they wanted to maintain.

Spending more time at home also intensified family relationships. Perhaps somewhat expectedly, tensions and frictions erupted at home. More significantly, young people reconnected or created new connections with their family members, including with parents, siblings, and grandparents. The restructuring of youth's social lives provided them with the autonomy to achieve their need for relatedness more intentionally. This seemed to support fulfilling relationships based on connection rather than circumstance. School closures changed the structure of youth's relations and youth's experiences of relatedness, which affected their motivation both positively and negatively.

*Rescheduled.* The abrupt closure of schools also disrupted youth's daily routines, initially removing all sense of structure. Youth were used to certain schedules associated with school and described their new "quarantine routines" at home. This restructuring of time was a challenge, affecting motivation and energy levels. Sleep schedules changed; youth went to sleep later at night and awoke later in the mornings, basically sleeping more or sleeping more erratically. Many missed having routine and found the absence of structure overwhelming. "Now I have nothing. It's just hours and hours and hours..." (Charlie, 15). Life became tiring and repetitive.

Significantly, youth attributed this challenge to not having a schedule *provided by school* and the self-discipline required to get their work done.

Before, everything was planned but it wasn't us who planned it. School decided. Now it's completely up to us to be organized. Sometimes it's hard. I think it takes a lot of self-discipline. (Maria, 15)

Many youth felt unprepared to manage and prioritize their time and remarked how their motivation increased when they created a schedule for themselves. One boy (14) set alarms on his phone as a way to discipline himself, with 1-hour time blocks for physical activity, meals, homework, time outdoors, and video games. For others, this decisional latitude became confusing, paralyzing, and derailing. As we explore elsewhere (Thompson et al., 2020), girls in particular felt pressure to be productive.

All my life I put a lot of pressure on myself and with school I had, like, a routine, so I would do homework, I was happy. But with the pandemic, I was not really motivated. It's just that it's a vicious circle.... I felt bad, and I didn't put pressure on myself anymore, and I didn't do my homework anymore. (Anonymous, 15)

While private school students were more scheduled by online classes, all participants struggled with motivation around the drastic change in structures normally provided by school. Having a more open schedule and more choice to decide how to spend their days was initially a stressor. Yet this autonomy could also become a resource as youth eventually developed strategies to manage their time by creating structure and finding activities that motivated them. Youth described the ways they found motivation as moments of transformation.

*Time to learn new things.* One key theme in youth's analysis revolved around being less busy with school and having more time for activities that interested them. With more autonomy and unstructured time, youth had more flexibility to decide *how* they wanted to spend their time and pursue passions and interests. Youth found motivation by reading or biking, cooking or gardening, or playing with pets. Some wrote music, played instruments, or explored new artists online. One girl played violin in an online concert for a long-term care facility. Youth had time and space for creative activities like drawing, sewing, embroidery, and photography. "We see the kinds of activities that we're doing that are not necessarily related to school, that we wouldn't necessarily do if we weren't in this situation" (Maya, 14). Taking photos or making a cellphilm through the study also provided a pivotal moment of self-expression in how they were experiencing the pandemic. "I saw this a way to express myself, to be more free, and that we could do even without being at school.... I saw it as a type of personal project" (Alex, 14). With less



structure and more autonomy, youth became motivated to invest in their own learning beyond formal schooling.

While many youth struggled to find wellbeing during the first wave of the pandemic, one of our Indigenous participants found that his wellbeing had *improved* since schools closed. Not having to attend school provided a much-needed break from stress related to the structure of schooling.

[Before COVID] ... well with school I was more stressed because of exams, and I thought I would fail my year. And now there is no more school so it's like a break I'd say, so I'm less stressed. I'm more relaxed and ... I have more time for myself. (Anonymous, 16)

He appreciated having more time for walking, reflection, and self-care.

Most participants described how self-directed activities helped them to feel motivated because they chose activities they *wanted* to do, not because they *had* to do them. This finding—youth's shared experiences of motivation around school closures—raises critical questions about the ways that school structures limit the autonomy and space that young people have to follow their interests through creativity, hobbies, activities, and relationships.

