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# THROUGH COVID: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS OF COLOR RETURNING TO IN-PERSON SCHOOLING

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## ABSTRACT

This case study investigates the experiences of high school students of color as they return to in-person schooling during the 2021–22 school year amid COVID-19, aiming to fill the gap in literature on students’ returning processes. By conducting multiple in-depth interviews with student participants, we incorporate youth voices that are largely missing in existing research. Using the concept of *situated agency*, we showcase the two sides of these students’ experiences: The nuanced challenges they faced because of their intersecting marginalizing identities and their strong resilience and agency as they navigate their return to school. The findings underscore the need for educational policies and practices that are sensitive to the complexities of student experiences, advocating for supports that recognize and address the diverse challenges faced by students of color in the pandemic’s aftermath and prepare for similar school interruptions in the future.

*Keywords:* students of color, returning to in-person schooling, youth voices, situated agency

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education in an unprecedented manner (Reimers, 2022), and substantial research has documented the scope of its impact on education (e.g., Dorn et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Krause et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2025). However, most studies have focused on the height of the pandemic, when schools were remote or hybrid. Comparatively few studies have documented the process of students returning to in-person schooling (one exception in the context of American K-12 education is Brockmeier et al., 2024). Considering the length and extent of the school interruption, the transition

back to full-time, in-person schooling was not as simple as welcoming students back to school and resuming where they left off. It is thus crucial to document the process of returning to in-person schooling after such prolonged pandemic interruptions and examine these impacts on students’ returning experiences and potentially their longer-term development. Our study aims to address this gap in knowledge. A deeper understanding of this process will not only shed light on how youth most severely affected by prolonged interruptions transition back to in-person schooling but also help us better prepare for future disruptions—such as

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another pandemic, which scientists consider highly likely (Williams et al., 2023).

Another contribution we aim to make is to elevate the youth voice in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact. As noted above, we now have a considerable body of literature on the educational impact of the pandemic; studies on learning loss and mental health disorders are particularly robust. However, most of the studies have drawn on assessment, survey, or interview data collected from educators and parents; the voices of the students themselves, despite their central role, are largely silent (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Racially, linguistically, economically, and sexually minoritized youth, in particular, are rarely heard (Kanno et al., 2022). In our view, this lack of student participation presents two problems. First, the current literature exhibits adultism (Bell, 2010; Brooks, 2022), prioritizing adult views of how the pandemic impacted children and youth over the views of the youths themselves. Second, the dips in academic achievement and increase in mental health disorders—and the racial and income gaps associated with them—are negative outcomes of the pandemic, yet they do not directly shed light on the causes that led to these outcomes. The phrase “the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on existing inequalities,” and its several variations (e.g., Haderlein et al., 2021; Mpofu et al., 2022; Sidik, 2022; Singer, 2023), has been repeated so often as to have become a cliché. But for all the refrains, we do not yet know how these inequities actually impacted minoritized youth, precisely because, we argue, we have neglected to capture youths' voices.

Thus, in this paper we inquire into the lived experiences of high school students of color during and through the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask the following research questions:

1. How did their marginalized identities shape their experiences during remote learning and during the transition back to in-person schooling?

2. How did they exert their agency as they navigated challenges?

3. To what extent did schools support their return to school?

In asking these questions, we aimed to capture the nuances of lived experiences of students positioned at the intersecting axes of marginalization (e.g., poverty, racism, immigration, disability, and learning English). Just as importantly, we also emphasize the agency and resourcefulness of minoritized youth and families. As much as we were concerned with the tremendous challenges that these young people faced, we were even more heartened by how they made adjustments, set new goals, and overall “played the hand they were dealt,” often with very little support from school. Thus, this is a study of the complexity of high school students' lived experiences during and through the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how they persisted despite the challenges and setbacks caused by the pandemic.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Considerable research on COVID-19's impact on education now exists, focusing on topics such as students' mental challenges (e.g., Meherali et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020), learning loss (e.g., Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021; Fahle et al., 2024; Moscoviz & Evans, 2022), and students' specific learning experiences during school closure and remote learning (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Schaefer et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). However, little research has focused on students' returning to school, which was a unique process that speaks to the long-lasting influence of COVID-19 and interrupted schooling on students' learning and career paths (Francis & Goodman, 2025). Understanding this process is critical for evaluating current practices and for schools to better prepare for future unplanned school closures (Harmey & Moss, 2023).

