

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

Leila Kharazmi

Abstract

The homeschooling of my 6-year-old son during the school closures due to the pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 has become exceptionally easier when, after a few failed attempts, I decided to give willed-learning a try. I have been brought up in a very different educational system, and my biggest fear was to lower my standards. I thought without a fixed daily plan and a rigid curriculum, my son would waste his time, but soon I realized that my style of homeschooling is more damaging than helping. After trying the willed-learning approach, his stress subsided and he became more confident and happy in his learning journey. In this paper, I will share my story while drawing on the willed-learning approach by Carlo Ricci (2012) to argue that children will feel empowered when they have the freedom to choose when to learn, what to learn and how to learn.

Keywords: Willed-learning, Empowering children, Homeschooling challenge, School closure, Pandemic

Introduction

The day that I started writing this article marked the end of the second month into quarantine and school closures. When the news around the COVID-19 began building up, like many other people all around the world, I was worried and stressed because the world was in chaos, and I had never experienced homeschooling my child before. I was not prepared for a massive shift in my life (Samuels, 2020). I started the homeschooling experience on a confident note, but I quickly realized it was a hard task (Ritschel, 2020). I started a quest; I decided to keep a journal and write my story, and in the process of creating it I came to greater self-knowledge (Crowe, 2005). This journey has a different meaning for me in the context of motherhood. I believe “the world needs mothers, and it needs writers, and it needs mothers who are writers, to give voice to this experience that is absolutely central to humankind” (Renfro, 2013, p. 60). I chose narrative writing as my method to present the data in the form of a story (Glesne, 2016). To gather the data, I initially started writing a daily journal, but I was surprised to see how my son was showing his feelings through his drawings. So, I decided to focus on art-based research and incorporate it into my narrative because of “its openness and capacity for surprise” (Glesne, 2016, p. 245). As Blair (2014) suggests, “art and personal experience can be—and should be—viewed as valuable data” (p. 8). His drawings were my data to understand his emotions. They depicted his feelings more than words can say (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008).

Although my story is just one account of what is happening during this pandemic time, I believe “the aim of qualitative research is not to find significance in numbers but rather in themes that emerge from narratives indicative of common human experiences” (Coyle, 2007, p.

205). By sharing my story with the focus on willed-learning, I hope I contribute to the mosaic of many stories of homeschooling experiences that are emerging during this time. What follows is the story that I wrote based on my personal experience, which shows a gradual change in my perception of learning and how the willed-learning approach changed my view. After that, in the discussion and conclusion sections, I will discuss my opinion in detail.

Willed-learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

I looked at my watch. It was 2:30 PM, and in 15 minutes, my son was going to be free from having to wake up so early for school and excited for the March break week. It was his second school year in Canada, and for a boy who knew no English a year ago when he started JK, being able to read grade one storybooks at the SK level was a great accomplishment. I looked at the hallway, students were going into their bus lines, and all seemed excited. My son's classroom was located at the end of the ever stretching hallway. On the other end of the hallway, there was another entrance that was mainly for the bus lines. I was gazing at the square-shaped light that I could see at the other entrance. All of a sudden, the lights in the building flickered and there was a blackout. I thought to myself, the building is tired, it is getting ready to sleep for a week! I could hear the muffled noises of children and before they get excited or scared, the emergency lights were on. Now it seemed as if I was at the entrance of a long tunnel in a mine with dim yellow lights and dusty air, waiting to pick up my child from his day of scavenging knowledge.

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

I spotted him walking with his teacher towards me. Mittens were hanging off his snow pants, and the snow pants were around his neck. His teacher was carrying a plastic bag for him. How many hours have I wandered in that hallway during the first few months of his last school year wondering if he was Ok not knowing any English? God knows.