## ***Part II: Different experiences of distance learning***

In this section, we present youth's different experiences of distance learning across the private and public systems. We acknowledge that all distance learning during the first wave of the pandemic was probably emergency distance learning (Farhadi, 2020). In general, all youth found the abrupt and unplanned shift to distance learning stressful, which affected their motivation. With a lack of structure and guidance, most students bumbled through and sometimes figured things out, although begrudgingly and often without a sense of fulfillment or competence. Youth expressed a new appreciation for everything they had taken for granted in school and for their teachers. Several participants missed connecting with the teachers who they had close relationships with and had limited access to support staff, such as learning disability specialists, psychologists, and youth workers. Youth also expressed empathy for the challenges that their teachers faced in navigating unfamiliar distance learning technologies and in their roles as front-line workers responsible for enforcing public health measures. Participants cared about their teachers and recognized the lack of institutional support that teachers received at that time.

While all youth struggled with distance learning, which negatively affected their motivation to complete their assignments, the type of instruction and learning strategies varied significantly across secondary school sectors. We acknowledge, as many youth did, how much these efforts varied from school to school and the difficult situation many teachers were, and continue to be, in. We therefore focus less on the role of teachers and more on the systemic differences in how private and public school system responses created inequalities in youth's access to continuous instruction. We attend to the nature of structure that students received once some form of distance learning began and differences in how private and public school students experienced motivation.

*Private school students adapting to the virtual environment.* At the time of research, private school students had received almost two months of online classes and tended to respond positively to, be motivated for, and even celebrate the synchronous distance learning they received.

After the first (online) classes that I had with a teacher, I went to see my Mom with a smile. Listen, I was different from how I was the day before. Just because I had had contact, I was able to speak, to communicate with someone different. It really changed things for me. (Anonymous, 13)

For private school youth, distance learning offered technological opportunities for learning new applications and software, and for facilitating interactive activities online. This new structure for learning somehow supported their motivation and sometimes increased their enthusiasm about schoolwork. Virtual learning spaces helped some students improve their focus because they felt they could learn with fewer distractions with their microphones off, without disruptions from peers goofing around at the back of in-person classes. The distinction between in-person and online classes sometimes seemed minimal. “Well [online] classes, it’s really good. It’s really like going to class. We learn new things. They give us time to ask questions and there are a lot of documents. So, it’s good” (Alice, 14).

Private school students appreciated how their schools were relatively organized and even recorded some classes for later access. Some teachers provided more structure than others and were more adept at creating engaging learning spaces online. But in general, private school students had synchronous access to their teachers, which facilitated relatively positive learning experiences.

I find that it’s well organized. For sure, there are times when, you know, there maybe aren’t enough people in our meetings ... I find that boring because ... sometimes they ask what we think so we get on the microphone and we talk but it’s, like, less interesting with [only three students]. But you know in general I find that it’s well done.... We have homework but it’s, like, super easy and I don’t have that much either. (Alexis, 17)

When teachers could not Zoom, some made instruction videos for their students. Private school youth had structured environments for learning that helped them feel supported and motivated.

Certainly, private school students also faced motivational challenges. It was harder to do homework without being at school, without seeing friends, and without the same level of positive reinforcement from their teachers. Shifting in-class work to homework made many participants feel like their workload had increased, as Sophie (17) exclaimed: “I had 36 billion things for homework!” This change in workload and rhythm affected youth motivation.

I find that school overloads us with homework. Now it’s the end of the year, they try to give us as much homework as possible.... I have a hard time with that. It’s both the workload and that it’s online. (Coralie, 15)

Despite feeling unmotivated, these students seemed to get on with their schoolwork, even with the knowledge that they would not likely return to school that year. Distance learning felt like a weekend schedule, but with courses added. Even though exams were cancelled, some students received practice exams so they could assess their learning achievements, which bolstered youth’s feelings of competence. From participants’ narratives, the private school system did an adequate job at providing structure and support for distance learning in ways that favoured their motivation. These students were more likely to consider distance learning as “hard but OK,” presumably because they had somewhat clear expectations, structured classes, and support and involvement from their teachers.

