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Pandemic Pivots for Older Volunteers: Online Tutoring and Pen Pal Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of older adult volunteers who pivoted from in-person tutoring to letter writing and online tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixty-one older adult volunteers were surveyed in the beginning and end of the school year about their experiences, including their perceived benefits, challenges, and feedback on the pandemic transition. Eleven of the surveyed volunteers participated in focus groups at the end of the school year. Perceived benefits included having a positive impact on a child's life and meaningful engagement during the pandemic, and perceived challenges included difficulty engaging students and lack of control over learning environments. The participants also suggested increasing opportunities for informal interactions with staff and students, technology training, and peer support between volunteers. There was agreement that the remote volunteering experience was not a substitute for in-person tutoring, but it was better than no volunteering at all.

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Introduction

The global pandemic has created unprecedented hurdles for volunteers. Policies such as lockdowns and social distancing have severely disrupted the volunteering context (Luksyte et al., 2021) and led to greater physical and social isolation for all people, including older adults (Peng & Roth, 2021). Recent studies have shown that, despite their higher risk for COVID-19, older adults were more likely than younger adults to have increased their volunteering during the pandemic (Mak & Fancourt, 2021). This is significant, given the abundance of literature on the benefits of volunteering for older adults, such as increased physical activity, strength, walking speed, cognitive functioning, and self-rated health (Brydges et al., 2021), life satisfaction (Haski-Leventhal, 2009), and volunteering as a buffer against negative self-esteem (Russell et al., 2019). Older adults' engagement in both formal volunteering (i.e., volunteering in an organizational context) and informal volunteering (i.e.,

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volunteering outside an organizational context, such as driving a neighbor to an appointment) during the pandemic has also been linked with improved daily affective and social well-being (Sin et al., 2021).

One of the disruptions to volunteering during the pandemic has been the shift from in-person volunteering to virtual and other non-conventional means of volunteering remotely. Research on volunteering among older adults during the pandemic has considered the value of virtual volunteering as a strategy (Lachance, 2020), the effects of the cessation of volunteering during COVID-19 (Grotz et al., 2020), and the reduction of volunteering (Yamashita et al., 2022), but little research has considered how volunteers perceive the transition to alternative forms of volunteering compared to in-person volunteering. To fill this gap in the literature, we surveyed volunteers in the Oasis intergenerational program, which matches older volunteers with elementary children in Grades K–3. Oasis is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting healthy aging. Its intergenerational program has been in operation since 1989, and more than 100,000 Oasis volunteers have worked with over 444,000 children across the United States. As a result of the pandemic, Oasis transitioned from in-person tutoring to two remote forms of formal volunteering: (1) a pen pal letter writing program and (2) an online tutoring program. The pen pal program consisted of an exchange of letters between volunteers and their paired students. The online tutoring program consisted of one-on-one sessions using an online reading platform. All of the letters and videoconferencing sessions were monitored by teachers or Oasis staff, and volunteers were provided with parameters on what to say and what not to say, such as following a guided form to introduce oneself or discuss a book together. As part of a three-year partnership with Oasis to study the effects of volunteering on older adults, we asked two research questions in this study: (1) What are the benefits and challenges of remote volunteering for older adults? and (2) How do remote forms of volunteering compare with in-person volunteering for older adults? Additionally, we asked participants to evaluate their experience with Oasis and provide recommendations to improve remote forms of volunteering.

This study builds on past research that has separately explored the benefits of older adults' participation in pen pal and online volunteering programs. One of the advantages of online volunteering is that it creates opportunities for volunteers with mobility or disability challenges (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Mukherjee, 2010). At the same time, older adults are less likely than younger people to use digital technologies and may be excluded from virtual opportunities (Seifert et al., 2020). To address this discrepancy, organizations are challenged to become "technological brokers" for socially isolated older adults and develop infrastructure for improving digital literacy (Xie et al., 2020). Pen pal programs have sprouted throughout the country as a result of the pandemic, from Madison, Connecticut to Clear

Lake, Texas (Zaveri, 2020). In North Carolina, a senior care company ran a pen pal campaign during the pandemic that garnered nearly 20,000 letters for 900-plus residents (Free, 2020). Some studies have explored the promise of pen pal programs in reducing social isolation and loneliness in older adults (Miller et al., 2021), but the comparative value of pen pal programs with in-person or virtual forms of volunteering has not to our knowledge been studied. For example, it is not known if older adults with low levels of digital literacy would prefer engaging students via traditional letter writing versus tutoring over a virtual platform.