## RETURNING TO SCHOOL

Most published research on students' returning to school has involved international settings. For example, Castro-Kemp and Mahmud's (2021) survey of UK parents of children with special learning needs revealed mixed feelings about the return to school, with some parents noting that their children had been happier at home during closures. In Hong Kong, students with similar learning needs were found to experience poorer quality of life and greater emotional challenges in the first several months of returning to school, compared with during-school closure (Tso et al., 2023). In Australia, teachers and school leaders were deeply concerned about students' well-being upon returning to school, highlighting that students experienced "high levels of fatigue and a rise in unacceptable behaviour, poor social interaction, and difficulties re-engaging in classroom learning" (Fray et al., 2023, p. 1543). A more recent study in the U.S. found that teachers observed declines in students' learning motivation and social-emotional well-being in the first few months of returning to in-person schooling, though SEL programs may have helped mitigate academic challenges (Brockmeier et al., 2024). These studies caution that we should not equate students' transition from an unexpected school closure to in-person schooling with a simple return to pre-pandemic conditions.

However, many of these studies also suggest that students were not experiencing these challenges equally, and their experiences varied by the socioeconomic (SES) status of their families (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021), their specific disability conditions (Tso et al., 2023), children's age (Fray et al., 2023; Tso et al., 2023), and rurality versus urbanicity (Fray et al., 2023). Considering the complex intersection of factors that shape children's return-to-school experiences, these authors suggest that schools should provide more targeted support so that students who were more severely affected receive greater attention.

## INEQUALITY

Moreover, one widely recognized effect of COVID-19 on education is that remote learning and lockdown experiences exacerbated existing inequalities (e.g., Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Gee et al., 2023; Hartas, 2024; Singh et al., 2020; Wild et al., 2024). Students from marginalized backgrounds were particularly hard hit, including students from lower-income families, with disabilities (Hurwitz et al., 2021; Rossetti et al., 2023; Wild et al., 2024), racial minorities (Strassle et al., 2022), and English learners (Poole & Sahakyan, 2024), and the learning achievement gaps widened by the pandemic continued to enlarge during the recovery (Fahle et al., 2024). For example, Kuhfeld et al.'s (2022) study of over five million students in 16,000 U.S. public schools found that the gap in math growth rates between Black and White students was approximately 2 to 3 times larger in 2020–21 than the prior school year.

However, scholars have cautioned against overemphasizing academic learning loss, noting that it can obscure critical issues such as students' mental health needs, which also showed larger impacts on minoritized youths (Gee et al., 2023; Ishimaru & Rodriguez, 2025; Osher et al., 2025). Krause et al. (2022) found the highest rates of emotional and physical abuse among students identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and those identifying as other or questioning, compared to heterosexual students. Racial discrimination at school further harmed students' mental health. Mpofu et al. (2022), in a nationally representative survey, found the highest perceived racism among Asian students (63.9%) and noted that those who reported racism were more likely to experience poor mental health and social withdrawal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved particularly tough for high school seniors transitioning to postsecondary education—a transition made even more precarious for students carrying multiple marginalized identities.