*Public school students struggling with fragmented rhythm and workload.* Public school students' narratives were more likely to connect to how government decisions created phases of conditions that structured distance learning and undermined their motivation about schoolwork. The announcements in the first days of the crisis regarding school closures were understood by some as if schools were on holiday. Charlie (16) said, "The Minister of Education was, like, 'Bonnes Vacances!' [Happy Holidays!]" In the following weeks, students received conflicting messages with the arrival of the *trousses* (learning kits). Disconnected from what students had been learning in class, the *trousses* were confusing and not meaningful. The directives on how to use the *trousses* were not very structured. "We had work, but it was optional, and it was really useless. The pedagogical kits from the [school board], they were really not clear, and they gave us exercises that really didn't make sense. They really didn't help" (Amsel, 15). Students received mixed messages about how, where, and whether to submit this work and whether these assignments were going to be evaluated, all of which affected their motivation.

I was more motivated at the beginning.... Now, it is harder to be motivated about school.... We have some work but it's harder to do it when we're not really at school.... At my school ... they started to give us things two weeks after the pandemic ... but it is still not mandatory, and it's hard to follow... you aren't really interested in doing it. (EB, 16)

Youth were not motivated to do optional homework that was unhelpful for their learning. Many youth were even unclear about whether the *trousses* came from the Ministry of Education, the school service centers (previously school boards), or from their teachers.

We got an email, like, "Nobody is doing the *trousses*." We were like, "But it wasn't mandatory so why are you mad that we didn't do the *trousses*?" ... The Minister was like, "OK now it's mandatory" and the teachers were like, "Excuse me?!" ... Like, lots of students asked their teachers, "What are you doing?" But the teachers were like, "No, it's not us, it's the Minister of Education" ... Everyone panicked at the same time, so I think that the Minister of Education made a small mistake.... It's not necessary to be that stressed. (Charlie, 16)

While public schools eventually got more organized, the transitions in structure were abrupt. Students found it difficult to reengage with schoolwork after an extended break. "At the beginning of quarantine, it was a bit like holidays and then all of a sudden, they started giving us a lot of homework.... [That was] my difficulty" (Maria, 15). For weeks, students were stressed out and unmotivated to find a work rhythm. Many just did the minimum because teachers assigned optional homework. If work was submitted, it was often low stakes. Students had understandably disconnected from schooling.

For the remainder of the semester, public school students received limited to no synchronous formal instruction. This of course varied from school to school, but youth described having only limited contact with teachers via chat, message boards, or email. Whether or not teachers responded (and when) depended on the teacher. When students submitted questions, waiting for answers could be long, and replies were not necessarily clear. Many youth relied on their friends or siblings for help. Youth missed having the teacher with them to explain and would have preferred live interaction. They struggled to learn autonomously, without a minimum level of structure and support.

Doing homework, for example, it's not like you have a teacher for real. Like, obviously we pay less attention to a teacher on the phone because you can do something else at the same time. Like, you aren't really invested in it because you are not in an environment with the spirit of learning, because you're not at school. You have lots of distractions [at home]... For my homework, I had to check by myself on the internet to find the material I needed. (Anonymous, 14)

Students realized the potential of the internet, but often felt overwhelmed by it and found themselves digging so deep that they got lost or confused in their searches. When homework was assigned all at the same time, as one student described waking up to "21 emails for each subject," they struggled to get organized, which affected their motivation.

Students received some synchronous interaction with teachers through weekly Q&A periods with several class cohorts at the same time (up to 75 or 90 students). However, with limited formal instruction, these sessions were often unhelpful. When there were behaviour issues in these sessions, students found it difficult to ask questions and catch up on their learning. Few students were motivated to attend these sessions, and by this time, their sleep schedules were off kilter. Youth struggled to attend classes scheduled at 9am, which they felt was unrealistic given adolescent rhythms. Public school students only received minimal, fragmented, asynchronous instruction, which was quite different from the full synchronous online classes, often in smaller groups, that private school students had been receiving since March. The distance learning structures created by the public and private school sectors affected the actions of teachers and schools in communicating with students, setting expectations, providing choices, and showing care towards student learning, all of which created different conditions for youth motivation.

### ***Part III: Shared attention to context beyond the school environment***

Returning to youth's shared experiences, youth drew attention to the wider contexts beyond their immediate school environments, including their living conditions and the politics of education.

