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The Zoom Conundrum

To Zoom or not to Zoom is one of the essential questions for students in secondary schools in the world we now live in. Who would have guessed that having to wake up and commute from one's bed to their desk is harder than physically driving to on-campus school. At first, when the global pandemic hit locally, I was excited for another two week Spring Break from school. I thought it would be a perfect time for me to destress before finals and hang out with friends after online classes. Little did I know that I would be trapped in the void of Zoom for up to 6 hours a day for the rest of my Junior year, my summer government class, and most of my senior year. Ever since our freshman year, my class has been excited and patiently awaiting our turn to have a fun, normal senior year. As freshmen we all envisioned ourselves as seniors hanging out together at the senior tables at Jake's Place enjoying the freedom of no dress code. Instead, we are in our pajamas hanging out on Zoom in breakout rooms with our cameras off and our mics muted. Virtual learning has proven to be developmentally challenging for secondary school students because it sparks academic, social, emotional, and even mental problems during a time where we need these to be most intact; justifying the importance of allowing Zoom to be a choice for students in the future, on an academic level as well as a professional level.

Due to the global pandemic, it became unsafe to attend school in person, allowing "Zoom school" to quickly rise to fame because it offered a safe and efficient option to continue classes during an international crisis. However, each student is unique when it comes to how they learn

and connect socially and emotionally, further alluding to how necessary it is for students in the future to have the choice of a Zoom education. Although, in most school settings, Zoom seems to be offered as the only option to meet the school's needs without considering other learning methods that would meet the students' diverse needs. According to *The Press Democrat* article, "Is Rancho Cotate's class schedule a new distance learning model?", a precise Zoom schedule has proven to be successful for a local Sonoma County high school, Rancho Cotati. "Now students take three classes at a time, down from six." "Classes now meet every day and a year's worth of curriculum is delivered in a semester" (Benefield). There are creative ideas like this, or even a hybrid model where half of the class is socially distanced in a classroom while the other half is learning remotely, in order to see positive results in the student's mental health, participation, and grades.

Given the circumstances that the pandemic has brought, I was able to adapt to this new way of learning since the beginning of the Zoom Age. I have continued to be successful in this unorthodox academic setting largely because the teacher's expectations do not seem as high compared to an on-campus setting. Less homework is assigned, lectures are shorter and, in my opinion, tests are easier. This new school system provides more leeway and encouragement for students to work at their own pace, however, there are costs. For example, there is a significant loss of material covered as well as reduced student comprehension and discussion on each topic. Another critical issue that Zoom has caused is a mass increase in student absences, leading to an increase in classes failed. According to *The New York Times* article, "As School Moves Online, Many Students Stay Logged Out," schools across the country are reporting drastic student absences in remote-learning with less than half of their students participating. Though this is occurring more with lower-income students due to a lack of access to reliable internet services

and personal computers, it is occurring on all social levels where students are not finding the motivation to continue their education (Goldstein, Popescu, & Hannah-Jones). Meanwhile, once on Zoom, if the student has been forced to get online by a parent, the younger age groups especially struggle with maintaining focus on the lecture, conversation, or the assignment easily distracted by their phones or things occurring away from Zoom.

In today's technology-dominated society, it is commonly known that social interaction is essential to build soft skills for younger generations, according to the article "Importance Of Developing Social Skills For Children." Zoom school has become a significant obstacle for younger generations to adapt to because remote learning strips away our daily interactions with classmates. These classmates might not necessarily be close friends you would typically hang out with, but we still engage and develop important interpersonal relationships to help make any normal school day more bearable. Now, more than ever, my generation is isolated and struggling to adapt to a new normal of school through a screen with far less interaction. And if one is unable to swiftly adapt to such a demanding challenge, their mental health can be drastically affected. In a *Elemental* article, author Rainier Harris reports that, "Experts are seeing a decline in students' mental well-being: According to a September 2020 report from Active Minds, a nonprofit that promotes mental health awareness, 20% of high school students said the pandemic has worsened their mental health significantly" (Harris). Harris also found that up to 80% of high school students have experienced stress or anxiety, loneliness or isolation, or have felt sad or disappointed in response to the pandemic. I would suggest that, for many, Zoom learning only heightens these emotions during such a difficult time. By contrast, Zoom has given me the leisure to further open up my introverted side to self reflect and learn more about myself, while trying new things that I find appealing. Without knowing, the Zoom world has compelled me to

notice the little things that give purpose and meaning to my life, such as the beauty in nature as well as a stronger bond with my loved ones. Even though Zoom was not a choice for any of us, there is a part of me that appreciates these challenges that we continue to face because they can be defined as a period of regrowth that much of humanity is experiencing on different levels where our outlook on life will change, hopefully for the better.

An article on NPR, by Anya Kamenetz, found that 4 in 10 US teen students are not attending online schooling since in-person schools closed. This may have dangerous impacts on the future of current younger generations as their lack of motivation and creativity to continue something important no matter the circumstance, like an education, is being revealed. This statistic alone should explain the significant difference where “47% of public school students say they have not attended a (Zoom) class, compared with just 18% of private school students” (Kamenetz). Though I do recognize that I have a major advantage going to a private school with access to a personal computer and reliable internet, Zoom has enabled me to develop a wide range of useful soft skills. Having to adapt to a whole new world of communication through a screen such as the challenge of reading body language through Zoom and watching your every move and mannerism, are two noticeable examples that our minds have yet to process. Moreover, as we navigate the dynamics of the Zoom world, I have grown to be more patient and flexible with the technological mistakes and irregularities that occur on a daily basis. I am confident that these diverse soft skills will prove to be highly useful in my future professional opportunities as we see countless jobs noticeably moving towards a more technology-filled world and virtual services.

Covid-19 not only opened up a new way to learn, but in many ways it has changed our professional sector where more and more people are working remotely at a highly efficient level.

From my perspective, Zoom does not appear to be going away any time soon, so it is crucial, through creativity and communication, for schools to improve their remote learning system in order to improve mental health and the motivation of students during virtual school.

Nevertheless, the future of Zoom is bright as it has proved that in the midst of a global pandemic, it has provided the only safe outlet where we can continue to learn. Though many have struggled to adapt, some have thrived in this new setting simply by maximizing their learning opportunities in a virtual classroom. This is an important approach to follow because after the pandemic, as long as remote learning becomes a choice for secondary students who prefer that specific setting, Zoom is a tool to stay and even thrive in the academic and professional world.

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