For a second, I had a flashback to the day I first brought him to school. We both went to the office, and I asked the secretary to give me a registration form. On the registration form, I had to write his date of birth, and I remember I smiled nervously; the secretary looked at me and said if all the questions are clear to me, and I said I am just trying to remember his date of birth! The secretary smiled back at me probably thinking how I could not remember my only child's birthdate, prompting me to explain that my first language is not English, and I am not from this city, I am not even from Canada, not even remotely related, and our calendar is totally different. So the year 2018 in the Persian calendar was the year 1397! Which was a more confusing explanation! I could have simply said I needed another minute to fill in the form, instead of explaining all that, but I thought I needed to explain everything. After I registered him, I looked behind me where he was politely sitting on a chair with his coat all zipped up and his hat covering his ears and eyes, trying to scratch his knee or to find where his knees were located underneath the thick snow pants that he had not worn before in his life, and he had religiously been wearing since the day I bought them for him. He knew it would protect him from the minus 30 degrees cold, as neither he nor his parents or anyone he knew had experienced that extreme cold before in their lives.

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

I remember, for a second, I was hesitant because he knew no English, and I didn't know how he would survive at school without knowing the language. I remember I shyly asked the secretary if there are other Iranian students in his classroom, and she smiled back at me saying there are no foreign kids at school. Later, I realized that multiculturalism in Canada has different degrees based on the location. If you live in Toronto, the story is very different, but I was in a small town in Northern Ontario, and there were only a few Iranian people in the city.

I looked back at the hallway, and my son and his teacher were approaching me now. I tried to free myself from the green plastic chair that I had sunk into. His teacher gave me the plastic bag with his extra clothes and the blanket for nap times and said it was a good time for me to give them a good wash and send them back after the March break. I thanked her and asked how he was doing in the classroom, and she said he is in the top two in his class, that he has learned so much since the year before, and his skills are comparable to the kids whose first language is English! I was delighted to hear this because being an ESL teacher in Iran for over ten years, has taught me that learning English can be difficult if you don't live in the environment. I had seen students struggling with the language and grammar and international exams for so many years, that knowing my son would probably not face that challenge in the future was so relieving.

When we said goodbye to his teacher, my son looked at me and said, "can we go now?" I asked if he had left anything in the classroom. He said his brand new indoor shoes were at his cubby and if he could run and get them, which I said **NO** to because I didn't want to send him

back in the dimly lit hallway and I knew he would be back soon and use the shoes after the March break. I was wrong!

I remember that day, Thursday the 12th of March 2020, because when we walked out of the school door, a new learning era officially began in Canada. The schools have been closed ever since for the unforeseeable future because of the COVID 19.

For the first week, which was the actual March break, we did nothing education-related. I had to finish an assignment for my studies, and I had no time or energy to tackle homeschooling. He was so happy that he had a drawer full of new toys that I had bought in a state of panic, knowing that we might be stuck at home for a long time. He had many different containers of Play-Doh, and he knew he shouldn't mix the colors because I didn't like messy colors. I was busy with my studies, and I was somehow trying to feel less guilty for not having enough time to spend with him. He had free screen time, and an iPad full of new games, and all he wanted to do was to play or watch the TV. The feeling of guilt was creeping in my room, getting into my head, stopping me from focusing on what I was reading, but at the same time, I was obsessed with taking this opportunity of having nothing else to do but to study. Each night I was going to bed, not even wanting to think about how many hours my son had spent watching the TV or playing video games. After the March break, I received instructions from his teacher on how to use the online platform to have access to educational resources. She had emphasized that there was no obligation or expectation to follow the suggestions and each family could decide what works best for them. She had also included a Youtube video of Mo Willems, the author of my son's favorite

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

book series featuring the pigeon, in the video he teaches kids how to draw the pigeon. I saved that video to show him as a treat!

Don't get me wrong! I was not one of those parents that would push their children to their limits for the sake of knowing more math or reading! Or at least I assumed I was not so!

I was simply in a panic mode! I was mainly upset that his access to his English speaking environment was limited for a while, and this was bothering me because I was worried he might slow down or forget his English. I thought his rate of learning English at school was fast, and I could not provide the same environment for him at home. So, to feel more connected to the school learning environment, I told him the March break party was over, and he needed to have a plan for his days, and I ignored his pouting lips or a drop of tear that was formed in his eye. This I thought, was for his own sake, for his future and that someday he might thank me for that. A few days after our new routine, I showed him the Doodling with Mo Willems video that his teacher had suggested, and I saw a spark of recognition in his eyes. He recognized the Pigeon from his favorite book series at school, which his teacher had read many times. He asked me what was the date of the first day in March break and I roughly guessed a day and showed him how to write it down. He went to his room and came back with three drawings:



Figure 1. Pigeon was in a park, but angry people were trying to fight him off the slide.



