brought me closer to family, which feels like the right choice for me, now, in this moment.

Over summer, I’ve picked up some consultancy projects, which I’ve been working on from my childhood bedroom in my parents’ house in the English countryside. Now I have to navigate two distinctly different identities on a daily basis. One: put-together millennial woman killing it on conference calls. The other: my sixteen-year-old angsty teenage self to whom I seem to revert to whenever I visit my parents. On Day Two of working from home, my dad kindly asked if I needed a lift anywhere for my meetings. I politely declined while laughing at the idea that the Liberian education minister would arrive in my village mid-pandemic! On Day Three, my mum slipped a hand-drawn takeaway menu in front of me while I was on a Zoom call to ask what I fancied for dinner. Her beautiful act of kindness threatened my ability to maintain separation between my distinct identities of both professional and child. Throughout the summer, I’ve been wearing a shirt on top and yoga leggings on the bottom, a physical manifestation of the different identities I am holding during this weird time.

My life is now punctuated by long dog walks, no mobile phone signal, and the fish and chip van that comes to the village every Wednesday night. This is not the post-Harvard catalogue life I had dreamed for myself, but I must admit that, despite the “pivot!” I’m quietly content.

Note: I write from the ludicrously privileged position of being healthy and having no family directly affected by the virus.

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**FELICITY BURGESS** is a school leader committed to transforming Britain’s schools by transforming the way we think about teaching and learning in the 21st century. She is passionate about building organizational cultures grounded in equity and scaling practices and systems that allow students from all backgrounds to thrive. Look out for her future school! She has designed and led professional development in Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Nepal, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. She can most easily be found in cozy cafes, where she will be lost in the pages of a book that she will eagerly recommend to you, warming her fingers with a cup of Earl Grey tea.
For the 16 years before COVID-19 hit Massachusetts, More Than Words was a beehive of activity, filled with young people working, learning, and engaging. We are a nonprofit social enterprise that empowers youth who are in foster care, court-involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a $37 million dollar business. Youth work part-time jobs in our retail and online used bookselling businesses while simultaneously working a second paid job focused on advancing personal goals to transition to other jobs and education. Youth went out on trucks to pick up books, put books in inventory and shipped our orders, and attended group seminars. All this job training and youth development programming was inherently in-person.

On March 13 we closed our stores and offices and our entire program changed overnight. However, our mission remained the same: empowering and showing up for our youth. The innovations we developed to retain this core while changing all the “trappings” have fundamentally altered the way we will operate going forward. We have learned not just to pivot, but also to knock down walls and build an even stronger More Than Words.

The first step was to ensure we stayed connected with our young people and did whatever necessary to ensure they survived, which meant also being a basic needs program. We completed a needs assessment with all the youth within our network, seeking to understand whether our young people had access to housing, food, cleaning products, and medications. We went from an organization that never had a street presence to one ordering pallets of food from Costco, packing bags, doing home visits. What we learned: it matters to show up and be there for our youth in a real and personal way. When we hand out laptops, turn on cell service, help stand up for emergency housing, or drive by in a “joy parade,” it shows our young people how important they are in this world. As the world opens up again, we’ll continue to be there in new ways.

Like so many other businesses and nonprofits, we transitioned our programming to Zoom. Individual case management with youth development managers, workshops, team meetings — it all happened remotely. We tested our relationships and young people’s commitments and found they stuck. We have retained nearly all of our youth through this crisis, and re-engaged many into our program who had left before. And we innovated: while past workshops were on important but dry topics like financial literacy and giving and receiving feedback, staff were now developing offerings around areas of personal interest. Our team gathers for cooking classes, meditation, health and wellness, creative expression, and makeup lessons. What we learned: relationships, community, and connection matter more than anything.

We had a hard look at our financials and our values. We rely on our youth-run business for 50% of our budget, and our highest margin business lines — retail, events, pop-up shops — were completely shuttered. We didn’t and still don’t know the future of government funding and philanthropy. Our first commitment was to continue to pay our youth even though work shifts were suspended.

Our youth, and their families, have extremely limited savings, and are at high risk of experiencing significant and compounding challenges associated with lost wages. Overall, we paid more than $50,000 per month directly to our young people through this crisis. To do this, we’ve had to pivot our businesses. We took a small pilot program in sourcing textiles and selling them wholesale, and have launched a new business line selling clothing, shoes, and accessories online. What we learned: this is a hugely profitable venture with new and exciting skill building opportunities for youth. We are going all-in and growing this line in the coming year.

But through all this, our young people continued to struggle. Our youth continued to be impacted by system failures and white supremacy, compounded by the danger and threat of COVID and the trauma kicked up by the murder of George Floyd. This crisis hits the most vulnerable among us the hardest. We went all in on a growing strategy of individual advocacy and policy work, shouting from the rooftops when our youth need us. When young people see cases closed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) making them homeless, we are meeting with DCF, saying no, and when our youth are criminalized by a justice system that views children as adults, we are showing up in court, convening prosecutors and defenders to learn about the brain science of emerging adults, and (virtually) storming the state house to raise the age on the justice system, moving emerging adults into the more developmentally appropriate juvenile system. What we learned: It matters when the bookstore speaks up.

These pivots and innovations have made us stronger. We’re not trying to “go back” to normal, we are building forward into a new, bolder, and stronger model.

“The key idea is to just focus on the essential knowledge and skills that kids need to learn in a given year, and then let go of some of the rest.”

Professor Jal Mehta

Discussing a report he coauthored called Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools During COVID-19.