This is the very stage most of our participants were navigating. For example, Dorn et al. (2021) found that high school seniors from low-income families were significantly more likely to delay or abandon postsecondary plans during this period. Trainor et al. (2023) showed that high school students who were dually identified for both special education and English learner services faced intensified barriers to postsecondary transition during the pandemic, as inconsistent information sharing, fragmented planning between home and school, and interrupted vocational rehabilitation services undermined their ability to pursue educational and career goals. Moreover, undocumented and DACA-identified youth faced heightened uncertainty about college access and financial stability due to ineligibility for federal aid and legal employment, and many avoided institutional supports out of fear of disclosing their status—challenges that were compounded by mental health problems and social disconnection (Ponjuán et al., 2024). However, no other research has directly explored how the pandemic has affected college access for students of color, including immigrant youth. Our participants' experiences help bring attention to the ways in which overlapping marginalized identities shaped students' postsecondary trajectories during this precarious time.

### YOUTH VOICES

Although youth voice is gaining attention in educational research, scholars often critique its representation in research as tokenistic and lacking real influence (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2023). In studies on COVID-19's impact, student perspectives are notably scarce. Research has largely centered on educators, focusing on teachers' challenges (e.g., Leech et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021), coping strategies (e.g., Pressley & Ha, 2021), shifting roles (e.g., Morita-Mullaney et al., 2024), and challenges for leadership (Reid, 2021). A range of methods have been implemented to highlight educator voices, including longitudinal repeated qualitative

surveys (e.g., Blaydes et al., 2024), focus groups (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2024), case studies (e.g., McMakin et al., 2023), mixed methods research (e.g., An et al., 2021), and action research (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2024). In contrast, few studies center on students or offer rich data beyond surveys or one-off interviews. For example, Huck and Zhang's (2021) review found that only 7 of 49 early COVID-19 studies in the contexts of K-12 education included student data—six of them relying solely on surveys.

So far, a small subset of studies has meaningfully centered youth voices through in-depth qualitative methods. For example, Schaefer et al. (2020) used child-parent collaborative autoethnography to document how three teenage girls recreated learning spaces at home to stay engaged during the COVID shutdown. Marsh et al. (2024) combined interviews, focus groups, and visual ethnography to show how 24 Black students made meaning of their experiences of both challenges and hopes in under-resourced Florida communities during the pandemic. Szabo (2021) integrated interviews with Latina mothers and their children and documented how 21 low-income Latinx families made nuanced decisions about online versus in-person schooling, challenging assumptions about "disadvantaged" family preference for in-person instruction. Literat (2021) analyzed 1,930 TikTok videos posted by youth during COVID-19, showing how they used the platform to express concerns and provide one another with emotional support. Moreover, several studies used Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR; Mirra et al., 2015) to involve students as co-researchers, empowering students to directly contribute to shaping school policies such as mental health support (Rocha et al., 2023), school safety (Owens et al., 2022), and school climate improvement during remote and hybrid learning (Renick & Reich, 2024). These studies, through various methods and collecting richer data, elevated youth voices during the pandemic and positioned students as active agents in shaping the realities of themselves and others. However, no research has

captured student voices about their returning experiences.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we draw on the notion of *situated agency* (Davies, 1991; Panelli et al., 2005; Vera-Gray, 2016) as the main pillar of our theoretical framework but also add perspectives from the *Community Cultural Wealth* framework (Yosso, 2005) and *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013).

## SITUATED AGENCY

The concept of situated agency, introduced in feminist literature (Davies, 1991; Panelli et al., 2005; Vera-Gray, 2016), challenges traditional humanistic and individualistic views of agency as purely internal and individual. Under these conventional perspectives, social individuals are often evaluated against a masculinist ideal of “perfect” or “full” humanity—one that privileges dominant norms around moral rightness, responsibility, and capability. By contrast, situated agency emphasizes the “interactive nature” (Davies, 1991, p. 44) of human action, highlighting how agency is produced through the interplay between individuals and situational factors, including other social actors, physical and social spaces, personal identities, and lived histories (McGann, 2014; Panelli et al., 2005).

## COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AND INTERSECTIONALITY

To further deepen our understanding of the situatedness of agency, we incorporate Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, which foregrounds the cultural, linguistic, familial, and aspirational resources that marginalized communities draw upon. This framework challenges deficit-based thinking by emphasizing how agency is often made possible through the assets embedded within students’ communities, which helps to show the strengths of marginalized youth such as immigrant

students, students of color, and LGBTQ students, whose identities are often perceived through a deficit lens. At the same time, we also draw on Crenshaw’s (1989, 2013) concept of intersectionality to recognize how overlapping identities—such as race, language background, immigration status, and gender—interact in complex ways to shape youth experiences. These two frameworks work alongside situated agency: CCW expands what counts as agentic by recognizing community-based resources, while intersectionality reminds us that multiple, compounding systems of oppression may limit how agency can be enacted.

Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the provisional school practices it triggered, this combination of theories helps to examine how these shifting structures created new limitations and possibilities for youth. Guided by these theories, we attend to our participants’ experiences by considering both their agentic strategies and the sociocultural and structural contexts in which they emerged. Our analysis highlights how students’ actions and decisions materialized through these complex interactions and offers implications for educational practices that aim to equitably serve minoritized youth.

## METHOD

This case study is part of a larger study that aimed to capture high school youth’s academic and social experiences during and through the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first part of the study, the authors, along with several youth researchers, conducted brief, structured interviews (15–25 minutes) with 62 high school students in Massachusetts recruited through a network of community-based organizations. To protect participants’ health and our health, and also to reach participants who were not easily accessible geographically, all interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. We asked youths about their academic learning, peer relationships, and life at home during the pandemic. These interviews, which we

refer to in this study as *Interview #1*, were thematically analyzed, and the following major themes emerged: (a) challenges of remote learning, (b) school attendance and engagement, (c) awareness of illness and death, (d) mental and emotional health, (e) changed networks of support among peers and adults, and (f) desire for, and apprehension about, returning to in-person schooling. The study was subsequently published as a white paper (Kanno et al., 2022).

As students returned to in-person schooling in fall 2021, we wanted to follow up with some of the students we interviewed to examine how they experienced their transition back to school. Although adults running the schools seemed eager to return to pre-pandemic conditions as quickly as possible, we knew, from our interviews, that many youth’s lives had been deeply affected. We also heard from the youth that they felt both excitement and trepidation about returning to school. We wanted to know how the students experienced this transition.

Of the original 62 participants, we chose 9 students for the follow-up study. This decision was based on several reasons. First, some students had concerns and challenges that were likely to continue even after the

end of school closures, such as those with ongoing mental health issues and those who had immune-compromised family members at home. Second, these 9 students had stories that reflected at least one of the major themes from the initial study (see Table 1). Third, these were particularly “thoughtful people who had many reflections throughout the process on their experiences” (Gowayed, 2022, p. 159), and we felt that their insights had much to teach us adults about how youth navigated this unprecedented pandemic and the policies and practices adults instituted in response.

Each of the 9 students was interviewed three times, at the end of the fall 2021 semester (*Interview #2*), mid-spring 2022 (*Interview #3*), and end of spring 2022 (*Interview #4*). This time, the first and third authors conducted all the interviews. In total, the follow-up study included 35 interviews, averaging 33 minutes each. Informed by *Interview #1*, the questions in *Interview #2* covered five areas: (a) background, (b) specific challenges, (c) experiences of returning to in-person schooling, (d) peer relationships, and (e) work experiences. Just like *Interview #1*, all follow-up interviews were also conducted remotely via Zoom. In *Interviews #3* and *#4*, we continued with the key themes that

