

We Contain Multitudes: Calling in Youth-Focused Researchers

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“There’s a radical—and wonderful—new idea here...that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. It’s an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously.” — Deborah Meier

Introduction: Listening to Youth

Researchers can do a better job of listening to and including youth in their research. As youth leaders in Philadelphia and New York, we see that what youth think and experience is often not taken seriously, even in research that purports to want to represent us. When we are taken seriously, our inclusion in research often lacks rigor in terms of engaging and foregrounding our authentic voices. We are typically not consulted on any stages of youth-focused research and, therefore, it usually does not use our authentic concepts or language, especially not in interviews, study findings, or research reports. This is a significant problem since research on youth is used to inform and design pedagogy, practice, and policy that impact us. Feeling ignored and unheard by educators and educational researchers was compounded by the absence of outlets for our voices and experiences of school and life throughout the pandemic.

We wanted our pandemic experiences to be heard by educators and researchers around the nation. As youth editors, we have collected youth reflections on life and learning in the pandemic during the past academic year. Under the supervision of Penn’s research team on intersectional identities in schools at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, we are studying youth experiences of school throughout COVID-19 along with graduate students and Penn faculty. Since October 2021 we’ve been collecting essays from high school students (and some middle school and college students too) written during this time of community, national, and global crisis. We share this compilation at the close of the 2021-2022 school year to invite reflection on what we’ve learned about ourselves and each other. In this framing piece we share themes we see across these youth essays. We then offer suggestions for researchers, educators, and policymakers interested in youth populations.

We have Had Diverse Pandemic Experiences

Our peers are brave, strong, and our experiences are as diverse as we are. In these powerful essays, we reflect on our pandemic experiences in ways that are inspiring and, we hope, grounding for researchers and educators. Across these essays and poems we feel our peers’ pain and hope, we are able to submerge ourselves in the feelings of loss and isolation, relief at missing bad things, excitement for new opportunities, experiences of connection and disconnection,

frustration and release, endings and beginnings. We share the themes we see in these essays from peers as a way to share all that we have learned from them and their writing.

★ **Routines Disrupted.** The pandemic stopped our routines without notice and changed everything about our lives. These massive changes include new school-life balances and imbalances we needed to figure out, unexpected and massive changes in our daily rhythms that changed often and without notice, our daily routines and rituals disrupted in myriad ways throughout the pandemic. Disruption became a new normal for us, a rolling phenomenon that significantly changed all aspects of our education and lives in ways we're still trying to understand (especially since the pandemic is still not over). These disruptions in our daily functioning and routine choices created new realities we needed to identify and make decisions about, often without direction or a clear sense of options in the moment. Disruption has become our norm.

★ **Connection and Disconnection.** We experienced different types of connection and disconnection in the pandemic which have influenced our school and social experiences in ways that have shaped our sense of ourselves. Many of us felt/feel disconnected from peers, teachers, and even parents in ways that felt difficult and which have left us feeling lost and in some cases, worried. Some connections we made prior to the pandemic were protective for us, such as supportive teachers and school counselors, who were suddenly hard to reach. Some of us suffered in silence. Some of us reached out and made new connections or strengthened existing ones. Across the pandemic these connections and disconnections changed and took new forms, all are important to our individual and collective sense of who we are.

★ **Loss.** We have now learned what the term loss means. Some of us knew it all-too-well going into the pandemic, while some of us learned about loss anew. As a group, we have been introduced to new kinds of loss we didn't know before the pandemic and some have endured familiar kinds of loss—in relationships, in connections with people and things we love, in freedoms, lifestyle and routines. Most painfully, many of us have faced the illness and deaths of relatives, elders, friends, classmates, grandparents, parents, teachers, and other caring adults. Loss is a part of who we are now and we want the adults around us to understand that we are still learning what this means for us now and in the future, even as some of us grieve multiple kinds of losses in silence. We need new rituals to make our losses visible.

★ **Unsure Futures.** The future always feels unsure for youth in some ways, we know, but not like it does for us today. We are living in a such a unique time and our futures feel more unsure now than they did before the pandemic. This includes concerns about our personal health, about public health, about gun and police violence, global warming and

the climate crisis, and about international political conflict with national implications. These massive societal issues make today's crisis of leadership clear to us, which has implications for how we view and plan for our futures. We are not sure how to think about the future in a time that all agree is 'unprecedented' and many of us do not trust our leaders as we have been taught to, and for good reason, they have failed us all. Our futures have never felt less sure.

★ **Just is or Justice.** We constantly make meaning of current societal realities as they connect to issues of justice, in society at large and in our schools and communities. We see a profound lack of accountability on the part of leaders on national and local levels and this has changed how we view the norms and values of the United States; it shows us that we have to play a central role in making society function more equitably. The lack of ethical and visionary leadership we see signals to us that we must mobilize and act together to build true justice, rather than simply accepting what *just is*, as our parents' generations seem to have. Injustice hurts all of us, especially the most vulnerable among us, so we must act. Many of us see the need to be different and to make massive and lasting change rather than accept the status quo.

