ALL OF WHO I AM:

Perspectives from Young People About Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning

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AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE℠

HOW LEARNING HAPPENS

About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads campaigns and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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About How Learning Happens

Science confirms what educators, parents, and caregivers have long known: learning is social, emotional, and cognitive. The most powerful learning happens when we pay attention to all of these aspects—not separately, but woven together, just like how our brains work. Through How Learning Happens, America's Promise Alliance is advancing this understanding about how learning happens and helping to fuel the growing movement to educate children as whole people—combining their social and emotional well-being with academic growth and success. Our effort builds on the work of many organizations and coalitions to advance a whole child approach to learning and development. We do so by developing a shared and inclusive message about how learning happens, sharing this message with a broader audience of stakeholders, and infusing the lessons from how learning happens into our signature campaign work, and exploring the perspectives of young people about how learning happens.

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, a growing consensus has emerged across a range of disciplines—including brain science, developmental psychology, and education research—about **how learning happens**. The latest science now aligns with what educators, youth-supporting adults, parents, and caregivers have known for a long time: successful learning requires an integrated approach to social, emotional, and cognitive[A] development.

Historically, both research and educational practice have treated social, emotional, and cognitive development as discrete areas. Yet over the past few decades, advances across disciplines in developmental science have contributed to a more integrated understanding of development.[1] This new understanding makes clear that social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions not only happen in conjunction with one another but are highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing.[2]

A landmark 2019 report, *From a Nation at Risk to A Nation at Hope*,[3] from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (the Commission) played a vital role in advancing this consensus. The Commission engaged 200 scientists, educators, policymakers, and groups of young people and parents in its deliberations. Its work to synthesize existing and emerging research, build scientific agreement, and consider evidence-based implications for practice has accelerated an essential national conversation about how to help many more young people—particularly those who have been ill-served by our current systems—succeed in school, work, and life.

A growing number of parents, researchers, educators, and other youth-supporting adults are joining the movement toward a more integrated learning paradigm. Less is known, however, about how young people perceive and experience these approaches. The Center for Promise, the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance, set out to listen deeply to a diverse group of young people across the country.

> **"...these learning environments are nurturing young people's sense of themselves as valued, multi-dimensional community members."**

What do young people think about the approach *A Nation at Hope* recommends? How do young people describe learning within schools and after-school programs already practicing an integrated approach to youth development? This report, *All of Who I Am*, describes young people's responses and considers how their insights contribute to knowledge about integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Using a rigorous qualitative methodology, the Center for Promise conducted semi-structured group interviews with more than 100 young people across six locations. The young people who participated in the study are primarily youth of color; many of them speak a second language at home; and all are in schools or after-school programs that are intentionally integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The report's title, drawn from a young person's own words, encapsulates the biggest insight this research offers: that these learning environments are nurturing young people's sense of themselves as valued, multi-dimensional community members. They are math students, peer mentors, planners, goal-setters, public policy researchers, stewards of their family's dreams for their future, and more.

The study's findings affirm that a diverse group of young people who are in environments that intentionally integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development are benefiting in many of the ways that youth-supporting adults and other experts envision. Moreover, the research adds rich new context to the field, offering powerful implications for future

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A   America's Promise Alliance has decided to use "cognitive" rather than the narrower term "academic" as a counterpart to the social and emotional dimensions of learning. Along with our partners, we want to emphasize that young people's learning and development happens beyond academic settings. The term "academic" sometimes appears in this report because the research questions were framed in relationship to recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

research, policy, practice, and communications. The findings underscore the importance of:

- listening to young people and understanding the language they use to describe their experience of adults' intentions and actions;
- creating cultures that encourage positive relationships and support young people's sense of belonging; and
- building adults' capacity to share power with young people in ways that go beyond "listening" to enable young people's agency, nurture their identity development, and co-create meaningful learning experiences that serve their present and future selves.

The recommendations that conclude *All of Who I Am* offer ways to utilize young people's insights to improve existing practice and to expand these promising approaches to benefit more young people in more places across the country.
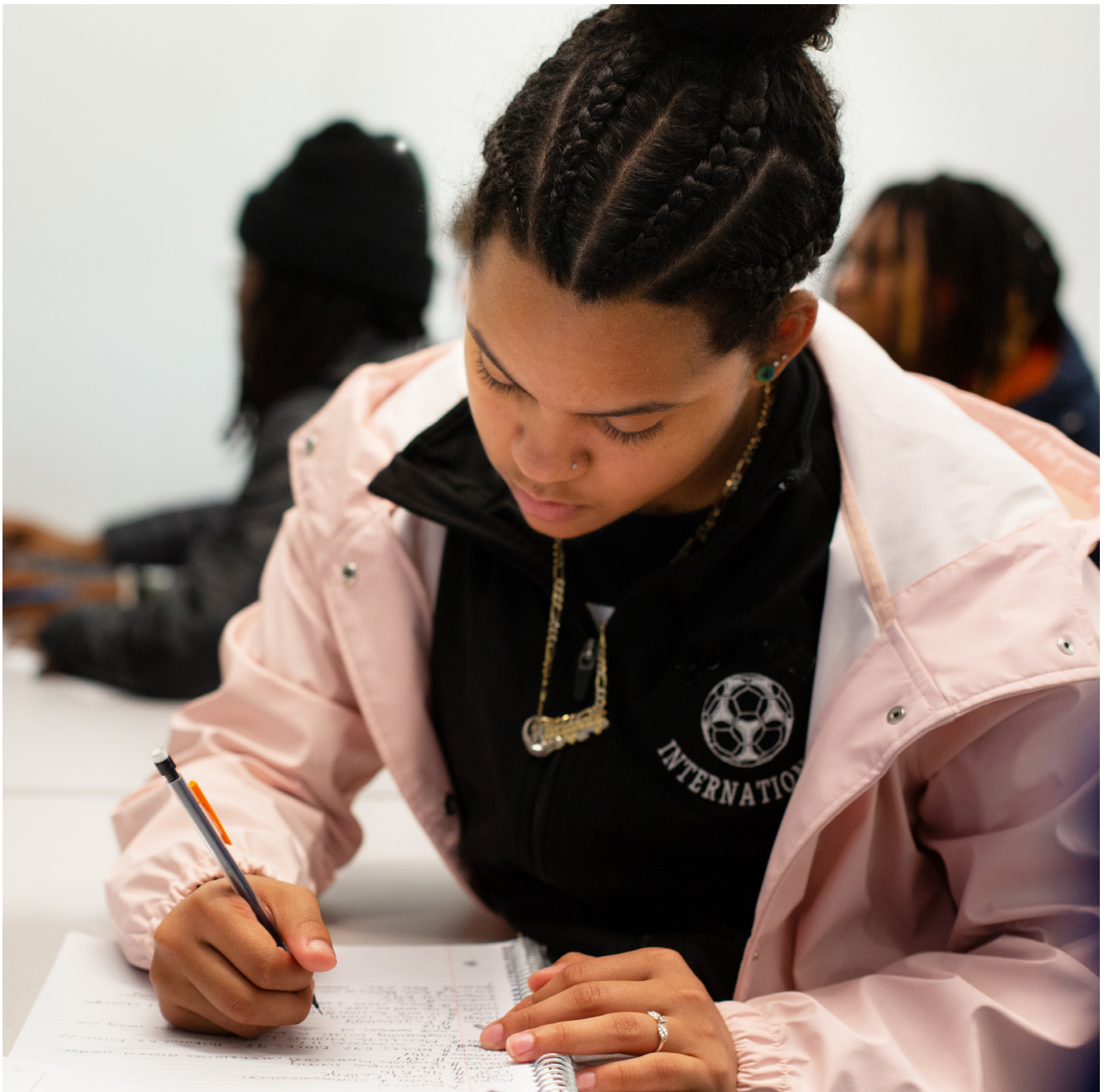
ABOUT THIS REPORT

Theoretical Perspective

All of the Center for Promise's research is grounded in a positive youth development framework. From this perspective, young people develop through mutually influential, bi-directional relationships with the context around them.[4] How a young person engages with their environment is further influenced by the assets, or strengths, they possess. Support from the surrounding family and community ecosystem can amplify these strengths.[5]

Building on this positive youth development perspective, the Center for Promise's previous research has advanced the concept of a Supportive Youth System[6] to better describe how the elements of a young person's ecosystem—the people, institutions, experiences, cultural norms, societal attitudes, and public policies that together comprise their lives—independently and interdependently shape their development.[7] Importantly, a young person is an active agent within this system, interpreting experiences, adapting to the ever-changing experiences around them, and constantly growing within these dynamic relationships.[8] When young people are embedded in a supportive youth system—environments filled with people, culture, institutions, and public policies that are aligned with their strengths and needs[9]—they experience positive developmental outcomes.
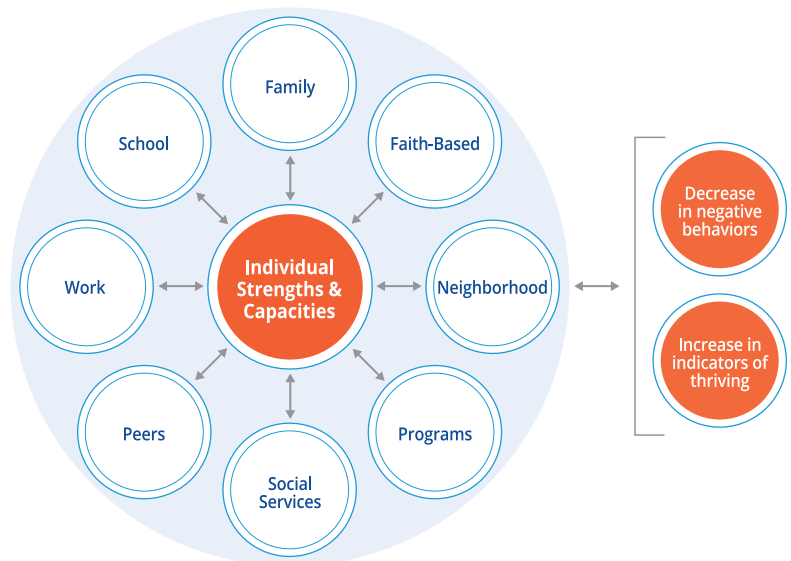
The current research on the science of learning and development is similarly rooted in a supportive youth systems frame of how young people learn and develop.[10] Given the complex interconnections among young people's developmental experiences and processes, Darling-Hammond and colleagues state that for a young person to thrive, "all aspects of the educational environment [need to] support all of the dimensions of children's development."[11]