As few extant studies has compared the relative benefits of in-person and remote forms of volunteering, we turn to Amichai-Hamburger's (2008) model on the advantages of online volunteering as a framework for interpreting our results. The model focuses on both informative and communicative aspects of online volunteering that are subdivided into three subdivisions: individual, dyadic, and group. The individual subdivision refers to advantages of online volunteering on a personal level; the dyadic subdivision refers to advantages on an interpersonal level; and the group subdivision refers to advantages gained from being part of a task group. In the individual level of the information aspect, the model hypothesizes that online forms of volunteering are advantageous, because the Internet is a vehicle for accessing the largest repository of information in the world. Online volunteer opportunities also help individuals overcome disabilities that may prevent them from participating offline in the same way, though the "digital divide" or inequality of access to information explains why certain subgroups of volunteers are included or excluded from certain types of volunteering. At the dyadic level, the model theorizes efficient information exchange and the opportunity to learn new facts or skills as advantages of online volunteering. At the group level, the advantages include having a group with shared interests, multiple channels for exchanging information, and having a data bank of experiences, ideas, and other relevant information. In the communication aspect, the model theorizes a potential relationship between online self-disclosure and successful social connections. In other words, some individuals may be better at expressing themselves through non-traditional forms of engagement, which in turn leads to positive social relationships. At the dyadic level, the protection provided by the Internet may also empower people who are socially isolated or suffer from social stigmas to create significant relationships. At the group level, the Internet is also advantageous for setting up communication platforms for both supervision and information exchange. To help interpret the findings in this research, we adapt this model to our study by broadening the model's focus on "online" volunteering to "remote" volunteering, because the pen pal program in our study shares many of the same features as online programs, such as the opportunity to volunteer remotely from home and to use the computer to type letters.

Methods

Mixed methods, including online surveys and focus groups, were used to understand the transition to alternative forms of volunteering. Study protocols were approved by the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board (No. 202008102).

Survey procedure

We surveyed Oasis volunteers in the St. Louis region before and after their volunteer programs in the 2020–2021 school year. In the fall, Oasis staff sent out a recruitment e-mail to all of the 104 volunteers in St. Louis who participated in the pen pal program, the virtual tutoring program, or both programs. Follow-up reminders to participate in the study were sent via e-mail, a hard-copy letter, and phone calls. A total of 87 total respondents filled out consent forms to participate in the study and completed the pretest survey (87/104 = 83.7% response rate). Five participants withdrew from the study after the pretest. In the spring, the remaining 99 volunteers were contacted using the same methods as above, and 61 respondents completed the posttest survey (61/99 = 61.6% response rate), resulting in an attrition rate of 26/87 = 29.9%. Participants who completed both surveys were included in this study for analysis (n = 61). This final sample included 22 online tutors and 39 pen pals. Eight participants completed both surveys over the phone with Oasis staff, and 53 participants completed both surveys via the Qualtrics survey platform. For each survey that a participant completed, the school district in which the participant is volunteering received a $5 credit to purchase a book. Participants who completed the posttest received an additional $10 credit to attend Oasis-coordinated online courses.

Survey measures

We developed both the pretest and posttest surveys as part of a larger study on the effects of volunteering on older adults. For this study's analyses, we used 9 demographic variables from the pretest survey, 11 outcome variables from the posttest survey, and 4 open-ended responses from the pretest and posttest surveys. The pretest demographic variables included: volunteer hours in the past 12 months, caregiver status, race, education, age, gender, marital status, income, and employment status. The posttest outcome variables included: mean volunteer hours per month in Oasis program, activity engagement (increased social activities, use time productively, contributed to the well-being of children, feel better about self), self-rated change in health (physical health, cognitive health, and emotional health), challenge connecting with student, and comparisons with in-person volunteering (engaging student

and forming relationship). The open-ended questions included: concerns about volunteering at the pretest, negative effects of volunteering, what worked well, and what did not work well. Our measures on activity engagement were adapted from our previous work on intergenerational tutoring and Experience Corps (Kinnevy & Morrow-Howell, 2000; Morrow-Howell et al., 2014). Both surveys were tested for usability and comprehensibility.

Survey analysis

Bivariate tests – chi-square tests of independence and Fisher's exact tests when the expected counts were less than five—were conducted to examine variations in the self-reported volunteering outcomes by each pretest demographic variable. Some of the variables were evenly collapsed or split at the median to avoid small cell sizes for comparisons (Iacobucci et al., 2015). For significant findings, we reported the effect size using Cramer's V and conducted a post hoc residual analysis using the Bonferroni adjustment. As missing data in the bivariate models ranged from 6.6% to 54.1%, we re-fitted the models using 55 imputed data sets created with multiple imputations with chained equations, as suggested by White et al. (2011). Because the results remained the same, we reported findings using our original data. To account for the attrition of participants in the posttest, we compared the demographic variables of the final study sample with the pretest-only sample using bivariate tests of association, including chi-square tests of independence and Fisher's exact tests when the expected counts were less than five. A significance level of 0.05 was chosen for the hypothesis tests, and Bonferroni adjustment was used for the multiple comparisons. Quantitative analyses were conducted in R version 4.2.0.