**TABLE 1**  
*Participants of the Study*

Name	Age	Gender	Major Themes Emerged
Alex	17	Female	challenges of remote learning; changed networks of support among peers and adults
AlyssaRose	17	Female	awareness of illness and death; changed networks of support among peers and adults
Amari	17	Male	awareness of illness and death; changed networks of support among peers and adults
DeMarcus	17	Male	changed networks of support among peers and adults
Jamie	17	Non-binary	Mental and emotional health; changed networks of support among peers and adults
Kode	18	Female	challenges of remote learning; changed networks of support among peers and adults; desire for, and apprehension about, returning to in-person schooling
Laura	17	Female	school attendance and engagement; changed networks of support among peers and adults
Nini	18	Female	awareness of illness and death; mental and emotional health
Sony	15	Female	school attendance and engagement; mental and emotional health

emerged over time and probed deeper into the students’ experiences. These included prompts such as describing a day in their life, sharing photos that captured important aspects of their experiences, and reflecting on ongoing developments such as the spring 2022 COVID surge. During these interviews, much sensitive information was shared (e.g., mental health crises, abuse at home, etc.). We never pushed the students to disclose information they did not want to—what to share and how much to share were left up to them. We also use pseudonyms for all participants, institutions, and places, and decided to intentionally obscure identifying details to protect anonymity.

The data were first analyzed for each student (*within-case analyses*; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), identifying salient themes in their experiences and how they changed over time. Afterwards, we conducted *cross-case analyses* by comparing and contrasting the nine cases to identify trends and patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through the data analysis, we were struck by how students faced distinct challenges shaped by the interaction between the pandemic and their minoritized identities (e.g., student of color, nonbinary, low-SES, etc.), and yet they also tried to exert their agency within the confines of their circumstances. This motivated us to adopt situated agency as our theoretical

framework. Some themes overlapped across the cases: For example, Nini and Jamie both related living with mental health issues, while AlyssaRose and Alex’s stories both included combating racism.

To delve deeply into these students’ stories within the space of a journal article, we decided to focus on five students whose narratives represented the key identities and themes from the nine cases. We also considered the types of schools the students attended (large comprehensive high school vs. small alternative school), which proved to significantly shape students’ experiences. Table 2 summarizes the demographic information of the five participants as well as the themes their stories represent. These five participants varied in age from 17 to 19 and included three females, one male, and one nonbinary student. They attended different types of schools, including large public high schools; a small, specialized school for immigrant and EL students; and an alternative technical academy, and carried different marginalized identities such as immigrant, ethnic minority, LGBTQ, and low-income backgrounds.

While the study design allowed us to collect rich, in-depth data on students’ experiences, our methodology was also shaped by the constraints of the pandemic, which introduced

**TABLE 2**  
*Participants Included in the Narratives*

Name	Age	Gender	School Type	Key Identities	Themes of Experiences
Amari	17	Male	Large public high school	First-gen immigrant; ethnic minority	Family cohesion and support
Jamie	17	Non-binary	Large public high school	First gen LGBTQ; immigrant; ethnic minority	Mental health issues; community-based organization support
Kode	18	Female	Small high school specializing in immigrant students	First-gen immigrant; ethnic minority	Domestic violence survivor; community-based organization support
Laura	17	Female	Small alternative technical academy	Second-gen immigrant; ethnic minority; low-income	Quasi-homelessness; chronic absenteeism
Alex	18	Female	Large public high school	Second-gen immigrant; ethnic minority; low-income	School violence; racism; family cohesion and support

several limitations to the research. Specifically, due to the scheduling difficulties, Interview #2 did not begin until November of 2021, potentially missing information about students' school experience during the first few weeks of the semester, which might have provided additional critical data about the reopening and returning process. While the students provided retrospective accounts of this period, these reflections generally lacked the richness and immediacy of real-time experiences, such as those captured in Interview #3 during the COVID case surge in spring 2022. In addition, the pandemic also shaped our access to data. Specifically, field observations of these students at their schools or community organizations were not feasible during the pandemic, which would have added more dimensions to the data and would have given us more opportunities to triangulate our assertions.

### RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

We are a group of university-based researchers. Chen and David were PhD students at the time of conducting this study and Kanno was their mentor and a faculty member. All three of us work in the field of applied linguistics and are passionate advocates for the rights of linguistically minoritized children and adults. Chen and Kanno are Asian, nonnative speakers of English and multilingual while David is a White, monolingual speaker of English. We had no prior connection with the participants in the study. Collectively, we have deep expertise in qualitative research and in working with high school and college-age students with minoritized identities.