Social, emotional, and cognitive skills work together with other individual assets to advance all aspects of development. For example, Gestsdottir and Lerner argue that "developing intentional self-regulation is important for the development of all areas in the lives of children and youth, both for their present functioning and for their future."[12] These skills are recognized as assets for adults, as well as for children and youth, and are sought after by employers, making them essential to post-secondary success.[13]

FIGURE 1: **SUPPORTIVE YOUTH SYSTEMS**

These theoretical perspectives shaped the design and analysis for *All of Who I Am* and influenced how the Center for Promise interpreted the young people's descriptions of their learning experiences. Examining the interplay between young people and their contexts revealed rich descriptions of learning environments that illustrate ideas embedded in these youth development frameworks.

The six themes discussed in the findings emerged directly from the data (that is, young people's responses in the group interviews). They are also firmly grounded in and reflective of the theoretical principles associated with positive youth development, the recommendations from *A Nation at Hope*, and the current research in the field of social, emotional, and cognitive development.
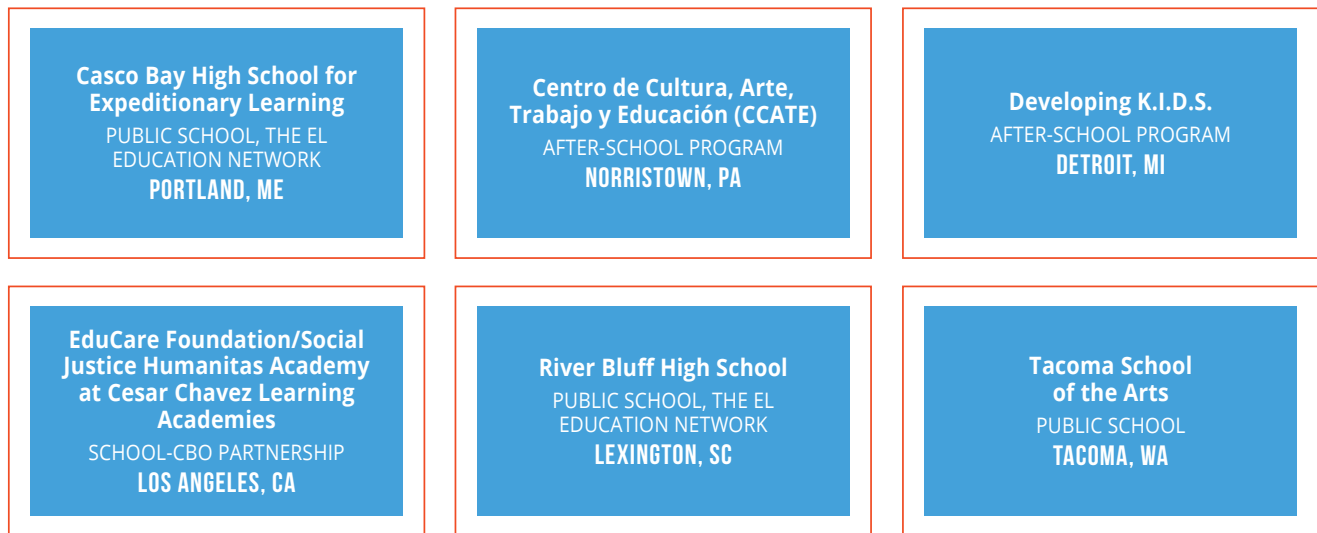
Study Design

All of Who I Am is based on a rigorous qualitative study by the Center for Promise that builds on the work and the recommendations of the Commission.[14] The Center for Promise designed this study to explore the perspectives of young people as an essential constituency in the unfolding discussion about integrated social, emotional, and cognitive approaches.

The research team set out to answer the following questions:

- How do young people understand and describe connections among the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of their learning experiences?

- Under what conditions do young people describe the integration of social, emotional, and academic dimensions in their learning settings?

- How aligned are young people's experiences in these settings with the recommendations in the *A Nation at Hope* reports?

The new study examines how young people themselves describe and experience their own social, emotional, and cognitive development in a specific group of six secondary school and after-school settings. Exemplary sites[15] were selected through a Request for Information (RFI) process to ensure that each site deliberately engages in practices that promote the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the young people they serve. The site selection process included a survey to gauge each site's inclusion of key social, emotional, and cognitive components, as well as a review of written descriptions of the site's approach. During the selection process, the Center for Promise also prioritized diversity of geography, program approach, and youth demographics. (For more information about the protocol for data collection and analysis, see **Appendix A: Methodology**.)

Through this process the research team selected six sites:

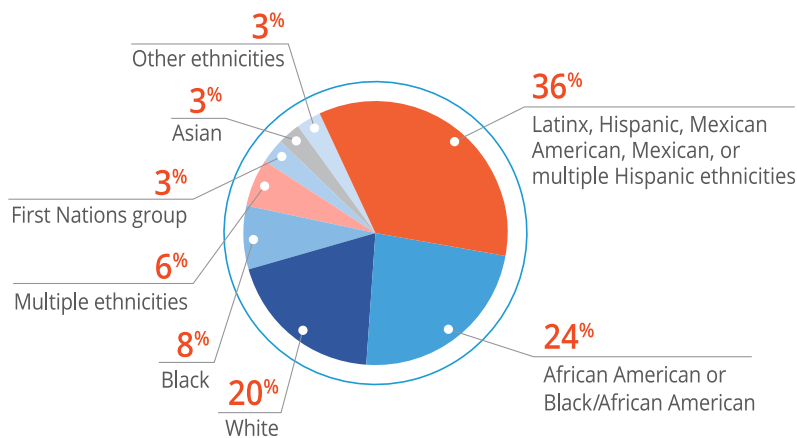|		
Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning PUBLIC SCHOOL, THE EL EDUCATION NETWORK **PORTLAND, ME**	**Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación (CCATE)** AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM **NORRISTOWN, PA**	**Developing K.I.D.S.** AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM **DETROIT, MI**
EduCare Foundation/Social Justice Humanitas Academy at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies SCHOOL-CBO PARTNERSHIP **LOS ANGELES, CA**	**River Bluff High School** PUBLIC SCHOOL, THE EL EDUCATION NETWORK **LEXINGTON, SC**	**Tacoma School of the Arts** PUBLIC SCHOOL **TACOMA, WA**

Among the six sites are three public high schools, two out-of-school time programs, and one after-school partner embedded in a public school. (See **Appendix B: Research Sites for more information**.)

Choosing sites that all integrated social, emotional, and cognitive development, but that represented different types of settings and approaches, meant that the research team could assert that findings garnered from the data were not specific to a particular program's curriculum, location, or demographics. Because the selected sites are places that already prioritize integration of social, emotional, and cognitive development, young people at the sites might be more able to discuss their experiences related to the study's inquiry.
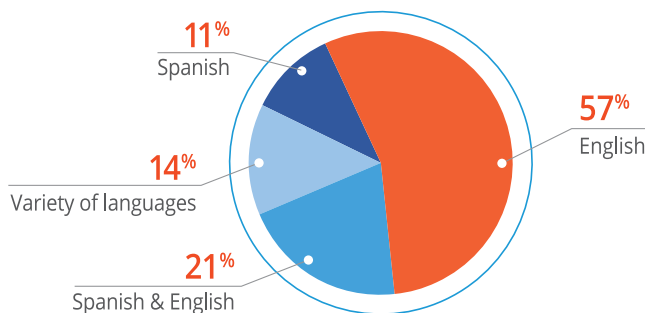
Framed by the three key questions, the research team conducted two semi-structured group interviews at each of the six sites, engaging a total of 103 young people (See **Appendix C** for youth demographics). Interviews were transcribed so that the research team could code the qualitative data for relevant themes, such as young people's descriptions of relationships or meaningful learning. Further analyses were conducted to see how codes co-occurred with one another, testing whether and how there might be relevant patterns among the codes, and thus within the experiences of the young people, indicating further thematic patterns. (See **Appendix D** for details on codes and their frequencies.)

Based on the dialogue in the twelve group interviews, review of the transcripts, coding, and qualitative analysis, the research team distilled a set of key findings related to the study questions. The following section illustrates, with young people's own words, the characteristics of their learning experiences and the conditions that support them.