*Finding workspace and resources at home.* Managing virtual spaces and communication intersected with the conditions of students' home environments, including inequities in household size and access to space and resources. Without adequate learning resources at home, it was difficult to stay motivated to learn. Public school students were not initially permitted to collect their books from school. While students did their best, sometimes consulting online learning sites like Allô Prof, many were discouraged and wished they had access to online books. While most youth had access to a computer and reliable internet for learning at home, this was not always the case. One youth struggled with motivation to do online classes on his mobile phone and with limited bandwidth for streaming video calls. "I don't really have any motivation because my cell bugs me. You know I have to work with my cell ... but with the internet, sometimes it's annoying" (Anonymous, 16).

For asynchronous and independent work, finding a workspace at home was also critical. For youth who usually worked at school or in the library, working autonomously at home required more effort and self-discipline to focus and stay motivated to do schoolwork. Alice (14) and Ophélie's (13) cellphilm, "Les Cours en Ligne" (Online Classes), focuses on a student struggling to do math homework through a sequence of comedic distractions, including watching TV, video chatting with a friend, playing with a pet guinea pig, playing a recorder, and dancing to a music

video. The student concludes, “In the end, I never even finished my homework!” With tightly scheduled online classes, these girls had little time to do homework between classes. As this cellphilm suggests, managing screen time on the internet and social media was tough. Youth felt better when they limited their time on Netflix and YouTube to the evenings but admitted how difficult this structure was to implement. Going online provided both respite and connection but also had the potential for provoking a decline in motivation.

Where youth worked at home also mattered: on beds, in basements, at the kitchen table, or, for one girl, at a desk in a hallway. Some admitted to never having spent so much time in their room and that it felt like a cave. Working at home could be noisy, particularly for larger families and those in smaller living spaces. When family members also worked at home, sometimes everyone talked at the same time or siblings played with pets during classes. In larger living spaces (mostly youth living outside of Montreal) or in smaller families, youth benefited from having their own space, contributing to their concentration and motivation.

For me, it's really fun to live in a big house anyway because we each have our space and well, we are just able to not breathe each other's air for a while. So ... it made me realize that I feel good at home. (Ophélie, 13)

*Concerns about educational inequities.* Given these challenges with distance learning, all youth expressed stress and uncertainty around how grades negatively affected their motivation. Youth wanted to do well but did not have adequate access to opportunities or resources to improve their academic performance in their final semester. However, public school students spoke more significantly about how their disadvantaged educational position affected their motivation.

Yeah, I think it's unmotivating. Because it's a bit like they abandoned us. Like, as if they forgot about us. You know, we're all teenagers and it's not just because someone goes to private school that they deserve more attention. (Maria, 15)

Public school students were more likely to feel unsupported and that they were *behind* in their learning. This learning gap created pressure for public school youth to “catch up” once distance learning began. They felt they did not have enough time and that their lessons advanced quickly, particularly for more difficult subjects like math and science. Public school students spoke passionately about how their learning gap during the first wave would impact their chances for CEGEP acceptance, and eventually employment, all of which affected their motivation.

Critically, the question of privilege and the inequities across education sectors was a concern for both private and public school students.

I've noticed that the injustice is more pronounced these days, for example I have friends who haven't had an effective and stable school program to continue their learning. It's as if they pressed pause on them, whereas I was lucky to have almost as many lessons as usual and live for the most part. (Maya, 14)

Private school students acknowledged how their friends in public schools were generally less motivated and how the disorganization and inconsistency in public teaching created systemic advantages for private school students' futures. Youth recognized how educational systems *already* structured inequities and how the pandemic accentuated inequality between public and private schools. Youth's political awareness about injustices extended beyond their individual experiences of motivation and educational opportunity to include wider concerns for the collective

wellbeing of society. Youth were motivated to express and discuss their concerns with other youth in the context of the research workshops.

## **Discussion**

While we did not set out to study motivation, the components of SDT—competence, autonomy and relatedness—emerged significantly in youth’s narratives. Whereas school structures influence how youth experience autonomy, competence and relatedness, the abrupt transitions that youth experienced created ruptures in familiar structures. For some youth, these ruptures produced a lack of motivation. For other youth, this interruption created opportunities for other experiences. For most youth, changes in the structure, autonomy, and relatedness in their daily lives created both a lack of motivation and then a renewed sense of motivation as youth invested in what they felt interested in outside of school settings. The cancellation of curricular and extracurricular activities shifted youth’s feelings of ownership and interest and affected the sense of relatedness from learning collectively with their peers. Most youth actively searched for ways of developing and exercising competence and sought new strategies to connect with loved ones.