Focus group procedure

Following the posttest survey, we conducted a 90-minute focus group session with four pen pal volunteers and another 90-minute focus group session with seven online tutors in two separate Zoom meetings (n = 11). Oasis staff recruited the focus group participants from the pool of volunteers who completed the surveys. The incentive to participate was a $10 credit to attend Oasis-sponsored online courses. Each focus group began with a welcome message, an informed consent script, an introduction to the purpose of the focus group, ground rules for the discussion, such as respecting each other's experience and keeping the discussion confidential, and a brief introduction of the participants and moderators. The sessions were then guided by seven open-ended prompts and spontaneous probes that queried the participants' experience of the programs, including (1) strengths of the program (e.g., "Given Oasis's transition to virtual volunteering, what worked well for you?"), (2) limitations of the program (e.g., "What did not work well for you?"), (3) content (e.g., "Tell us about your online

tutoring session"), (4) comparison with in-person volunteer programs (e.g., "Could you compare your experience this year as an online tutor with in-person tutoring?"), (5) benefits to self (e.g., "How has participating in online tutoring affected you personally?), and (6) suggestions for future programming (e.g., "What do you think is important for Oasis to know for future programming?"). A graduate student assisted with note-taking in each focus group session. At the conclusion of the focus groups, the participants were given the option to comment on any of the preceding discussion and informed that a report of the findings would be distributed to them. An audio recording of each focus group was temporarily kept for transcription.

Focus group analysis

Thematic analysis was used to discover emergent themes in the focus group sessions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We transcribed audio recordings of the focus groups and immersed ourselves in the data through line-by-line reading and memoing. The data were coded independently by the first author and a graduate student to classify the manifest, directly observable content and then to uncover the underlying latent meanings behind the data. Because of the novelty of our study's phenomenon, our themes were inductively derived and named with in vivo codes to foreground the participants' unique experiences (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The first author, second author, and a graduate student held three meetings to compare codes and resolve differences until a consensus was met. Finally, the codes were sorted and organized into themes and subthemes that mapped well onto the data. Our iterative process ended when we achieved a greater than 90% intercoder reliability – defined as the quotient of the number of agreements and the quantity of the sum of the agreements and disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 65). Coding and memoing were carried out in NVivo 12.

Results

Sample characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the survey participants at the time of the pretest survey. Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of the 61 total participants were pen pal volunteers (n = 39); 36.1% were online tutors (n = 22). While some volunteers had the option of participating in both programs, all of the volunteers in this study participated in a single program. A larger proportion of online tutors volunteered for 50 hours or more in the past 12 months (78.9%) compared to pen pals (55.9%). About a third (34.2%) of pen pal volunteers were caregivers, compared to about a quarter of online tutors (26.3%). The majority of volunteers in both programs were White (98.3%) and married (69.5%). Most online tutors were female (76.2%) and between the ages

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants by program ($N = 61$).

Category	Online tutoring *n* (%)	Pen Pals *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
Number of participants	22 (36.1)	39 (63.9)	61 (100.0)
Volunteer hours in past 12 months = 50 hours or more (%) (ref: Less than 50 hours)	15 (78.9)	19 (55.9)	34 (64.2)
Caregiver status = caregiver (%) (ref: not a caregiver)	5 (26.3)	13 (34.2)	18 (31.6)
Race = White (%)	20 (95.2)	39 (100.0)	59 (98.3)
Highest level of education = Some college or above (%) (ref: GED or high school diploma)	18 (85.7)	31 (83.8)	49 (84.5)
Age (%)			
40–49	0 (0.0)	1 (2.6)	1 (1.7)
50–59	1 (4.8)	4 (10.3)	5 (8.3)
60–69	5 (23.8)	16 (41.0)	21 (35.0)
70–79	14 (66.7)	14 (35.9)	28 (46.7)
80–89	1 (4.8)	3 (7.7)	4 (6.7)
90–99	0 (0.0)	1 (2.6)	1 (1.7)
Gender = Female (%) (ref: Male)	16 (76.2)	34 (87.2)	50 (83.3)
Marital Status = Married (%) (ref: Not currently married)	16 (80.0)	25 (64.1)	41 (69.5)
Annual Household Income (%)			
Less than $25,000	0 (0.0)	2 (8.0)	2 (5.3)
$25,000–$50,000	2 (15.4)	6 (24.0)	8 (21.1)
$50,000–$75,000	0 (0.0)	4 (16.0)	4 (10.5)
$75,000–$100,000	3 (23.1)	3 (12.0)	6 (15.8)
$100,000–$125,000	5 (38.5)	5 (20.0)	10 (26.3)
$125,000 or greater	3 (23.1)	5 (20.0)	8 (21.1)
Employment Status (%)			
Working part-time	0 (0.0)	2 (5.1)	2 (3.3)
Working full-time	0 (0.0)	2 (5.1)	2 (3.3)
Unemployed and looking for work	0 (0.0)	2 (5.1)	2 (3.3)
Retired	21 (100.0)	33 (84.6)	54 (90.0)