FIGURE 2: **RACE/ETHNICITY**

- 3% Other ethnicities
- 3% Asian
- 3% First Nations group
- 6% Multiple ethnicities
- 8% Black
- 20% White
- 36% Latinx, Hispanic, Mexican American, Mexican, or multiple Hispanic ethnicities
- 24% African American or Black/African American

FIGURE 3: **LANGUAGES SPOKEN**

- 11% Spanish
- 14% Variety of languages
- 21% Spanish & English
- 57% English

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Social and emotional skills, including the ability to regulate one's emotions, resolve conflict, persevere through difficult tasks, take responsibility for one's own actions, and ask for help, among many others, are vitally important for success in school, work, and life.[16] To explain the different terms for and approaches to various domains of social, emotional, and cognitive development, Stephanie Jones and her colleagues at Harvard's Graduate School of Education built a taxonomy[17] to examine commonalities and differences among them.[18]

Examples of related terms include:

- Social and emotional learning (SEL)
- Student-centered learning
- Whole child instruction
- Character education
- 21st century skills
- Non-cognitive skills
- Non-academic skills
- Soft skills
- Life skills

All of these propose a more holistic approach to learning and positive youth development, though each emphasizes different social, emotional, and cognitive competencies.[19]

FINDINGS AND LESSONS FROM YOUTH VOICES

The young people whose voices infuse *All of Who I Am* described a **holistic, youth-centered educational experience**—what one young person called a *"learning ecosystem."* [B]

Importantly, their perspectives mirror the field's advances toward a more integrated understanding of social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Six interconnected concepts emerged from listening to 100+ young people across the research sites:

- Relationships
- Belonging
- Meaningful learning
- Intentionality
- Agency
- Identity development

The research team interprets all six as important aspects of young people's experiences, both individually and working in concert with one another. Taken together, these six themes characterize both how young people describe connections among multiple dimensions of learning *and* the conditions under which that learning occurs. In other words, from young people's perspectives, responses to the first two research questions listed previously are not distinct.

FIGURE 4: SIX INTERCONNECTED THEMES IN A YOUTH-CENTERED EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Together, these themes comprise a holistic, youth-centered educational experience— what one young person called a "learning ecosystem."
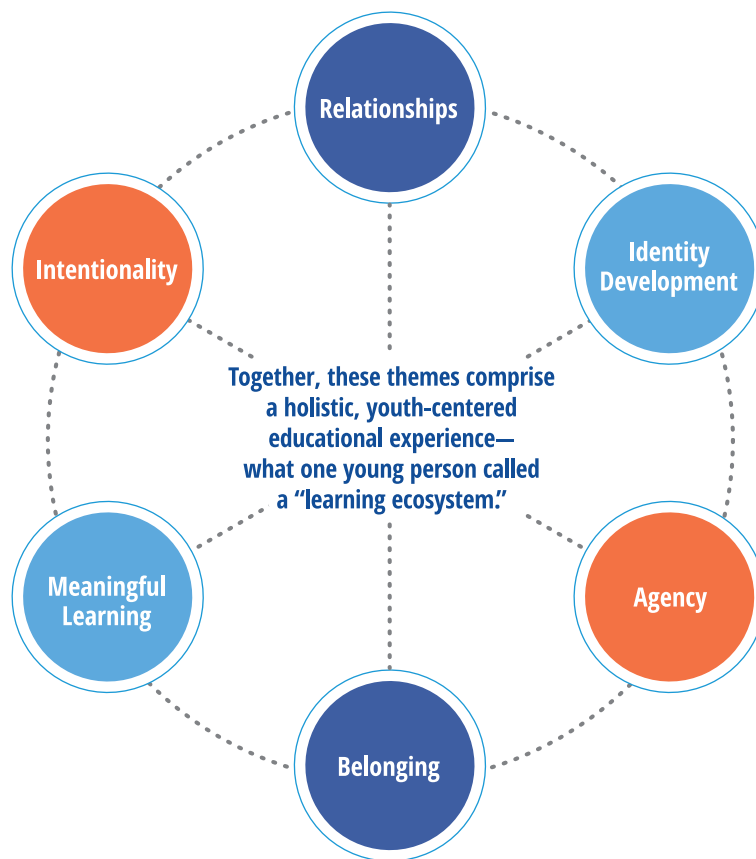
B Throughout the report, language that comes directly from the interviews with young people is highlighted by using quotation marks and italics. All youth names are aliases to protect the young people's privacy. For the same reason, the report avoids using terms within the quotations like "CREW" or "council" that are specific to a particular site.

"LEARNING ECOSYSTEM" FOR SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Six interconnected themes emerged from listening to more than 100 young people across the research sites. The research team interprets all six as important aspects of young people's learning experiences, both individually and working in concert with one another.

- **Relationships**. Overall, the term refers to a young person's relationships within their learning setting. These relationships are multidimensional, in that they offer mulitple types of support—e.g., informational, instrumental, and emotional.[20] The rich relationships that young people spoke about include those with teachers, other caring adults, adult and peer mentors, and their peers.

- **Belonging**. Belonging is the psychological or affective experience associated with the perceived validity of one's inclusion and positioning within a given social context or network. Sanchez, Colon and Esparza[21] indicate that this affective experience contributes to the young person feeling enveloped in support and connected to peers and adults in a young person's context; this in turn may facilitate community-building and mutual respect.

- **Meaningful Learning**. Meaningful learning occurs when a young person's educational activities and learning experiences are relevant to them, align with their life experiences and interests, and/or have value to them by connecting with their future orientations or life goals.[22]

- **Intentionality**. Intentionality refers to a young person's perception that there is a purpose and a reason for school or program activities and experiences. *A Nation at Hope*[23] includes a recommendation for learning settings to have a strong mission that "prioritizes the whole child" and offers a clear and consistent vision that cuts across all aspects of the setting. This vision infuses all aspects of the learning setting; be it the language that community members use when talking to each other, how different spaces and areas are set up, or how schedules are organized in each setting.

- **Agency**. Agency refers to a young person's sense of, and expression of power over, their own experience and their own lives. Agency conveys that the individual's behavior originates in the person rather than compelled by someone else, and also reflects a person's interest or investment in the behavior in the context of a goal (e.g., attending class in order to graduate). In this way, a young person's agency is both tied to their internal locus of control[24] and rooted in the individual's relationship with their ecosystem (e.g., other people, the outside world).[25] Agency acknowledges the influence of external factors and recognizes that the young person has the power to respond to these external forces by making choices that influence their impact.[26]

- **Identity Development**. Identity is the compass that guides an individual's path[27]—an internal sense of self that resonates with who you have been and who you can be. In this way, an individual's identity is an internal meaning-making process, negotiated in relationship with a range of experiences and with that person's conceptions about the future.

Throughout the group interviews, young people described processes related to social and emotional learning while rarely invoking the vocabulary and terms used by educators, youth-supporting adults, or other experts in the field. At the same time, the terms they used and stories they told indicate their deep understanding of the holistic social, emotional, and cognitive approach that is essential in their learning settings.

Through analyzing young people's own words, the research team gained insight into how holistic approaches to learning and development are creating a complete educational experience in the selected sites. Young people describe experiences with adults who are *"here to have you learn,"* settings that are *"providing us with space to grow and excel,"* and a vision of how learning happens that is inclusive of *"all the things of who I am."*

Young people's holistic view of their learning environments encourages an emphasis on the interdependence between and among the six themes. The sentences below display the speaker's awareness of intention, a sense of belonging within a structured set of relationships, and identity development over time.

> *Your [group] is designated as soon as you become a freshman at [this high school]. It's a group of like 10 to 15 people and you stay with those same people throughout all of high school. So in challenges and in good times, you get to know each other … and it's meant to give you a group of people that you can rely on and feel comfortable talking to …*
>
> *I felt close to my [group] for a long time, but this year I've realized just how important that has become, especially because senior year asks so much of you in terms of looking at where you want to be in your future. So it's like having a group of people that you can relate to and talk about [those things with], and it's a close-knit group. It's great … I call them my family in school."*

The way that these themes emerged from interviews also underscores an interconnectedness among the conditions young people described.

The following sections explore each of the six themes, with attention to the relationships the research team observed between and among them based on qualitative analysis. Several of the themes discussed in the following sections are paired together because of the connections suggested by the qualitative analysis as well as the ways they relate to existing literature.

Young people describe… a vision of how learning happens that is inclusive of 'all the things of who I am.'"

One way to deduce themes from qualitative data is to note the frequency and patterning of codes (how often codes occur, and how codes co-occur with one another). For example, the research team observed that in passages where young people were discussing the relationships embedded in their learning setting, they also frequently described experiences of belonging—a co-occurrence that may imply an important association between these concepts from the young person's perspective.

The first section below describes the emphasis that young people place on the relationships they have with peers and adults in each school or program, and how these relationships appear to foster belonging. The second section describes meaningful learning opportunities. These experiences emerge from the intentionality that is present throughout the learning settings. Young people's descriptions suggest that intentionality and agency also relate to one another. The final section discusses identity development, a theme that the research questions did not explicitly explore but that emerged as a strong aspect of the young people's experiences. These six themes represent crucial processes that help young people internalize and connect the dots among their various learning experiences.

Its ok to cry, its also okay to put a hex on someone!

You can do it

DON'T GIVE UP!

keep going ♥

Smile ♥

Dreams

You are enough Just as you are :)

Treat people with kindness

...n't let people ...ee you down.

Stay Amazing!

DO YOU ♥

I LOVE ME!