★ **Social Media.** Adults often talk about how bad social media is for us. But social media has been our lifeline during the pandemic—it has been our main source of communication, our place to go for entertainment, news, to connect to activism, to gain global and local knowledge. Social media became our whole social lives in lockdown because we could not interact in person with our friends for extended periods of time. It is important to understand that our relationships to social media are more nuanced and varied than adults seem to recognize. Many of us see social media primarily as a source of social connection and also a source of learning and information we need for daily life. We also know it has many downsides such as bullying, predatory behavior by adults, oversharing of personal information, hurtful drama, and misinformation as well as disinformation. For some, social media is paradise, for others it is a hellscape, and for many of us, it is something in between that we learn to set boundaries around and navigate as we grow. Ask us about it.

★ **Finding Our Way.** We have lived through something that our parents, as youth, never had to live through. We've had to figure so many things out on our own over the past 2+ years. We've created collaboration strategies and ways of navigating the all the disruptions together. We see now that many of us are lighting each other's way as we go, that we are interdependent, and that we need each other to see the steps forward to a better future for everyone.

A Call-in to Researchers: Recommendations for Research on Youth

Cancel and call-out culture are all around us. These new social phenomena are defined by swift and public admonishment upon a perceived transgression with no ability for redemption. *Calling people in* is more open to possibility because it necessitates that constructive address of discriminatory behaviors and oppressive structures from within relationships to drive compassionate accountability. In this spirit, *we call researchers in*—to understand us as one demographic living many complex realities while coming out of a pandemic that is radically changing our lives, our brains, our hearts.

1. **Adults are exhausted. We are too.** Specific to schooling in COVID-19, everyone, including teachers, parents, school leaders, and school counselors were affected. This means that many students have had a hard time getting support from exhausted adults who themselves have been/are overwhelmed and tired. Among other things, masks and social distancing are barriers to building relationships with each other and teachers. Please remember that we are people too, subject to all the exhaustion that you feel.
2. **Many of us feel lost.** So much of who we are is invisible in school. Often students feel like we're just a number or robot spitting out work with little motivation or sense of purpose due to how schools work. Some of us feel stuck in the past because of COVID since we could not grow socially or intellectually over this time and since many fell behind in school. Some of us feel lost about high school, about college, about tech school—about our next steps and future direction.
3. **We see outside of identity boxes.** Our identities are complex, so ask us about our ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, immigration histories, gender identities, do not just ask us about our race or force the concept of only 2 genders on us—these categories do not fit the complexity that is us. We have different upbringings, diverse circumstances, a range of financial means and issues, health and mental health issues that require outside-of-the-box thinking about who we are as individuals and as a group.
4. **We're more than meets the eye.** Please work to avoid making assumptions based on what we look like (e.g., race, clothes, hair, social class, social group) or based on our families or neighborhoods. As youth, many of us see that adults look down on us. We feel ageism in that way. We are young *and* we have important life experience to share—those two things can go together. Social media can be performative, but who we are up close is different, more authentic, layered, and intersectional, meaning that we have multiple parts of our identities that intersect with social structures to create our experiences in school and society.

5. **We don't feel prepared for what's expected of us.** Many of us feel like we know less about our career and college possibilities than we should since life shut down for two years in the pandemic and since a lot is still not back to normal. For example, standardized testing has become more stressful and even traumatic for many of us, we feel like adults do not understand that our brains have changed in the pandemic and days upon days of testing feels intolerable right now. We need more guidance in ways that help us to feel prepared and supported for what is expected of us.
6. **We've got young eyes.** With eyes wide open, we are watching adults and systems carefully. The way research currently happens reinforces a false logic that just because someone is young they don't have a valuable opinion. We need researchers to value our experiences, opinions, and perspectives. Walk with us, do not tell us how to walk—see how we walk and inquire into that, ask us now just what, but how we see with our young eyes.
7. **We do complexity well.** Adults can forget what it was like to be a teen, and they were not teens in the information age or in a global pandemic. It would be better, certainly more honest and helpful, if researchers and educators acknowledged what they do not understand about youth and our lives. Complexities emerge from the fact that we view so many things in fundamentally different ways—like sexuality and culture—which must be questioned and understood anew given the times we are in.
8. **Pandemic-enhanced mental health issues.** We've seen serious mental health issues play out in ourselves and our peers (as well as in the adults around us), especially during COVID lockdown. These issues include anxiety, depression, ADHD, OCD, cutting, psychiatric hospitalizations, suicide attempts, significant social withdrawal, drug use. Mental health issues surround us and they seem to have blossomed in both youth and adults in ways that we need support to understand and navigate. Teachers and parents put too much pressure on us when we're going through a lot internally. We need a new way to talk about this so researchers and educators can learn to understand us better.
9. **We've got insider insights.** Our vantage points as youth generate important insights about the contexts in which we learn and live. No one knows young people like young people do—we know the scenes, players, the power dynamics. No amount of observation or number of interviews will invite you inside of our lives and into our thinking—we're the only conduit to that and so we ask you to ask us about what we know from the inside.
10. **Think of us as research advisors.** We hope that you will involve us in your research teams and projects, create youth research advisory boards, engage us in data collection

and analysis, in developing your research questions and data collection instruments. We'll serve as trusted advisors, if you let us.

This post is a call-in, from youth leaders, an accountability check for researchers to centralize youth perspectives, values, and knowledges—and youth themselves as advisors—in research. We end with Dr. Margaret Mead's words, "The young, free to act on their initiative, can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown. The children, the young, must ask the questions that we would never think to ask." Youth have many questions worth asking, researchers just need to listen!