Figure 2. Pigeon looks scared and is attacked by scary creatures. Sad faces are floating in the background.



Figure 3. A furious monster fuming with rage.

I was shocked! This could not be the result of my attempt to homeschooling only; it had something to do with the uncertain world that he was in as well. I tried to explain why the world was like this these days, but I was not sure if I did a good job. The new reality was hard for him, as it was for me and probably many other people around the world. That day I promised myself that I would choose a more democratic approach to homeschooling, but I still wanted to see a pattern, a day plan, a curriculum! I was brought up in an education environment where grades were the measuring units for progress, and it was hard for me to know how to measure his progress. To compare him with what? With himself? That did not make sense to me. Needless to say that his drawings were still the same for the coming days:



Figure 4. Pigeon is captured by villains.



Figure 5. A very angry face.



Figure 6. Pigeon is crying! Saying “nobody is happy.”

Up until seeing the last drawing, I was partly thinking that the anger in his drawings might also be the result of watching his favorite Ninja Turtles series. But that was not his new favorite and he had never drawn something like that before. When I saw the pigeon crying, I asked him why the pigeon was so upset. And he simply said: “The pigeon is me!” I gave him the biggest cuddle and we ended up spending the rest of the day talking about the new world we live in again, why adults are scared of the invisible virus; why the schools are closed; and, why, when we go for a walk we can’t play in the neighborhood park.

This young artist was trying to show me through his art that my version of homeschooling was not working! I recognized that something had to be changed. I decided to stop the flow of education for a few days. He seemed relieved, less stressed, and generally happy.

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

A couple of days later, as I was reading an article in my room, he called me from his room and said: “Mom, did you know that blue and yellow turn to green?” I hastily responded yes, just to zoom back on my reading. “Mom, did you know that red and orange turn into a different red?” –Yes! “Also, did you know that white and black are less black?” –YES! “Did you know that all the colors mixed turn into an ugly dark brown?” At that moment I said: “How do you know all this? Is that a game on the iPad?” And before I finish my sentence, he ran into my room with a big ball of Play-Doh all mixed up, and he was right! Not a nice color! He laughed and said: “I think I made Mars or Saturn, or could this be the Moon? Oh no, that is white, I guess”.

I had to react! Two options! To tell him why he mixed all the colors when I had told him not to, especially when I wasn’t sure if I can go back to the store and buy him new tubs of Play-Doh? Or choose to praise him for his self-directed art lesson. I chose the latter! Faked a smile, and as he was leaving the room, I remembered something from my studies that I was not courageous enough to try: Willed-learning! Let’s give it a try. That evening, I talked to my husband, and we both agreed that we should give him a chance to decide what to learn and also give his brain a break from having to learn a new language and learn how to read or write in it at the same time. We were in no rush!

The next day, I explained to him that from that day forward, he has the freedom to choose what he wants to learn, and when in the day. I also asked him to think about all the games that we could all play together that made him happy. He went back to his room and came back with a new drawing:



Figure 7. Pigeon was perfectly happy now!

For a few days after that, he enjoyed his newly gained freedom and ruled his little world. I had promised myself not to interfere. One morning, however, he asked me if I could help him plan his day, and he brought a piece of paper and asked me to write three things on it: Math, Reading, Creation! When I asked him what creation was for, he said he is trying to create something new each day, and he will explain his goal when the time comes!

Because of the willed-learning approach, he likes his self-decided plans; he learns math, reads the books he wants, and creates something with simple things we have at home. It can be as simple as glitter gluing a CD or painting a stone. His plans for the day will not last him more than 45 minutes, and he spends the rest of the day watching his favorite shows or play. But he is happy now, and to my great surprise, he is using English words that are new to him that he probably picked up from watching the TV while having no stress about learning them. He can

tell the time because he first wanted to know when his cookies are done in the oven. So I made him a cardboard clock, and we ended up talking about when there were no alarm clocks in the history, so there were people hired to wake you up each morning by throwing a small stone at your window. He has shown interest in learning how to read in his first language, Farsi. I should admit that I panicked when he first asked me to teach him Farsi because I had no idea how and where to start, but he suggested I show him the name of his cousins, uncles, and friends in Farsi so that he can learn the alphabet. Currently, we are halfway through the alphabet, and although I have no rush for him to learn it, he is so excited to be able to read.