Be You

...ROW IS A ...DAY :)

LOVE YOURSELF

Good things take time.

Own the Day

Live and learn

...f You look Gorgeous today

You are beautiful

You're An Amazing Person ♥

Stay strong

YOU'...

Kind

ur great

You are strong

Don't need makeup to cover up. Being the way that you are is enough

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF

Be yourself

You are beautiful. ♥

...OVE Yourface

Get better!

...ter!

Keep you... up even if...

Today's... afraid,...

OTHERS

...re Beautiful

You're AMAZING

STAY ST... YOUR ST... OVER...

Everything wi... get better... you got th...

Be Happy

Lea... Self...

...ven when you're ...you're at your ...est stay strong

free the boys

Your Amazing

LOVE yourself

You are wo...

...MINED

Be Yourself

YOU ARE Loved.

Be yourself

Smile, it looks good on you! (:

...se your dreams like it was $ MONEY $

St P...

You're Enough

Be Great!

Always reme... to smile

You Got this

YOU GOT THIS ♥

Today's going to be a good day's here why?

You're Amazing ♥

Neve... you...

...You're Beautiful ♥

You are the special flower in the garden

Be yourself because everybody else is already taken.

Estas Hermosa

Love You...

you're a SNACK!

love yourself ♥

you're stronger than you think!

Relationships and Belonging

Previous research from the Center for Promise emphasizes the importance of relationships to young people's positive development.[28] Similarly, within learning environments, Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey and Osher[29] stress the importance of designing school and classroom structures to foster lasting positive relationships among students and adults.

Belonging is an affective experience of feeling enveloped in support and connected to peers and adults in a given context.[30] Farrington[31] posits that a young person's sense of belonging is one of four "academic mindsets," and that belonging contributes to increases in academic behaviors, perseverance and achievement. By building close lasting relationships, through which a strong sense of belonging is nurtured, teachers are able to know and understand their students' strengths and needs and therefore foster the conditions necessary for them to learn.[32]

The importance of developing and strengthening relationships with caring adults and peers, in ways that contributed to a sense of belonging, emerged as strong interrelated themes in the experiences of the young people interviewed for this report. The structures facilitating relationships and belonging took on a variety of names. Depending on the learning settings, these are known as Mentor Project Group, CREW, Council, High School Fridays, Discussion, Family Meeting, or Family Dinner. Many of these spaces were akin to an advisory period; however, they went deeper, to create a *"group of people that you can rely on and feel comfortable talking to,"* a group that is like *"family"* for each young person within the learning setting.

Young people described these advisory structures as places where they could form powerful peer relationships; feel deeply known, understood, and supported by both peers and adults; and explore aspects of their identity during a critical period of adolescent development.[33] There were common characteristics across sites, though each setting structured these practices differently. At four of the six selected sites, these advisory class structures were composed of young people from various age groups and grade levels so that peer-to-peer and near-peer mentoring relationships could form. One young person reflected on the ways that near-peer mentoring created a unique support structure beyond the school:

> ❝It gives you a sense of belonging and of being part of something."

> ❝ *It's not always about school. It gets really intimate, you know? They get really vulnerable. And they share stuff that you wouldn't necessarily share with your parents. They seek out other support systems that they want … Our mentor program does a really good job, and I think that's what our school's known for. It gives that relationship, and I've always admired that…"*

Another participant reflects on his own responsibility and agency in the mentor/mentee relationship:

> ❝ *For my experience, right now I have this mentee … He texted me last night at like 11 asking me for help or advice. And I was there and I was kind of useful to him and he had trust in me that I was there you know? Because this person has a problem with talking to others, but with me he got trust and that's really good. Because with mentors, you always have that one person that's not really an adult, but they've been through experience that maybe we have been through, and they just need that help."*

Creating a culture like this gives young people opportunities to practice skills that deepen their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. These structures are not lessons or programs focused on building specific competencies in isolation; instead they fit within a holistic approach, where multiple facets of youth development are addressed. One student described the experience of an advisory period in this way:

> ❝ *It gives you a sense of belonging and of being part of something, I think [advisory group] really ties into all of the social, the emotional, and academics … It forces you to accept people's differences, accept that, 'Okay, then, I'm going to have to also work on my character. I'm going to have to let go of some stuff so that I can be part of this group so that we can all be a collective and succeed together.'"*

Young people described the various forms of advisory groups in ways that suggest that the relationships and culture formed within and through these structures positively influence the nature of peer relationships in the broader learning environment. Additionally, this particular quote highlights individual agency in service of the group's collective success.

Structured advisory groups encouraged young people to connect across differences. Young people observed that the way they were assigned to groups *"almost prevent cliques from being started … It prevents isolating students to a certain group of people,"* and *"It helps you create friends of the people that you wouldn't normally be friends with."* Again, these structures are not lessons or programs focused on building specific competencies in isolation; rather, they are intentionally set opportunities to practice social, emotional, and cognitive capacities in context.

Having a wealth of mutually supportive relationships with both peers and adults creates a strong school culture and climate that fosters a sense of belonging. As one young person remarked,

> ❝ *I think it's more how welcoming they are and how open they are. They tell their own stories to us. So they [the adults] trust us too. And that makes us feel connected to them. Some of their problems are exactly like ours, their life experiences. And we just feel connected to them, like, "You know what, I'm going to go talk to this teacher." You build a relationship throughout the years; and you gain trust with someone, and it's just there. And they let you know, 'I am here for anything.'"*

Putting relational structures at the heart of school serves a range of functions. As described by the young person below, these structures contribute to the development of important social and emotional skills, such as demonstrating respect towards others and understanding the emotions and perspective of others. These structures also contribute to the creation of a safe place and a sense of belonging rooted in interconnectedness and communal respect. At the same time, they serve as a vehicle for nurturing empathy, understanding diversity, and advancing equity.

> ❝ *I had a hard time socially with others at the school. But after learning the do's and don'ts, I feel like it's much easier, especially with others because I kind of get what they are coming from. I feel like at the school we use a lot of pronouns and the way we associate others, we're not assuming of others or we're not over stepping people's boundaries because everyone here has different boundaries and everyone here has different ways of communicating. So we are accepting of that and kind of conscious of that and aware of that."*

Overall, in the six selected sites, young people described a deep sense of belonging and being cared for by both adults and peers as one of the conditions their learning settings fostered. They described learning how to respect and appreciate others while holding different perspectives, and feeling as if their *"life outside of school is important here,"* emphasizing again the point that this report's title makes.

A sense of belonging goes beyond feeling safe or comfortable in a space. The six selected sites are creating spaces where young people can be heard and valued for all their unique experiences. Through relationships, these young people work together with adults, co-creating an environment that fosters belonging, invites vulnerability, and enables both adolescents and adults to grow. Feeling safe, heard, and valued, in an environment rich with mutually respectful relationships, appears to foster young people's capacity to engage in meaningful learning experiences.

Meaningful Learning

Strong relationships and a sense of belonging create the conditions for young people to pursue learning experiences that draw upon their strengths and address their needs in applicable ways.[34] The research team interpreted the young people's educational experiences as meaningful when they described their learning activities as aligned with their life experiences, allowing them to explore their emerging interests and passions, as well as when they saw the experiences as connected to the world at large and to their own futures.

Meaningful learning often includes practices such as project-based learning that offers opportunities for sustained inquiry, internships that connect youth to the real world, group presentation or portfolio-based assessments of learning progress that build community and communication skills, and student support/study groups that allow young people to share in the decision-making processes associated with their school or program.[35]

These educational approaches and structures are designed to support young people so that they can engage critical thinking skills, work collaboratively and develop the skills to do so, become an effective communicator, and learn how to learn.[36] These approaches work because they create a connection between the young person's self and their immediate experiences in the learning setting, and relate to the development of their future self, sense of purpose, and direction.[37]

For instance, during junior year at one of the school sites, young people spend several months exploring issues surrounding public policy. While all young people choose a topic related to the broader theme, each has the flexibility to focus on an issue that matters to them. Young people described the two related goals for the project: first, finding an issue that was about *"making change in the real world"* and second, *"pick[ing] an issue that's really important to you."* One student described why they chose to focus on the costs of higher education in their public policy project.

> ❝ *Like for my public policy, I did mine on the costs of higher education, and how it's been increasing, and how it's ridiculous. And that was at a time where I was thinking a lot about my older sister's college tuition, and just the financial situation around that.*
>
> *This project gave me an opportunity to, within school, study something that I had been thinking a lot about, and sometimes that doesn't always line up. But that, then, made me more motivated to do research and to create a presentation about this kind of thing. It's because it was something that I was passionate about in the moment, and I think that it's just built for people to become more enthusiastic about the material."*

As this young person explained, *"having the opportunity to learn about something that you're passionate about in school, can make people more willing to learn, and like you want to put more effort in."*

This learning setting provides a structure that allows the young person to lead. As one participant said, *"I feel like a lot of schools teach you what they think you should know and this school teaches you what you think you should know."*

❝**That ability to be able to go to someone and defend something you believe in, having that ability in life is huge."**

Meaningful learning opportunities also included opportunities for young people to present their work to others, be it their peers, other adults in the learning setting, their parents during a portfolio review, or members of the public for whom the work was intended. Multiple young people described the value of being able to develop a position on an issue of importance and defend their positions publicly.