Note. Survey respondents had the option to not answer any question, therefore not all categories sum to 100%.

70–79 (66.7%) and 60–69 (23.8%), and most pen pals were female (87.2%) and between the ages 60–69 (41.0%) and 70–79 (35.9%). Fewer volunteers in the online tutoring program (15.4%) had an annual household of $75,000 or less compared to pen pal volunteers (48.0%). In terms of employment status, all of the online tutors were retired, compared to 84.6% of the pen pal volunteers.

While the study's sample excluded 26 pretest respondents who did not take the posttest, Fisher's exact tests showed that the participants who only completed the pretest did not significantly differ in all nine demographic variables from those who completed both the pretest and posttest ($p > .05$ for each comparison). There were 11 total focus group participants: Four were male; six were in the 70–79 age bracket; four were in the 60–69 age bracket; and one was older than 79 years. Four were pen pal volunteers, and seven were online tutors.

Survey results

Table 2 presents the self-reported outcomes of volunteering in the posttest survey. The mean hours of volunteering were 7.0 hours per month for online

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of post-test survey outcome variables by program.

Category	Online tutoring n (%)	Pen Pals n (%)	Total n (%)
Mean Volunteer Hours Per Month in Oasis Program (mean (SD))	7.0 (5.8)	2.3 (1.5)	3.9 (4.2)
Increased Social Activities (%)			
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	5 (25.0)	9 (25.0)	14 (25.0)
Neither Disagree Nor Agree	4 (20.0)	14 (38.9)	18 (32.1)
Strongly Agree/Agree	11 (55.0)	13 (36.1)	24 (42.9)
Use Time Productively (%)			
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	2 (10.0)	7 (19.4)	9 (16.1)
Neither Disagree Nor Agree	7 (35.0)	19 (52.8)	26 (46.4)
Strongly Agree/Agree	11 (55.0)	10 (27.8)	21 (37.5)
Contributed to the Well-Being of Children (%)			
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	2 (10.0)	1 (2.8)	3 (5.4)
Neither Disagree Nor Agree	0 (0.0)	3 (8.3)	3 (5.4)
Strongly Agree/Agree	18 (90.0)	32 (88.9)	50 (89.3)
Feel Better About Self (%)			
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	1 (5.0)	1 (2.7)	2 (3.5)
Neither Disagree Nor Agree	1 (5.0)	6 (16.2)	7 (12.3)
Strongly Agree/Agree	18 (90.0)	30 (81.1)	48 (84.2)
Physical Health Compared to Beginning of School Year (%)			
Worse	0 (0.0)	1 (2.7)	1 (1.8)
About the same	15 (78.9)	30 (81.1)	45 (80.4)
Better	4 (21.1)	6 (16.2)	10 (17.9)
Cognitive Health Compared to Beginning of School Year (%)			
Worse	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
About the same	12 (60.0)	32 (86.5)	44 (77.2)
Better	8 (40.0)	5 (13.5)	13 (22.8)
Emotional Health Compared to Beginning of School Year (%)			
Worse	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
About the same	12 (63.2)	30 (81.1)	42 (75.0)
Better	7 (36.8)	7 (18.9)	14 (25.0)
Connecting With Student Was Challenging (%)			
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	3 (15.0)	25 (67.6)	28 (49.1)
Neither Disagree Nor Agree	2 (10.0)	5 (13.5)	7 (12.3)
Strongly Agree/Agree	15 (75.0)	7 (18.9)	22 (38.6)
Engaging Student Compared to In-Person (%)			
Less effective than in-person	14 (82.4)	20 (69.0)	34 (73.9)
Equally effective as in-person	2 (11.8)	6 (20.7)	8 (17.4)
More effective than in-person	1 (5.9)	3 (10.3)	4 (8.7)
Forming Relationship with Student Compared to In-Person (%)			
Less easy than in-person	14 (82.4)	23 (69.7)	37 (74.0)
Equally easy as in-person	3 (17.6)	8 (24.2)	11 (22.0)
Easier than in-person	0 (0.0)	2 (6.1)	2 (4.0)