He likes to spend a long time in the yard and monitor the wildflowers growing around the trees. We feed the birds, and we make stories of how these birds might have families, babies, or friends. To me, all the birds look the same, but he thinks they each deserve a unique name. We now feel more connected to our surroundings, nature, and the neighborhood. As Dufty (2010) explains “there is wisdom and value in communicating with non-human others by being in their presence, attending to them carefully, listening to their varied voices and then responding in various ways, including words, images, and actions” (p. 130). He drew an invitation for birds to come to our yard for food. He found his way to communicate with them and was confident the birds would understand his drawing. His drawings are fascinating to me because they show what is going on in his mind in a creative way.

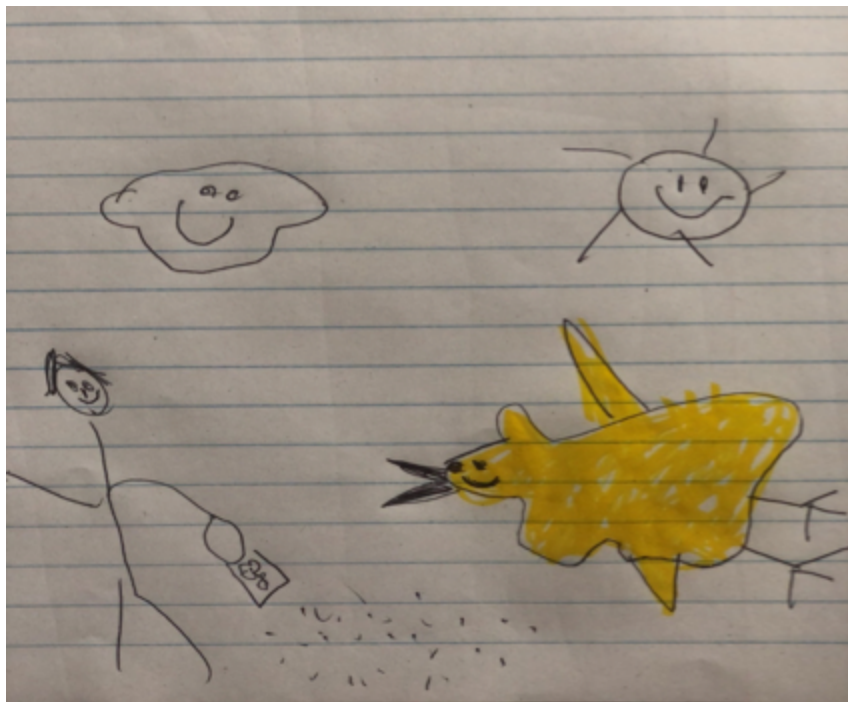


Figure 8. An invitation for hungry birds in the area

Discussion

There was a child went forth everyday.

And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,

And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day,

Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

(Whitman, 1993, p. 57)

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

I see the willed-learning approach as a contrast to traditional education. In this method, learning is engaging, deep, and is meaningful to the children, because they can freely decide to learn and explore (Ricci, 2012) as opposed to the traditional learning approaches where usually a teacher dictates what the children learn, when to learn and how to learn it. During this process, I realized that authentic learning is “permanent and useful, that leads to intelligent action and further learning-can arise only out of the experience, interests, and concerns of the learner” (Holt, 2005, p. 41).

The process of learning for my son has not been in a linear fashion. Some days he wanted to learn about the galaxy, and the next day he just wanted to play with play-doh. Either was fine with me, and overall, it equaled out (Powers, 2020). The interesting part was that on the relaxed days, he was mostly practicing what he had learned through playing. Also, I realized that in this modern world technology is an inevitable part of learning “for contemporary children, the textual landscape in which they are developing particular skills, knowledge, and sense of self is increasingly composed of new technologies” (McTavish et al., 2010, p. 254).