> ❝ *That ability to be able to go to someone and defend something you believe in, having that ability in life is huge. It helps you get jobs and when you have that job really move up ... a lot of jobs you try to go and you say why you think it's the best and why ... And people try to say no because of this and if you can defend it, that's huge..."*

Some young people's responses connected doing this type of work with its meaning for their future educational experiences. One student explained this by comparing their school to a more traditional classroom experience:

> *I feel like other schools they give you the background to prepare you for college itself. But this school is already like college … You're already prepared to go out into the real world … Like actually go into the real world to do things rather than just sitting in a classroom learning how to do algebra or whatever. We're actually using our skills in the real world."*

This young person is echoing the idea of what one researcher calls "playing the game at a junior level,"[38] understanding and applying their classroom skills to their function in the world as part of a larger whole. Making those connections appeared to help participants feel more invested in their learning; they understood how learning certain skills would help them as well as their wider community. For example, a young person explained how a particular math skill enabled them to create a scale drawing of a proposed neighborhood garden for use in a public presentation.

…A lot of schools teach you what they think you should know and this school teaches you what you think you should know."

> *And the reason I bring up 'build community' is because in geometry we were learning about scaling. And so what we had to do was make a scale model of a neighborhood garden … we took a blank area of [our city]. Right now it's just a big old lot and we measured it and then [scaled down] and then actually proposed to the city council 'here's what we should do with this space.'"*

An experience like this one is not explicitly teaching social and emotional skills; rather, skill development is embedded within the academic content. Connecting geometry class to a neighborhood planning proposal requires young people to practice collaborative decision-making, communicate with diverse audiences, engage in perspective-taking and empathy, and persevere through difficult obstacles. Young people are therefore developing social, emotional, and cognitive capacities that existing literature suggests are essential to their academic and post-secondary success.

The examples young people offer in these interviews provide insight into the types of learning experiences and conditions that embed and integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development. Young people explore and hone their interests and values, see themselves and their work as powerful, and meaningfully connect their high school and after-school program experiences with their future goals and ambitions.

Intentionality and Agency

The 100+ young people who participated in this study are engaged in schools and programs where the structures and components of the settings have been purposefully constructed to promote social, emotional, and cognitive development. One reason for intentionally constructing spaces that specifically address these aspects of development, and to communicate these intentions with young people, is to engage the young people as "agents" or co-constructors in the space and in their learning experiences.

Existing literature offers a conceptualization of this interconnection between agency and intentionality. Little and colleagues,[39] for example, describe agency as context-dependent. How agency is realized depends upon the opportunities, resources, and challenges that are offered in a person's ecosystem.[40] From this perspective, an "agentic" person is one who feels empowered to set goals and work to achieve them, pulling on the resources and opportunities available to them.[41] The co-occurrence between codes pointing to the intentionality in aspects of the learning setting and agency may therefore reflect a critical link between these concepts from a young person's perspective.

Young people's descriptions of various features of their environments highlight that adults are explicitly and implicitly communicating the purpose of those features. Across sites, young people described what they understood about the intentions behind various structures and practices in their learning settings. In some of these experiences, they described an explicit connection between a certain programmatic structure and a perceived outcome. For example, young people at one of the programs described the importance of their required daily planners to developing and practicing skills like time management.

> ❝ *In the beginning of the year, everybody gave us a planner. And they require us to have it every single day ... They make you write down what your homework is. And the thing that really helps too, is in the back ... they already have our schedule there. This is your homework, and this is what we're doing today. So we're ready, this is what we're expecting ... Those really help just to balance my time and stuff. And, because when you go to college, once you get there, they're not going to force you. So it's good to develop those habits now, of being organized and having a planner."*

This young person perceives the current intention and the future usefulness not only of the planners themselves, but the habits they enable. While adults play a role in creating this purposeful atmosphere, intentionally providing resources and opportunities, this quote shows that the young person understands the communicated intention, accepts the proposed strategy, and believes that practicing the related skills now is useful both for *"what we're doing today"* and for *"when you go to college."*

Young people also discussed how their teachers not only explained why they were doing specific activities, but also helped them make connections across different classes and with different facets of their life. Research points to the importance of integrating across curricula and developmental domains in order to foster authentic educational experiences for young people.[42] The conversation below between Jenny and Rebecca illustrates this intentional approach and the ways that young people recognize their educators' reasoning.

JENNY: ❝ *Our teachers tell us about it, it's not just 'Oh yeah we're doing this.' They tell us why we're doing this, what it means, things like that."*

REBECCA: ❝ *At the end of the year, we have an interdisciplinary essay where everything we learned from each class applies to one essay, whether it's math, history, English ... It's short, but it's everything we learned, it all connects to each other ... and so all the lessons connect to each other, and then you start to realize how they connect ... "*

JENNY: ❝ *So, what you'll be learning in your English class, will relate to what you're doing in your art class. For example, last year we were learning about the incarceration camps, and so in art we started looking at artwork during that time period. So ... it all ties together."*

REBECCA: ❝ *It's like everything has a purpose. Everything."*

The year-end essay Jenny and Rebecca are discussing intentionally incorporates, and asks young people to reflect upon, what they are doing across their math, history, English, and art classes. In this example, Jenny noted that their teachers *"tell us why they're doing this."* The two young women also show they are aware that adults are offering opportunities to deepen content knowledge, allow for personal reflection, and support making connections among multiple aspects of their educational experience and with their social ecology.

Opportunities like this one, which overlap with the meaningful learning theme, appear to allow the young people involved in these programs to realize *"everything has a purpose. Everything."* Therefore, they are able to engage at a deeper level with their learning setting, with the curriculum, and with themselves.

❝It's like everything has a purpose. Everything."

The prevailing literature about youth agency suggests that the degree of control or power young people believe they have over any given circumstance influences how they engage in goal-directed, or agentic, behavior.[43] Young people perceive the opportunities and resources available to them, and consider whether and how those resources might enable them to achieve a particular goal.

For example, Leo and Miguel discuss an interplay between their desire to learn (agency) and the importance that their school places on relationships with the teachers in their school (intentionality) that support their learning process.

LEO: ❝*If you don't have intent to learn, then you're not going to learn anything, and it's impossible to help you. But if you don't understand the subject and you want to learn it, then they'll get you there. When I came to [this school], I didn't consider myself great at math, but over time, I realized that just asking for help, and staying after and talking with the teacher will get you there."*

MIGUEL: ❝*Yeah, like it's true, a willingness to learn, that's not part of ... that's not inherent in a kind of person. Your willingness to learn can be affected by things, like your social life or your emotional health."*

Leo and Miguel see the teachers as resources available to support them in their learning journey, *"just asking for help, and staying after and talking with the teacher will get you there."* They also indicate that their *"willingness to learn can be affected by things, like your social life or your emotional health,"* and that this setting has a variety of intentionally set resources, structures, and program components that they perceive as supporting their *"intent to learn."* Leo and Miguel's short dialogue recognizes the ways that the intentional conditions in the school support their agency—and that they have a role to play in their own learning.

Young people also described how physical spaces and schedules allow them to collaborate with each other and with adults, see their teachers outside of the classroom, take time to reflect and learn from mistakes, and encourage them to regulate their own behavior. At one of the six sites, this took the shape of Independent Learning Time (ILT) blocks and special physical spaces within the school. At this site, ILT is built into each young person's schedule and the school describes it as time for youth to work on various projects, ask for help, and gain independent learning strategies such as planning and time management. The open and flexible physical space appears to create opportunities for students to practice managing their own workload and collaborating with peers and adults. As Sadie says:

> ❝ *Our school has provided us with a place and a space perfect for interacting with each other and our teachers. It's a learning environment ... And if I have a problem, then I can literally just get up and go walk over to [my AP Calc teacher] and ask her a question. Or walk over to someone in the Commons who I know is in my class, or who I know is taking it and just ask them a question. I think it's producing a lot more like collaboration ... We're not just fortunate because we have free time, but we're fortunate because the school is providing us with space to grow and excel."*

In this example, ILT appears to set the conditions that encourage young people to engage a variety of different learning resources, activate an individual's agency to determine the learning conditions that work best for them, and work with others to ask for the support that they need. Setting these conditions enables young people to express their agency to *"get ahead or catch up"* and as Sadie states, *"I think it's producing a lot more collaboration,"* setting them up with *"space to grow and excel."*

Program components such as planners, interdisciplinary essays, or independent learning time are resources that not only encourage academic growth, but also enable young people to develop within social and emotional domains, such as self-regulation, planning, collaborating, and negotiating. In this way, both designing and communicating the purpose of program components encourages the development of social, emotional, and cognitive constructs such as a young person's sense of agency.

The research participants' narratives suggest that when adults explicitly communicate their intentions for a particular structure or strategy, young people not only display agency, but also recognize opportunities for meaningful learning, relationships, and identity development. This further reinforces the interconnectedness among the six themes that frame the findings.

I am a boy who cooks
and bakes sometimes.

My parents don't want
me to be reckless like
my brothers.

My family wants me to
"act like a girl."

Identity Development

As the research team examined the youth interviews, evidence of the young people's identities—both social (e.g., ethnicity) and personal (e.g., learner)—emerged strongly in the descriptions of their experiences in these learning settings. Codes for identity frequently co-occurred with young people speaking about social, emotional, and cognitive strategies—for example, being supported, their sense of agency, intentional aspects of the learning setting, sense of belonging, and relationships with peers and adults in the setting. In revisiting these instances, the research team noted that the young people were discussing how their experiences in these learning settings supported them to better understand themselves, their place in the community, and their goals for the future.