Note. Survey respondents had the option to not answer any question, therefore not all categories sum to 100%.

tutors and 2.3 hours per month for pen pals. When asked about the benefits of volunteering in the posttest, the volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that they increased social activities (42.9%), use time productively (37.5%), contributed to the well-being of children (89.3%), and feel better about themselves (84.2%). Compared to the beginning of the school year, most of the volunteers reported that their health was about the same; however, 17.9%, 22.8%, and 25.0% of the respondents indicated that their physical, cognitive, and emotional health, respectively, improved as a result of volunteering. A larger proportion of online tutors (75.0%) than pen pals (18.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that

connecting with their students via videoconferencing or letter writing, respectively, was challenging. The majority of volunteers in both program (73.9%) responded that engaging with their students remotely was less effective than engaging with their students in-person. Similarly, most volunteers (74.0%) reported that forming a relationships with their student was less easy remotely than in-person.

Chi-square tests of independence and Fisher's exact tests showed that the above 11 posttest survey outcomes did not significantly depend on 8 of the volunteers' baseline demographic characteristics: caregiver status, race, education, age, gender, marital status, income, or employment status (Bonferroni adjusted $p > .05$ for all comparisons). One exception, using Fisher's exact test, was that the participants' volunteer hours in the past 12 months at the time of the pretest survey was found to be significantly associated with their assessment of the effectiveness of engaging with students remotely versus in-person in the posttest survey (Bonferroni adjusted $p = .014$, Cramer's $V = 0.63$). A post-hoc residual analysis revealed that a larger proportion of participants who volunteered 50 or more hours in the past 12 months (92.3%) reported remote volunteering as less effective than in-person volunteering, compared to participants who volunteered less than 50 hours in the past 12 months (42.9%) (Bonferroni post-hoc $p = .003$).

In an open-ended question on the pretest survey, the volunteers expressed that their top three concerns for volunteering was using technology (23.0%), keeping student engaged (16.4), and not being able to volunteer in-person (16.4%). In open-ended questions on the posttest survey, the volunteers reported being frustrated with technology training, the negative impact of COVID-19 on student education, and student attention problems in online tutoring. When asked what worked well in their program, they reported navigating the reading platform on Zoom, building a personal relationship with their student, and writing and receiving letters. When asked what did not work well, they reported missing in-person interactions, technical problems, difficulty engaging students, and low frequency of letter exchanges.

Focus group results

Pen Pals:"Lost Art" of letter writing

Table 3 presents the focus group themes, subthemes, and the number of significant codes for each subtheme. A recurrent theme of the pen pals focus group revolved around letter writing as a "lost art" that has dual benefits to volunteers and students. When asked about the effects of the program to their students, several volunteers juxtaposed the slow, deliberate process of writing letters with the fast pace of technology; they found that technologically fluent students learned to be more patient by engaging in a slower form of communication. Volunteers considered it an important exercise for students to

Table 3. Focus group themes, subthemes, and number of codes by program.

Program	Theme	Subtheme	Number of codes
Pen Pals	Lost art of letter-writing	Benefits to volunteers	12
		Benefits to students	4
		Program strengths	20
	Missed interactions	Limited interactions with students and staff	25
		Limitations of the program	10
		Recommendations	5
Online tutoring	Place in the world	Virtual environment	38
		Institutional environment	16
		Home environment	20
	Something on my calendar	Benefits to volunteers	23
		Comparison with in-person	11
		Recommendations	17

receive deferred feedback, ranging from one to two weeks, rather than to receive immediate feedback. The volunteers also believed that their students' letter writing led to improved writing ability over the course of the program, in part motivated by the chance to develop a positive relationship with an adult. As one volunteer noted:

> . . . it does slow things down but maybe it teaches us to be patient and appreciate the process of slowly getting to know someone through letter writing*(70–79 year-old female)*

For the volunteers, the most rewarding aspect of the program was the chance to establish a meaningful relationship with a child. The relationship provided an opportunity for generativity, the caring of a younger generation by way of exchanging stories, interests, and knowledge. Additionally, the volunteers cited the program as a buffer against the social isolation caused by the pandemic and lockdowns – a psychological "boost" that "added something" to their lives.