This period of transition and the differences in experiences between private and public students during the first wave of the pandemic generated interesting findings in relation to motivation and SDT theories. First, we discuss how our findings draw attention to and amplify the role of *structure* in facilitating and inhibiting autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Second, we discuss how the differential experiences across the public and private school sectors allow for a critical reflection on social context, social inequities, and how contexts of inequity influence motivation.

### ***Structure and motivation***

Structure in SDT refers predominantly to the relations and teaching strategies within school environments. School environments provide youth with structure in various ways, including through schedules, learning activities, teacher feedback, and the communication of clear expectations (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Schools also structure who youth relate with during and outside of school hours. A structured learning environment can be experienced as beneficial by students who describe feeling more efficient and competent within highly structured environments (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

Interestingly, in the face of incredible disruption, youth in this study found some motivation by creating a structure for their day, by learning, and by exploring new hobbies. Youth missed having a schedule and created schedules of activities for themselves to improve their motivation. Many youth also found that participating in the research was helpful, almost therapeutic, in terms of putting their experiences into words and being heard. Making a cellphilm and exchanging with other youth provoked a shift in how youth understood their circumstances at that time. In a way, our data demonstrates something important about adaptation and resilience in general as youth found fulfilling activities that they wanted to engage in: a shift from motivation based on grades and school expectations to motivation based on creativity and self-discovery.

Our findings also raise questions about structure. From youth’s analyses, it seems as if the over-structuring of schooling left many youth initially unprepared to cope without that structure. Indeed, most of society struggled with this massive disruption during the first wave. Yet take for example how one of our Indigenous participants felt relieved to have a break from the structure provided by school. The public school youth felt overwhelmed by the loss of structure normally

provided by school and therefore created their own structure. We suggest the locus of structure is important. Who places the structure on whom? Who imposes structure, and who is omitted from deciding what that structure is? How are people left to figure it out? How do particular structures create uneven expectations, for example, in relation to the ways that internalized productivity discourses in our study were gendered? If there is an innate attempt to go towards walking, nature, cooking, supporting others, thinking of others, and thinking of politics, should these activities not all be part of the structures that are offered to youth in the first place to support their motivation? When structure is disrupted and people feel a lack of motivation, how they chose to engage to create motivation tells us something important about what motivates them and about society's response in terms of inequitable access to schooling.

### ***Towards a critical, collective account of motivation***

Youth in this study had different access to distance learning depending on their location within private or public school, which differentially affected their motivation. Youth recognized the important role of the school system in *structuring* inequitable social patterns that create uneven opportunities and constraints—amplified in the context of the pandemic—as youth anticipated their transitions through government exams, acceptance to post-secondary schooling, and careers. Although SDT recognizes the role of context in providing autonomy, relatedness, and competency, this model may benefit from what Jennie Popay and colleagues (2020) call an *outward gaze* towards the larger structural realities, conditions, and opportunities that differentially impact the realities youth must negotiate.

SDT's consideration of structure offers a junction towards more macro and sociological theories that consider how historic and socio-political factors shape school environments. An *outward gaze* brings into focus how inequalities within the Quebec education system influence motivation. A focus on macro structures is interesting in part because they directly influence the key components of the SDT model but also, and perhaps more importantly, because the youth in this study clearly felt concerned about these societal realities. Several examples in this study show how inequalities influence motivation, including differential access to the internet, family dynamics, pre-existing hobbies such as violin and sports, and differences in housing situations, including youth in urban areas living in small apartments versus youth in rural areas with more access to indoor and outdoor space. Private school students' access to clear and coherent support immediately after school closures created very different conditions for motivation compared to the disorganized and fragmented support that public school students received. These differences in feeling supported or unsupported, and relatedly in feeling recognized and valued or not through structured and un-structured access to formal learning, clearly influenced youth's levels of motivation. Remarkably, despite the inequalities in access to education and to structure and support, all youth actively found ways to be motivated in their everyday lives.