The way in which the young people described their experiences of identity in the learning settings is supported by prevailing research, which indicates that young people's sense of belonging, their relationships with both adults and peers, and the ways they derive meaning from their learning experiences create the conditions that support identity development.[44] That is, young people are able to explore their self-concept as a learner, family/community member, and individual in ways that extend beyond high school and into their future lives.

The schools and programs included in this study had different ways of supporting and enabling young people's identity development. At several of the sites, young people referenced different learning styles, often reflecting on their own.

> *There's a lot of thought put into our school; there's something that we do, which is being aware of each other's learning styles. So, whether you're interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic, visual, auditory … [teachers] incorporate different ways to get to everybody through their lessons. Maybe they'll do things specifically towards kinesthetic; which is we're doing something, making something. Or they'll have a presentation for the visual learners, and stuff like that. And things for interpersonal people, it's talking in groups and stuff like that. They'll also give you the space to work alone if you need to, because that works better for some people."*

Another way that young people described these schools and programs supporting their identity development was through structures that encourage them to grapple with their beliefs, values, and opinions. One of these structures, called "courageous conversations," occurred once a month at one of the schools. As one young person said, one purpose of this activity was to learn and practice *"how to have a conversation that is difficult …"* Maeve and John chimed in, further explaining why having these conversations is helpful now and useful practice for the future.

MAEVE: *They're subjects that are hard to talk about. Sometimes it's like equality in our country, race, sexuality: topics that are kind of tough to talk about, but are put out there and you talk about them, which is really nice."*

JOHN: *Courageous conversations, it's also trying to teach you how to respectfully disagree with people who don't have the same opinion. I think that's really important, knowing how to do that, because later on you will definitely meet people who disagree with you and knowing how to handle that is really important."*

Their stories suggest that "courageous conversations" integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development. Participants have the opportunity to build transferable social and emotional skills such as perspective-taking and self-regulation while learning new information.

> *Being a part of the majority belief, you have to know how to be respectful and not seem like you're just ganging up on this one person, which I think is a really important thing to do. And on the other hand, we still want to share what we believe, like you don't want to give in to someone else's ideas. So, I think that's an important skill and like in the context of the real world, I do think it's important to know how to be in the majority and be respectful of the minority."*

Structures such as "courageous conversations" give young people opportunities to build relationships *("you have to know how to be respectful")* at the same time that they are building their own identity *("we still want to share what we believe")*. Within these contexts, young people have the opportunity to reflect on how different aspects of their identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity/race, immigration status, socioeconomic status, familial background, interests, strengths, and weaknesses) might affect the way they view themselves, their learning, and their future.

One group of young people reflected on how specific aspects of their identities influenced their self-concept and goals for their future. These young people described how both their and their families' experiences build resilience and motivate them to give back to their families and communities.

> REBECCA: *It's a defining moment through your hardest times; being able to persevere through things and being like "Hey, yeah, this happened." I know it's a setback, but I'm going to make the best of this situation. In the way that you're going to grow as a person..."*

> JENNY: *I feel like there's so many negative things to say about our community ... there's a lot of poverty, there's a lot of immigrants. Just things that people usually frown upon. I feel like we're trying to build the community, where people succeed ... And, being able to be the first generation to go to college; I'm already giving back to my community. I think it's those things that matter..."*

> *I think the way we can give back is by setting a really good example so people can be like, "Damn the valley is doing really good. Have you seen this kid?" Or "Yeah, they're improving so much." Just the fact that our graduation rate is going up, is setting such a high rate. It's making us look better as a community ... We want to help out the rest of the world in the best way we can by working hard on ourselves, to improve this place."*

A critical aspect of identity development for young people is understanding how they, and the communities they belong to, are perceived and treated by society.[45] For young people of color and other marginalized populations, this often means negotiating conflicting experiences of discriminatory treatment and negative messaging with a competing sense of self-worth and personal and familial strength. An upcoming report from the Education Trust explores this by speaking with youth and families of color about how they experience applications of social, emotional, and cognitive development within their educational settings.[46] When learning settings are safe and honor those experiences, young people are able to engage in a more coherent and supported process of identity exploration.[47]

The experiences offered here are illustrative of what Jagers and colleagues term *Transformative Social and Emotional Learning,* where an integrative approach to education fosters the "knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities."[48] Thus, in addition to describing their emerging racial and ethnic identity, identities as learners, and the development of their convictions, values, and beliefs, these young people meaningfully connected their experiences in school to their goals for their futures and the future of their communities.

An important component of a consistent, integrated identity is having a coherent and connected sense of self over time: who a person was in the past connects to who they are now and to whom they see themselves as being in the future.[49] One young person noted the importance of simply setting a goal in order to realize it in the future.

> *Because if you come to [school], you have to care about [your future]. Not even just academically because some people just have a harder time with academics but about where they want to put themselves in life. They have to have a goal, which they don't have to know the exact goal. They don't have their life planned out but they want to know if they want to make themselves out to be more than what they already are."*

Sometimes young people described this as an implicit expectation of their school or program, but also reflected on the ways they learned to pursue their own goals using strategies such as identifying leaders or models they admire.

> *I often will look up to the people as leaders that I see doing what I want to see myself doing in the future ... It's like they're getting to where they want to be already. They have both. One person I view as a leader is [name] ... She's working really hard to get where she wants to be in the future. I take a lot of advice from her and try to like sort of follow what she's doing to just get as far as I can as early as I can and sort of be ahead of the game in whatever I want to do."*

Supporting young people in developing an integrated identity is a critical step in positive youth development. The narratives from these young people offer examples of how relationships and student-centered learning experiences can create a safe and supportive context for identity development.[50]

RECOMMENDATIONS

All of Who I Am builds on previous research to create a deeper understanding of how young people are experiencing integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive learning.

These 100+ youth voices, in concert with the prevailing wisdom of researchers, educators, youth-supporting professionals, and policymakers who are part of the movement to expand whole child approaches to learning and development, suggest a number of future directions toward creating more supportive and effective learning experiences and environments for young people.

The Center for Promise prioritizes understanding youth perspective as an essential aspect of advancing better research, practice, and policy. The themes and insights that emerged from the youth-centered research lead to the following recommendations that capture the essence of what young people identified as the critical factors driving their learning and development.

- **Foster supportive, relationship-rich environments that embrace young people for all of who they are.** The kinds of relationships described in *All of Who I Am* depend, in part, on intentionally creating spaces that enable supportive relationships, including among peers; nurturing a culture that recognizes and rewards supporting others; and creating conditions that enable adults to build their own social and emotional capacity. Two resources for leaders who want to put this into practice are the recent Creating Cultures of Care[51] brief from America's Promise Alliance and Search Institute's Developmental Assets®Framework.[52]

- **Create new pathways for listening to and engaging young people.** The findings in *All of Who I Am* point to the importance of moving beyond the act of simply listening to young people, to a participatory frame where young people's voices are authentically and consistently engaged.[53] Creating a culture where young people feel encouraged to speak up and can trust that their voices will be heard takes more than individual structures like advisory groups, youth councils, or youth representatives on a board. The Youth Engagement Guide, published as a companion to this report, offers considerations and action steps for organizing conversations that are modeled on the group interviews for *All of Who I Am*. Adults who are responsible for policies, practices, or direct services affecting young people can use the guide as a roadmap for eliciting regular youth feedback—both formally and informally—to create a foundation for sustained youth-adult collaboration.

- **Co-construct learning opportunities that are meaningful to young people's circumstances, future goals, and identity development.** Whether writing an interdisciplinary essay, using math and public speaking skills to advocate for re-use of a vacant lot, or investigating the rising cost of college, young people described being engaged in their learning when they had choice over content, when the purpose of learning activities was clearly communicated, and when their learning served their current and future selves. Offering opportunities like these requires intention, explicit communication, and the willingness to trust young people's choices.[54] Like creating relationship-rich environments, putting this recommendation into practice takes time and skill. Policy and practice leaders can encourage risk-taking and learning among youth and adults in order to make this happen.

- **Adopt more holistic ways of assessing progress and success.** Young people described holistic learning settings that encouraged them to build relationships with adults and peers, to co-create meaningful learning experiences, and to explore their agency and identity in supportive environments. Traditional measures for program, school, and system success such as students' test scores or teacher retention rates do not fully capture whether a learning setting is supporting all dimensions of young people's social, emotional, and cognitive development. New measures and tools are needed, including ways for young people and their families to collaborate with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to define what success looks like and how to assess progress toward that vision.

ALIGNMENT WITH *A NATION AT HOPE*

A Nation at Hope from the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development offered six recommendations for action to optimize young people's learning experiences. This report explicitly explores, from young people's perspectives, four of the six recommendations from the Commission.[55]

Set a clear vision that broadens the definition of student success to prioritize the whole child. The learning settings highlighted in this report are designed to foster all aspects of the young person's development, not just those traditionally associated with academic or cognitive outcomes. While the discussion of grade point averages did arise, the young people emphasized that grades were applied to aspects of their learning beyond the "academic"; for example, young people discussed how they were graded on critical aspects of their cross-curriculum projects including presentation and conversation skills. The young people described the adults in their programs as prioritizing the whole child by supporting their connection with societal issues that impact and interest them and encouraging them to follow their passions and to be their "best selves."