When at first I was not sure how the curriculum should look like in the willed-learning, I came across the whole-curriculum in which “the important factor is helping the child to see how many aspects of the life are interdependent. The experience of one connection can open the door to seeing the interconnections in other areas of life” (Miller, 2010, p. 79). The first exercise of adopting the whole-curriculum was to let him help me cook dinner. I had initially planned for a conversation about the ingredients and how they come together to form a type of food. What happened instead was we talked about what my favorite childhood food was. Before I knew it,

we were traveling down the memory lane, and I called my grandmother to give me an old recipe that she used to cook for me when I was a child. A simple exercise turned into an intergenerational conversation. I was surprised how fluid willed learning can be, and the resources can be picked based on the present context rather than being previously fixed (Ricci, 2012)

Practicing the willed-learning approach was not easy for me to start with. I was brought up in the traditional form of education, and transforming my point of view meant questioning all those years of schooling. I had to critically reflect on my misconceptions and set myself free of the old assumptions that were like ill-fitting clothes on me (Kohn, 2010). Luckily, this realization happened quickly, and so our mother-child bonding did not suffer (McBride, 2020). With more than a decade of background in teaching, in the first few days, I was not comfortable to back off as a teacher and accompany him as a friend. He was so excited about his newly gained freedom that he did not want to let it go. However, soon he realized that the change that he could see in me was not temporary, so he started to trust me as a learner and friend as opposed to a strict teacher. I supported and nurtured his desire to learn in his way and he in return kept inviting me to his learning world, this time appreciating the help that he was getting (Ricci, 2012).

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to document my ongoing experience of homeschooling during the quarantine period of COVID-19. By paying attention to my son's drawings and emerging themes from them, I realized that the way I had initially started the practice of homeschooling was not going well. His drawings showed anxiety, anger, and stress, "drawing can allow a child to

represent experiences, without the constraints of language or literacy skills” (Haberlin, 2017, p. 4), and his emotions were evident in his drawings without expressing them to me.

This practice was eye-opening for me. I could see that against my intentions, which were to make optimal use of this time at home, I was practicing helicopter parenting. In this particular time in history, when maintaining well-being should have been my priority, I wanted to push educating my son to the limits. His drawings made me realize that what I was doing was wrong. So instead of using a strict curriculum at home, I decided to try the willed-learning curriculum that is emergent, fluid, and not rigidly preplanned (Ricci, 2012). This approach helped us as a family to explore new ways of learning. We monitored the plants in the garden and learned how to grow seeds. I learned that everything has the potential to turn into a learning experience now that my son was confident in his learning environment. Like most of the people in the world, at this particular time, he needed some time to digest how the world had turned upside down. My way of dealing with the change was to read more about it and follow the news, and his way to deal with it was to watch the Peppa Pig series and to jump in the muddy puddles with them happily.

My experience of homeschooling during the last two months provided me with a new insight. My combined role as a mother and a strict teacher could not benefit my son, and his reaction to this taught me that I should give him the freedom to learn by choice. Ricci (2012) believes that children, like adults, learn best when they learn according to their will, and my son learned best when he was motivated to explore the world around him by choice.

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

It was not an easy decision to try willed-learning. I had this presupposition that I know more, and it is my responsibility to teach my son as much as I could in a time that I thought there is not much else to do. But I realized that I had to trust his ability to decide when, where, and how to learn and, more importantly, I had to learn to back off. Gilman (1984), in an interview with Holt, asked him about the challenges of homeschooling that parents face, and his response was:

The hardest one is learning to trust their children, learning that they don't have to make learning happen. Learning that you don't have to stimulate your kids all the time. Parents start teaching their kids because they feel a strong sense of responsibility but they tend to sometimes feel more responsible than they really are. The hardest thing to do is to learn to back off. (p. 46)

During this unique time in my life, I have started to trust my son and the process of willed-learning. I learned to trust my child's ability and trust that education goes way beyond the school curriculum and that there is a broader definition of education than what is decided at schools (Slivinski, 2020). I have seen much better results compared to when I initially started homeschooling him with a rigid curriculum. He feels empowered that he can choose what to learn and when and how to learn. The only thing that still bothers him is his indoor shoes that were his favorite, and I did not let him bring back home on his last day of school. He thinks his shoes are lonely, and he might outgrow them, but I have assured him that his friends' shoes are there too. So he said, "who knows, maybe all the indoor shoes left at the school are now playing in the gym?" and I nodded!