> I enjoyed it quite a bit, it was kind of limited with the correspondence that I could send with the kid. I didn't get to meet the young man, but I got to know him. He sent me pictures and I sent some back. (80–89 year-old male)

Many volunteers appreciated the choice of letter writing over virtual volunteering because of the challenges associated with learning new technology. One volunteer described tutoring virtually using Zoom as stressful and appreciated the option to do pen pals:

> I love the option that I can do [pen pals] . . . I don't think I would be very good with Zoom. I'm just not very great with this technology, so that'd be more stressful for me than it would be enjoyable, whereas the [pen pal program] is just pure pleasure.
>
> *(60–69 year-old female)*

Pen Pals: missed interactions

The theme of "missed interactions" captures the ways in which the pen pals program fell short of the volunteers' expectations for human interactions.

Volunteers explained that despite its forgotten strengths, letter writing could not replace the verbal and non-verbal communication they enjoyed in the schools with their students. One volunteer explained this mismatch vividly:

> When I first went into school, when you just stop in the office and talk to everybody and say hi, but when I went to the room to pick up the child, the smile on the child's face when it comes to the door, and we give a fist bump, and we talk about things on the way to the classroom, then we have our little session in the library, and on the way back, we discuss things on the way back, so we have a pre-meeting, a meeting, and a post-meeting, and I think the pre-meeting and the post-meeting add a lot to what we do.
>
> *(80–89 year-old male)*

In addition to the lack of informal interactions, volunteers admitted that writing on paper limited their ability to transmit feelings and emotions. Simple gestures such as a smile or a laugh could not be transcribed into words. Students also varied in their ability to express themselves or converse on paper. The volunteers also felt that written correspondence was challenging from a pedagogical perspective, given the delay, for example, in providing feedback on student writing. Some volunteers suggested that improvements to the program's operations could mitigate these concerns, such as starting earlier in the school year, increasing the number of letter exchanges, expediting the process of reviewing and vetting letters, or adding in-person sessions, when feasible, to enrich the letter writing relationship. Increasing interactions between volunteers and staff was also suggested as a means to improve the program. The volunteers desired to share tips with one another and have an open channel with the teachers to seek feedback about their students or their own letter responses. Overall, the volunteers felt that the program had "no comparison" to in-person tutoring, but it was better than nothing and could potentially complement in-person tutoring.

Online tutoring: "Place in the World"

A significant concern among the online tutors in the focus group was their child's "place in the world"—the holistic virtual, home, and institutional environments that both added to and subtracted from the program. With respect to the virtual environment, the tutors were divided on whether or not the virtual medium was conducive to student learning. Some tutors praised the virtual reading platform for keeping their kids zeroed in on the task at hand, while other tutors found it demanding to keep their student's attention. The virtual environment was additionally complicated by the children being either at a home or a school environment; children in both settings had little autonomy over the quality of their learning spaces. Common concerns included loud background noise, lack of child supervision, and other interruptions.

Similar to the tutors in the pen pal program, the online tutors observed that the virtual format restricted their field of view of the student's learning environment:

> There's so much that you glean about your student and their place in the world by seeing their surroundings and – and having a chance to talk as you walk from place to place and cover a multitude of subjects that have absolutely nothing to do with the reading that you're doing. (70-79 year-old female)

Consequently, the participants expressed that they, too, had little control over their students' learning environments, an example being when children would swing "off-camera." While the participants felt limited in the activities they could engage in with their students, they appreciated the virtual reading software for providing novel ways of teaching that were not possible in a traditional-styled classroom. For example, the virtual platform provided a wide variety of digital books to choose from, allowing the children's interest in reading to grow unimpeded.

Virtual tutoring: "Something on My Calendar"

The theme of "something on my calendar" encapsulates the participants' ambivalence toward the tutoring sessions as being either positive or negative. One of the benefits was an increased understanding of the roles of teachers and parents, especially through witnessing their back-and-forth adjustments between in-person and virtual contexts:

> I had a conversation with the teacher about attention spans and she said, "Well, tell me about it." You know she had a whole classroom full of first graders were just basically tough to keep under control. *(70–79 year-old male)*

Other benefits included self-development with respect to new forms of learning, such as the digital online reading platform that was used and the enjoyment of interacting and connecting with children. These benefits were cast in temporal terms (e.g., "something on my calendar") and collocated with ambiguous sentiments (e.g., "I don't know"), suggesting that the participants were, on the one hand, "self-obligated" and motivated to the extent that they actively marked their calendars and reminded themselves to participate (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008); and on the other hand, uncertain of the benefits of virtual volunteering because of its transitional nature:

> I like having something on my calendar during the pandemic, it was good to know I did twice a week, which I don't know if that's a lot or not much probably not much, but I did twice a week and I enjoyed having something on my calendar on two days.
> *(70–79 year-old female)*

Other participants echoed this uncertainty but stated that virtual volunteering was better than nothing:

> If it's still virtual next year, I'm not sure I'm going to do it. It was just, I don't know, it just never seemed to really click, but it was better than nothing. *(70–79 year-old male)*

Anticipating an end to the pandemic, the volunteers stressed the importance of getting back to in-person tutoring. Their appeal was that in-person tutoring would lead to stronger engagement with students, as well as open up avenues of dialogue between themselves, which was not possible within the confines of the one-on-one videoconferencing platform. Despite the overwhelming preference for in-person tutoring, the volunteers also voiced ways to improve virtual volunteering and saw value in it even when in-person volunteering would return. They suggested increasing technology training, improving Internet connectivity, and developing a virtual community of support. As one volunteer affirmed:

> I would encourage them [Oasis] to go back to in-person, but there are places and times where having to do it virtually could be extremely advantageous.*(70–79 year-old female)*

Discussion

Our investigation of older adults on their pivot from in-person to alternative forms of volunteering revealed several important findings. Below, we compare and contrast our results with Amichai-Hamburger's (2008) model on the information and communication aspects of online volunteering and discuss strengths and limitations of our study.

First, with respect to the information aspect of remote volunteering, we found both benefits and challenges for older adult volunteers at the personal, interpersonal, and group levels. At the personal level, the online tutors in our study discovered new pedagogical models and expanded their educational toolkit, owing in part to their access to the "biggest library" on earth (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008, p. 549). These findings are somewhat tempered by the volunteers' natural point of reference as the height of the pandemic, when they were completely unable to volunteer. Yet, when the volunteers were explicitly asked to compare their current experiences to in-person experiences before the pandemic, they still had a favorable view of remote volunteering. For example, several online tutors touted the digital reading platform's wide variety of reading options as an exciting way to engage students in reading, compared with the limitation of choosing books from a small classroom collection. This "dyadic information exchange" was less efficient in the pen pal program, as the exchanges were limited to written communication and hampered by slow delivery times (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008, p. 551).

Our results also support the notion that remote forms of volunteering can overcome disabilities (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Older adult volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic are in many ways impaired because of the

"double burden" of social and digital exclusion (Seifert et al., 2020). But we found that both letter writing and online tutoring presented an accessible platform for volunteers to remain socially engaged. A caveat to this is Amichai-Hamburger's (2008) warning that the "digital divide" may compound, not lessen, social inequalities. The overrepresentation of White volunteers (98.3%) in our study compared with the proportion of White volunteers in the total population of Oasis volunteers (83.9%) suggests an upward bias for online volunteering, given that Whites have greater Internet access than people of color (Campos-Castillo, 2015; Oasis Institute, 2021). While our quantitative results indicate that the benefits of volunteering were conferred upon both online tutors and pen pals, irrespective of such individual differences as age, gender, and education, it is likely that our sample had insufficient variance to detect a significant effect. Future studies recruiting a more diverse pool of older adult volunteers would provide better evidence for confirming or rejecting this finding.

At the group level, peer support emerged as a potentially beneficial component for remote volunteering programs. The participants recommended that institutions should provide informal gatherings for the volunteers to support one another. Such meetings would allow volunteers to share teaching tips or discuss common struggles. This suggestion coheres with Amichai-Hamburger's (2008, p. 554) model, which theorizes that group information exchange is a unique advantage of online volunteering programs, as they "can be organized at no expense and at short notice." In traditional forms of volunteering, arranging a meeting for volunteers would typically require a physical space and logistic considerations, whereas remote volunteers may take advantage of communication platforms such as video conferences, chat rooms, and discussion forums to connect with one another (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). We did not investigate the type of platform that older volunteers would prefer; however, Taipale (2016) found that older adults are more likely than younger adults to prefer asynchronous modes of online communication (e.g., discussion forums), which may be due to differential concerns for privacy and the lower level of technological proficiency required (i.e., typing proficiency) (Nahm et al., 2009).

Third, we found both benefits and challenges with respect to the communication aspect of remote volunteering. One benefit was associated with the "high level of self-disclosure" afforded by both volunteer programs in our study (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008, p. 552). When self-disclosure was high between pen pals and their students, the pen pals viewed letter writing as a lost art with a number of positive attributes, such as providing the opportunity for generativity. Conversely, the volunteers found it difficult to establish a connection with their students when their children struggled to disclose intimate and personal details about themselves – provided that such information was within the parameters of the program. One challenge at the group

level concerned having the right environmental context for remote volunteering to be successful. Here our findings diverge from Amichai-Hamburger's model, which focuses almost solely on the positives of the Internet, rather than its challenges. Specifically, we found that despite the ease with which the Internet and letter writing enabled some forms of communication, the tutors' experiences were limited by the lack of *contexts* that could potentially enable other, more richer forms of communication. For example, the inability to interact with children in their immediate contexts diminished the volunteers' ability to modify their children's holistic environments, although research has shown that sense of agency is important for volunteer motivation and retention (Luksyte et al., 2021). Furthermore, the contexts that mattered most to the participants were not formal educational occasions but informal encounters with children or staff, such as meetings in hallways and doorways. Lorenzi and White (2019) has termed such educational contexts as "creative interstitial spaces," because activities that are not always timetabled or planned in advance may be just as effective as formal teaching contexts in fostering creativity.