Transform learning settings so they are safe and supportive for all young people. In their conversations about their schools and out-of-school time settings, young people describe learning environments that foster a deep sense of belonging and connection, where authentic relationships among peers and adults are the rule and not the exception, where learning experiences are meaningful, and where they feel empowered to explore their limitless potential. As they described, these programs are like "family" where people look out for one another, learn to embrace differences, can be vulnerable and make mistakes, affirm identities, and engage their own sense of agency to support their individual goals and interests.

Change instruction to teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and in schoolwide practices. Young people talked about social, emotional, and cognitive skills in an embedded way, not as discrete components of their learning environments. Their experiences reflect how social, emotional, and cognitive skills are integrated into the learning settings and with one another. For example, young people described intentionally-designed project-based learning and cross-curricular projects that encouraged them to develop teamwork, problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking, growth mindset, and other social and emotional skills.

Align resources and leverage partners in the community to address the whole child. Meaningful learning opportunities offered young people ways to connect their experiences and their interests and passions outside school walls with what they were learning in school. Leveraging community partners allowed for young people in one setting to work with the architect designing their school to make the space student-friendly; in another setting, young people re-designed vacant lots in their neighborhoods and collaborated with community leaders to plant trees as a part of a science project on climate change. Students across sites held internships in the community to build job and academic skills. Bringing the community into the learning environment, and encouraging students to bring their learning out into the world, appears to create a more connected and coherent learning experience.

The remaining two recommendations from *A Nation at Hope* focus on **building adult expertise in child development** and **forging closer connections between research and practice.** The research team did not ask young people directly about practices related to these recommendations. However, the ways that some young people spoke about different learning styles or multiple intelligences suggests that adults are designing learning experiences based on psychological and developmental theory. Adults in the six selected sites also embraced this research study as an opportunity to gain insights into young people's experiences and to improve their own practice.

In summary, young people interviewed for *All of Who I Am* indicated support for the ideas in the Commission's recommendations. More than that, the young people's stories illuminate their deep understanding of the holistic social, emotional, and cognitive approach that plays an essential role in their learning settings.

CONCLUSION

Approaches to learning and development that integrate social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions are evolving quickly. The rapid growth of the field is promising, particularly because it enables a variety of settings to adopt and refine whole-learner practices. In many ways, however, research into integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive development lags behind promising practices and the recommendations in existing literature.[56] As research, practice, and policy advance, it is especially important to prioritize research that speaks to the experiences and insights of young people.

All of Who I Am begins to fill that research gap by offering insights about how young people describe and experience social, emotional, and cognitive development as well as the conditions they perceive are supporting their learning. To build on these findings, the Center for Promise conducted a nationally representative survey of high school aged youth to more precisely explore how the themes described in this report work together to foster learning experiences that integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development. The analysis of this survey will be released later in 2020. Additional research on the ways different groups of young people experience these integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive learning is needed and is beginning to emerge.[57] Taken together, these pieces will make a substantial contribution to the continuing development of the field.

Just as young people are active agents in their own learning, they can be leaders and co-creators in building and guiding this growing field. Guided by one young person's aspiration to *"help out the rest of the world in the best way we can by working hard on ourselves, to improve this place,"* adults can work together with young people to create better learning environments and experiences for all young people everywhere.

METHODOLOGY

Three specific research questions guided this qualitative research study:

- How do young people understand and describe connections among the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of their learning experiences?

- Under what conditions do young people describe these types of experiences occurring in these settings?

- How aligned are young people's experiences in these settings with the recommendations in the *A Nation at Hope* reports?

To answer these questions, the research team from the Center for Promise conducted twelve group interviews, each lasting about two hours, of approximately eight youth each. The team engaged a total of 103 secondary-school-age young people at these six learning settings:

- Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning, a public school in the EL Education Network (Portland, ME);

- Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación, an after-school program (Norristown, PA);

- Developing K.I.D.S., an after-school program (Detroit, MI);

- EduCare Foundation/Social Justice Humanitas Academy at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies, a School-CBO partnership (Los Angeles, CA);

- River Bluff High School, a public school in the EL Education Network (Lexington, SC); and

- Tacoma School of the Arts, a public school (Tacoma, WA).

These sites (including three public high schools, two out-of-school time programs, and one out-of-school/in school SEL provider) were chosen based on their demonstrated engagement in promoting the social, emotional, and academic development of the young people they serve, as well as their geographic, programmatic, and youth demographic characteristics.

See Appendix B for an overview of each site's characteristics.

Site Selection

Given the nature of the questions, and the complexity of the recommendations set forth in *A Nation at Hope*, the team decided to interview young people at exemplary sites. Damon and Colby (2013) argue that to be better able to generalize results, researchers need to examine fully realized forms of phenomena in human development. Exemplars, according to this frame, offer a fully realized form for researchers to examine. By focusing on a group of exemplary sites in different parts of the country and with different emphases on how they integrated social, emotional, and cognitive developmental constructs, the research team could assert that findings garnered from the data were not specific to a particular program's curriculum, location, or demographics. Furthermore, by choosing sites where the youth are immersed in environments that support the mutually constitutive nature of social, emotional, and cognitive development, the Center for Promise believed that the young people would be more able to draw upon their experiences and talk about these principles in a more nuanced way than would be elicited in programs that are not as focused on the whole child. In selecting the sites, the team considered the following five factors:

1. **Mix of Approaches**. The research team sought a mix of programs that embody a variety of different approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive development (e.g., an emergent curriculum, trauma informed practices, competency-based learning, student led assessments, etc.). Having this variety ensures that the findings would not be limited to a single type of approach but something that we might see in multiple settings.

2. **Mix of Settings**. The research team sought a mix of both school and out of school time (OST) settings.

3. **Alignment with *A Nation at Hope* Findings**. The research team had each interested site complete a brief survey about their approach to education and reviewed each organization's website, paying particular attention to how they emphasized the tenets that *A Nation at Hope* embodies and to see how they described their programming and the young people with whom they work. In particular, the research team looked closely at the language the organization used and the programming they described offering (e.g., positive youth development, restorative practices and why they use them, character development, integrated curriculum, etc.).

4. **Community and Program Demographics.** The research team considered the demographics of each program and of the community it is situated in. The Center for Promise sought to get a demographic range and also paid particular attention to understudied populations.

5. **Geographic Location**. The research team considered geographic location, keeping in mind that while this study is not a representative sample, it is a national sample. The Center for Promise therefore tried to choose places from the coasts, the South and the Midwest—making sure there were post-industrial cities represented.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sites assisted the research team in recruiting young people to participate in group interviews. Two group interviews were conducted at each site, allowing for a diverse representation of youth within each program (including race and ethnicity) as well as in academic performance and their lived experiences in and outside of school. Two researchers from the Center for Promise facilitated and recorded each group, following a semi-structured interview protocol.

Recordings of the groups were transcribed and then systematically analyzed to uncover themes within and across participants. The research team then validated the findings by reviewing the themes with interview participants through virtual meetings after an initial round of analysis.

To develop the answers to the research questions, the research team engaged in a process of open coding the group interviews. The Center for Promise chose to open code the interviews, creating the codes to categorize the data emically, so that they might emerge from and be inspired by what the young people were saying (Saldaña, 2009) about how they experienced social, emotional, and cognitive development in their school and after school program settings. Throughout the analysis process, all research team members met to discuss the emerging codes and establish reliability through consensus checks (Saldaña, 2009) to ensure agreement on the definition and application of each code.

The final coding scheme was organized into three categories of codes:

- Program Components (e.g., individually led instruction, school policies)
- Climate Variables (e.g., perceived support, sense of belonging)
- Internal Processes (e.g., identity as an individual, identity as a learner)

See **Appendix D** for the complete coding scheme.

After examining the frequencies of codes and the co-occurrence of codes, the research team returned to the interviews to examine these manifestations and how the interplay between internal and external factors worked in creating these experiences. By examining the interplay among the codes, and the experiences to which they are attached, the research team identified six thematic findings in relation to the research questions.

RESEARCH SITES

At each of the six sites, our research team conducted two group interviews. Each group included 6-8 young people.

Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning, Portland, ME
cbhs.portlandschools.org

PUBLIC SCHOOL: Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning (CBHS) is a small and rigorous public high school, serving approximately 400 students grades 9-12, that reflects the increasing diversity of Portland, Maine. Casco Bay challenges and supports students to become college-ready through their 3Rs: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. Their goal: for each student to "Get Smart to Do Good." Nearly 100% of graduating students are accepted to college.

Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación (CCATE), Norristown, PA (Philadelphia area)
ccate.org

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM: CCATE's mission is to develop and empower the Latinx community through the promotion of culture, art, work training, and education. Based on family, student, and faculty interests and talents, CCATE collaboratively designs classes in the areas of dramatic and visual arts, media productions, and music. Through the intersection of participants' dreams and determination, CCATE works collectively to create space for individual growth, community engagement, and social change.

Developing K.I.D.S., Detroit, MI
developingkids.org

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM: Developing K.I.D.S. provides best-in-class programming to strengthen urban communities through developing intergenerational youth leaders, driving academic enrichment, instilling civic engagement, and providing opportunities for youth to become strong contributors to their community. In 2017, the program served 306 youth, ages 5-18, from seven different schools across the Detroit area. In 2019, they served 600+ youth and their families. Since they started tracking graduation for incoming students in 2012, they have had a 100% graduation rate. They also have an alumni support program for those who have graduated and still want support.