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

During this very special time in history, many parents around the world have gone through the struggles of homeschooling. Who knows the next time that the indoor shoes left at schools hear the children running in the hallways, how will education look? Or what stories will emerge from other parents? Clandinin (2013) mentions that “we re-story ourselves and perhaps begin to shift the institutional, social, and cultural narratives in which we are embedded” (p. 34). I hope that by sharing my story, I have provided an example of a successful account of using the willed-learning approach to invite more educators and parents to trust the ability of the children in a context where learning is “inspired and driven by the will of the learners” (Ricci, 2012, p. 104), as opposed to an external force that might bruise their souls.

References

- Blair, J., M. (2014). Animated autoethnographies: stop motion animation as a tool for self-enquiry and personal evolution. *Art Education* 67(2): 6-13
- Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & Siegesmund, R. (2008). *Arts-based research in education: Foundations for practice*. Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press.
- Coyle, N. (2007). Qualitative research: What this research paradigm has to offer to the understanding of pain. *Pain Medicine*.8(3), 207-209
- Crowe, K. (2005). An art-based approach to conceptual educational practice. *Canadian Journal of Education*.28(3), 2-15
- Dufty, D. (2010). Communicating soul to soul with others. In I. ColalilloKates, & C., L., Harvey (Eds.), *The wheels of soul in education: An inspiring international dynamic* (pp.131-142). Sense Publishers.
- Gilman, R. (1984). *Growing without schooling: An interview with John Holt*. Context Institute.
<https://www.context.org/iclib/ic06/holt/>
- Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (5th Edition). Pearson.

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

Haberlin, S. (2017). Using arts-based research to explore peak experiences in five gifted children. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 18(24).

<http://www.ijea.org/v18n24/>.

Holt, J. (2005). *The underachieving school*. Sentient Press.

Kohn, A. (2010). Foreword. In J. Mintz, & C. Ricci (Eds.), *Turning point: 35 visionaries tell their stories*. (pp. 5-8). Alternative Education Resource Organization

McBride, A. (2020, April 2), '*Quarantine schooling*': Veteran homeschooling parents share advice for helping kids learn amid the coronavirus school closures. San Antonio

Express-News.

<https://www.expressnews.com/lifestyle/health-family/article/Quarantine-schooling-Veteran-homeschooling-15174429.php>

McTavish, M., Streelasky, J., & Coles, L. (2012). Listening to children's voices: Children as participants in research. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 44(3), 249–267.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-012-0068-8>

Miller, J., P. (2010) *Whole child education*. University of Toronto Press.

Powers, L., (2020, March 31). *Homeschooling tips from actual teachers*. The Cut.

<https://www.thecut.com/2020/03/expert-advice-homeschooling-during-quarantine.html>

Willed Learning and Art as a Way for Young People to Express Their Feelings

Renfro, Y. P.(2013). How to write motherhood.In J. Dymond & N.Willey (Eds.), *Motherhood memories*. (pp. 60-68). Demeter Press.

Ricci, Carlo (2012). *The willed curriculum, unschooling, and self-direction*. Ricci Publishing.

Ritschel, C. (2020, March 25). *Coronavirus: Parents share homeschooling fails amid COVID-19 quarantine*. Independent.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/coronavirus-homeschooling-funny-school-children-parents-fails-lockdown-quarantine-a9425616.html>

Samuels, C., A.(2020, March 27). Will learning gaps widen as schools stay closed? *Education Week*, 39(28), 5–5.

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/01/will-learning-gaps-widen-as-schools-stay.html>

Slivinski, A. (2020, March 23). *Homeschooling helped prepare me for quarantine*. Theorca

<https://theorca.ca/resident-pod/homeschooling-helped-prepare-me-for-quarantine/>

Whitman, W. (1993). *From this soil*. The Nature Company