It is interesting that youth's concerns of social inequities extended beyond themselves and their virtual classrooms to include the greater social good. Youth were politicized and ready to engage in critical dialogue about their perspectives on the inequitable impacts of the pandemic. These social realities seemed to motivate youth to participate in collective activities such as research. This contrasts with the more general tendency—within public health, within education, within psychology—to focus *inwardly* on individual-level psycho-social processes and needs when discussing motivation. While this gaze on the individual is an essential component of empowerment and wellbeing, an inward gaze is insufficient to capture the realities of youth.

We suggest that theories of motivation that work within current understandings of the human psyche could benefit from more critical, situated theories of motivation that grapple with the problems of self and that account for a wider, interdisciplinary analysis. Our questions align with literature that calls for more macro views of psychological theories. For example, Toliver (2015) found that family stress models do not account for Black family experiences because they do not account for the pervasiveness of racism. Life-course researchers Heckhausen and Buchmann (2019) emphasized the importance of dynamic interplay between individual psychological motivational processes and the broader societal landscape. Given how historical contexts, institutions, and social structures shape what opportunities and constraints are available to individuals, we suggest that an interdisciplinary approach could help provide better understanding of these complex social, cultural, and institutional relationships around motivation. There is a need to extend understandings of motivation beyond the self as framed within SDT to also consider the effect of conditions related to privilege, resources, access to opportunities and technologies, and so on. At the same time, youth still spoke significantly about the importance of their lived experiences in relation to autonomy, relatedness, and competence, suggesting that these constructs remain useful for the youth. Therefore, we do not wish to dismiss these core concepts of self-determination but to understand them as being imbricated within larger social and political contexts. We suggest the need for more expansive, interdisciplinary conversations beyond development science to understand the range of complex factors that shape youth's inequitable experiences within schools and school systems as organizations that are located within historical and political contexts (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). From our interdisciplinary lens that includes educational psychology as well as mental health and wellbeing, feminist, decolonizing, and social inequities approaches require us to look more widely and critically beyond individualized views. Critical motivation research would benefit from accounting for how ongoing histories of discrimination, structures of power such as racism, colonization, sexism, and class, and complex forms of intergenerational trauma play important roles in shaping human experiences of motivation.

### ***Limitations***

We acknowledge how the inequitable responses of the public and private school systems during the first wave have since been addressed through efforts to keep all schools open (as much as possible) through subsequent waves. Our study involved a relatively small group of participants from across diverse urban, rural, and Indigenous contexts, and our fieldwork trajectory also shaped our findings. We facilitated the public school cohorts first, as these students were emerging from almost two months with no formal instruction and in the first weeks of a very limited form of distance learning. We facilitated the private school cohorts two or three weeks later at a time when these students had completed almost three months of distance learning. This timing, partly related to government and school administration decisions and partly related to the sequencing of our research process, shaped youth's perspectives.

### ***Participatory visual methodologies for motivation research***

Our study contributes to the identified need for more qualitative research about SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020). While rare within educational psychology, participatory visual methodologies that invite young people into the research process as co-researchers offer possibilities for complicating understandings of motivation. This type of engagement *with* participants moves beyond self-report



surveys and controlled lab environments that apply existing theoretical models and constructs to learn from and with youth about the issues that matter to them. In particular, a visual approach provided youth with opportunities to explore video-making and photography and to identify, name, and represent their experiences in new and creative ways. Youth experimented with different forms of visual and embodied expression to produce representations of their lives that they were not seeing represented in the media and social media at that time (Thompson et al., 2020). Participatory visual methodologies, like photovoice and cellphilmimg, can create generative spaces for interrogating norms and discourses related to motivation—both through the types of photographs or videos that youth decide to make as well as through the research process and facilitated discussion that emerges around the visual productions. Through photovoice and cellphilmimg, youth shared funny, serious, proud, edgy, and emotional stories about their interests and struggles. Getting together with other youth also offered opportunities to view motivation as a shared collective experience rather than an individualized phenomenon. Approaches to research that value youth agency, voice, and capacity to produce critical analyses about their circumstances can help to address the ways that youth are often marginalized within research and decision making about issues that affect them. In particular, at a time during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when public school youth felt disconnected and abandoned, participating in visual research provided a space for youth to express and share their experiences with other youth and be heard.

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