EduCare Foundation—Social Justice Humanitas Academy at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies, Los Angeles, CA (Northeast San Fernando Valley)
sjhumanitas.org/educare

AFTER-SCHOOL/ IN SCHOOL PROGRAM SUPPORT: Cesar Chavez Learning Academies is a social justice high school that is predominantly Latinx, in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood sited three blocks from a housing project that is adjacent to one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city of Los Angeles. Now 20 years old, the EduCare program offers after-school activities at 17 school sites. EduCare's tag line is: "Do the best you can, with what you got, where you're at." At the site the research team visited, their "Making the Best of Me"/ACE curriculum starts in 9th grade, embedding SEL and character into subjects like robotics.

River Bluff High School, Lexington, SC
rbhs.lexington1.net

PUBLIC SCHOOL: River Bluff High School is an EL Education high school serving students in grades 9-12 in Lexington County School District One. Engaged in developing a 21st-century system of learning, River Bluff High School's goal is to graduate students who are college, career, and citizenship ready through a personalized learning experience. Their motto: Work hard. Get smart. Do good.

Tacoma School of the Arts, Tacoma, WA
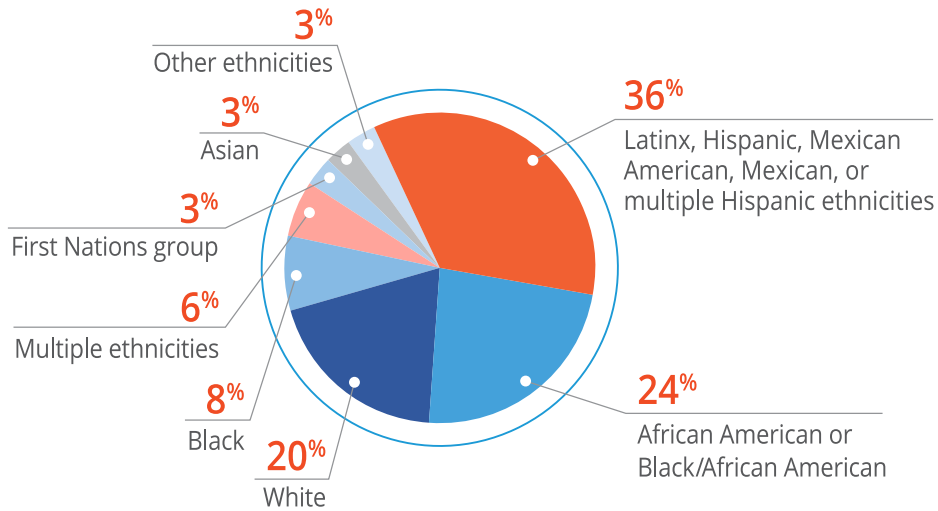tacomaschools.org/sota/Pages/default.aspx

PUBLIC SCHOOL: The Tacoma, Washington school district is a national leader in infusing trauma-informed practice throughout its schools. The School of the Arts' mission is to partner with community resources to change public education, emphasizing creativity, and utilizing a fully inclusive model that educates the whole student through the values of Community, Empathy, Thinking, and Balance.
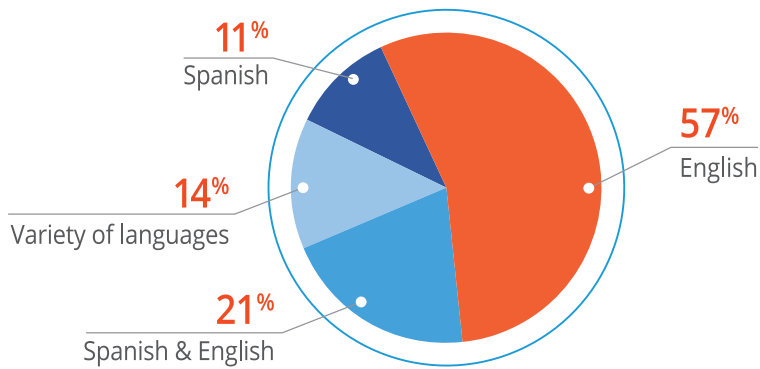
DEMOGRAPHICS

Race/Ethnicity are self-reported by youth. Overall demographics (across six sites, representing 103 young people)

RACE/ETHNICITY

3%
Other ethnicities

3%
Asian

3%
First Nations group

6%
Multiple ethnicities

8%
Black

20%
White

36%
Latinx, Hispanic, Mexican American, Mexican, or multiple Hispanic ethnicities

24%
African American or Black/African American

LANGUAGES SPOKEN

11%
Spanish

14%
Variety of languages

21%
Spanish & English

57%
English

Demographics (by site)

PROGRAM	SEX	RACE/ETHNICITY	PRIMARY LANGUAGES AT HOME	AGE	YEARS AT PROGRAM/ SCHOOL
Detroit, Michigan: N=18					
After-School	F=10	African American = 8	English= 17	Mean = 15.94	Mean = 3.67
	M=8	Black = 5	Arabic and English = 1	Mode = 14	Mode = 4
		Black/African American = 4		STDev = 1.73	STDev = 2.57
		White = 1			
Lexington, South Carolina: N=11					
Public High School	F=6	White = 6	English = 10	Mean = 16.55	Mean = 3
	M=5	African American = 2	English, Gujrati, Hindi = 1	Mode = 17	Mode = 1
		Black = 1		STDev = .69	STDev = .77
		African American/Mixed = 1			
		Asian = 1			
Los Angeles, California: N=16					
After-School/SEL in Public High School	F = 6	Mexican American = 2	Spanish and English = 11	Mean = 15.94	Mean = 2.67
	M = 9	Latinx = 3	Spanish = 4	Mode = 16	Mode = 3
	NonBinary = 1	Hispanic = 5	Nonspecific =1	STDev = .77	STDev = .82
		Mexican = 2			
		Multiple ethnicities Hispanic = 4			
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: N=16					
After-School	F = 8	Mexican American = 3	Spanish and English = 7	Mean = 15.5	Mean = 4.53
	M = 8	Hispanic = 4	Spanish = 6	Mode = 16	Mode = 6
		Latina = 3	English = 2	STDev = 1.21	STDev = 2.17
		Mexican = 2	Spanglish = 1		
		Puerto Rican = 1			
		African American = 1			
		Multiple ethnicities Hispanic = 2			

PROGRAM	SEX	RACE/ETHNICITY	PRIMARY LANGUAGES AT HOME	AGE	YEARS AT PROGRAM/ SCHOOL
Portland, Maine: N=20					
Public High School	F = 9	White = 8	English = 11	Mean = 15.75	Mean = 2.6
	M = 11	African American = 6	English and French = 2	Mode = 17	Mode = 4
		Native American = 1	Japanese and English = 1	STDev = 1.25	STDev = 1.19
		Asian = 2	English, Italian, Spanish = 1		
		Asian Black = 1	French, Lingala, Swahili, English = 1		
		Black = 1	French, Kirundi, English, Swahili, ASL = 1		
		American = 1	French, English, Kirundi = 1		
			Vietnamese and English = 1		
			French and Somali = 1		
Tacoma, WA: N=22					
Public High School	F = 13	White = 5	English = 17	Mean = 16.14	Mean = 3.05
	M = 7	White/African American = 2	Spanish and English = 3	Mode = 16	Mode = 3
	Non specified = 2	Black/African American = 3	English and Tagalog = 1	STDev = .77	STDev = .72
		Latina = 1			
		Black = 1			
		Hispanic = 1			
		Multiple Ethnicities Hispanic = 3			
		First Nations group = 2			
		Multiple Ethnicities =2			
		African = 1			
		Not specified = 1			

CODES AND CODE COUNTS

CODE NAME	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS CODE IS MENTIONED	NUMBER OF CODE MENTIONS
Climate Variables (e.g., perceived support, sense of belonging)		
Belonging	11	43
Cultural Beliefs and Values		
Community or Society	5	14
Family	5	12
Program	4	12
School	10	45
Equity	11	23
Expectations		
Adult	11	58
Community or Society	4	6
Peer	3	3
Self	10	27
Giving Back		
Obligation to Give Back	3	5
Opportunities to Give Back	8	20
Want to Give Back	6	13
Supported	12	64
Unsupported	4	13
Internal Processes (e.g., identity as an individual, identity as a learner)		
Identity		
Individual	12	84
Learner	12	65
Meaningful Work Purpose	10	33
Passion	9	22
They Don't Understand Me	3	9
Intentions or Intentionality		
Explicit	10	57
Implicit	11	41
Pivotal Experience	8	22
Reflection on Growth	12	34
Youth Sense of Agency	9	59
Comparing	9	30
Connections		

CODE NAME	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS CODE IS MENTIONED	NUMBER OF CODE MENTIONS
Connections Between School and Outside World	9	40
Connections Between Self and World	11	36
Social Emotional and/or Academic Domain	12	127
Program Components (e.g., individually led instruction, school policies)		
Organizational Structures		
Individually Driven Instruction	8	31
Mentor Program	9	13
Physical Environment	5	9
Program Activities	6	25
School Programs	9	76
Relationships		
Adult		
After-School Program	5	12
Community	2	2
School	11	51
Community or Society	3	3
Family	6	13
Mentor	6	11
Peer	12	56
School Policy		
Assessment	7	13
Discipline	5	8
Grading	6	9
SEL Processes	12	106

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57. For example, see descriptions of the work underway by the Education Trust at edtrust.org/resource/sead-through-a-race-equity-lens/ and the work recently published by Balfanz & Byrnes (2020) evaluating City Year's social, emotional, and academic programming.

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