Our finding on the importance of the volunteering context also provides evidence for the literature on organizational support for formal volunteers. Many of the pen pal volunteers appreciated the choice of writing letters over navigating the "stressful" virtual landscape. This is consistent with studies that show that choice of activities is important in sustaining volunteerism among older adults (Tang et al., 2009). Another common concern among the participants was their desire for additional training, especially in the area of digital literacy. Skoglund (2006) discusses training as a requisite pathway toward an individual's role identity as a committed volunteer, which begs the question if more volunteers would have engaged in Oasis' virtual tutoring program had they received better or more technology training, such as how to teleconference with a student using Zoom. The finding that nearly all high-intensity volunteers (50 or more hours in the past 12 months) found remote volunteering to be less effective than in-person volunteering may suggest the need for trainers to target volunteers who have a longer history of in-person volunteering. Cravens and Ellis (2014) proposed that participants are more likely to be receptive to virtual volunteering if they are gradually scaffolded through five "degrees of virtuality," which range from the bottom rung of learning how to access information on the Internet to the highest level of volunteering virtually. This recognition of virtual volunteering as a complex form of engagement, echoed in our findings of online tutors with frustrated technology experiences, should encourage organizations to flatten the learning curve as much as possible by integrating lower degrees of virtuality into volunteer programming. For example, Lachance (2020) suggested teaching tasks such as using browsers, logging in to platforms, and communicating via e-mail and videoconferencing software.

The participants in this study felt that remote forms of volunteering may be better than nothing and potentially additive to in-person tutoring. The participants also overwhelmingly expressed that remote volunteering is not a replacement for in-person volunteering. As revealed in our focus groups, there was considerable anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the adoption of new technology. Online tutors especially found that connecting with their students was significantly more challenging virtually compared to in-person. Part of this struggle was undoubtedly shaped by the pandemic; both staff and volunteers had to learn new tools within a short timeframe. The lack of large-font devices or "adult-friendly mediums" to access online spaces may also present a barrier (Ibarra et al., 2016). Provided that these challenges are addressed, the volunteers in our study suggested that organizations may embrace the best of both worlds by integrating remote and in-person forms of volunteering. Indeed, we surmise that such a fusion of traditional and non-traditional modalities will provide greater flexibility for older adults to contribute meaningfully, particularly for those who may be periodically homebound, have disabilities, or live in remote regions, as predicted in Amichai-Hamburger's (2008) model. As Filsinger and Freitag (2019) found, older adults in Switzerland were more likely to volunteer if they had experience with the Internet, which can be an effective tool for overcoming physical barriers and promoting social contact.

Several limitations in this study need to be considered. First, this study's generalizability is limited by its investigation of a single organization. We have shown that our sample was not demographically distinct from the total population of Oasis tutors in St. Louis, with the exception of an overrepresentation of Whites. However, the experience of Oasis volunteers in our study cannot be generalized to volunteers in non-Oasis programs. Second, the lack of a comparison group in our descriptive, qualitative design prohibited us from attributing any longitudinal change to program effects. Despite these limitations, very few studies have considered the experiences of older adults who are online volunteers or pen pals, especially during a time of public health crisis when in-person forms of volunteering are limited and engagement with volunteers particularly challenging (Santos & Laureano, 2021). Remote forms of volunteering are not new. They are, however, leveraged at a much lower frequency than in-person volunteering. Thus, this study provides an important documentation of benefits and challenges and sheds light on how older adult volunteers compare and contrast different forms of tutoring, from shared spaces to separated spaces to the possibility of both spaces coexisting together. In view of the increased use of digital technologies, a key priority will be to narrow the digital divide, a task that will require "solidarity, sustained commitment, creativity, and cooperation" (de Raad, 2003). This research also recognizes the strengths of older adults – their sustained engagement and service to others in spite of the challenges of physical disengagement during

the pandemic (Cravens & Ellis, 2014). Future research should continue to elucidate ways to increase benefits for older adult volunteers in a variety of settings and explore strategies for streamlining the transition from in-person to remote forms of volunteering.

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