### FINDINGS

In this section, we present the findings thematically, organized around our three research questions. Overall, we found that students' experiences of returning to in-person schooling were deeply shaped by the social and structural conditions surrounding them, including challenges rooted in their

intersecting identities, family, and institutional contexts. Despite facing significant barriers, the students exercised agency in ways that were closely tied to the support—or lack thereof—they received from their families, schools, and communities. These findings highlight the need to view student agency as situated, emerging through their interactions with people and institutions during a time of ongoing disruption.

### INTERSECTIONAL MARGINALIZATION OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

All our participants share the identity of students of color and are either first- or second-generation immigrants. Their individual experiences show how these core identities intersect with a range of other specific marginalizing experiences, including SES challenges, family-related conflicts, and school-related difficulties. These intersections created complex and layered challenges for the students.

**SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES.** Among many challenges, SES instability often emerged as a salient factor intersecting with the youth's other marginalized identities to exacerbate their vulnerability to academic disruption during COVID-19. Laura, an 18-year-old Latina from a Central American immigrant family, experienced great difficulties during COVID because of her immigrant background intersecting with severe financial instability. In 2021, her father and stepmother relocated to Puerto Rico, leaving Laura and her older sister to fend for themselves. Unable to afford housing, Laura temporarily moved in with her boyfriend's mother, living in constant fear of homelessness. To support herself, she took on a full-time night shift at a local hotel. Already dealing with learning difficulties and chronic absenteeism, the demands of full-time work made it even harder to focus on school. "I could have done more when I started in the school year," she reflected, "but because of me working, I kind of let that consume me" (Interview #2). As a result, her graduation was delayed, and she ruled out pursuing higher education.

Similarly, Alex, a rising 12<sup>th</sup> grader and Asian American student of color, grew up in a Cambodian refugee household where her parents oscillated between unemployment and low-wage jobs. Her family had subsisted on Social Security checks and food stamps for years. During the pandemic, Alex joined her three older sisters in picking up part-time jobs while attending school so that they could help the family stay afloat. Alex was a talented student who would have loved to focus on school, but she felt obligated to work despite her mother's objections—since her mother was still traumatized by the car accident Alex had survived in the previous year and preferred that she stay home as much as possible. Still, Alex felt that she had no real choice: “My family needs money. ...What am I going to do?... If we don't have money, we're kind of screwed” (Interview #2).

While economic insecurity was widespread during COVID-19, Laura's and Alex's experiences suggest that those already living in poverty—particularly from immigrant backgrounds—were hit much harder. For some families, financial strain meant lifestyle adjustments or parents taking extra shifts to shield their children from hardship. But for Laura and Alex, generating income for basic needs became an immediate and non-negotiable responsibility. For Laura especially, the conflict between work and study proved overwhelming, ultimately narrowing her postsecondary options and posing long-term risks to her development.

**SCHOOL-RELATED CHALLENGES.** Students also described several school-related challenges as they returned to in-person learning during the ongoing pandemic. For many, returning to school not only reignited logistical and academic struggles, but also heightened emotional stress, health risks, and exposure to racialized experiences that had intensified during the pandemic.

Amari, a rising senior and Asian American student from a Nepali immigrant family, expressed deep concerns about the health risks associated with school reopening.

With his parents often working away from home, Amari lived between the households of his grandparents and his uncle and aunt. Returning to school significantly increased his potential exposure to COVID-19, which he feared could endanger both his elderly grandparents and his newborn cousin. His anxiety was intensified by what he perceived as a lack of adequate safety measures at his school. “I think they're waiting till somebody dies before they close stuff down,” he said, frustrated by the absence of systematic case tracking and transparent communication (Interview #3).

The school environment also became a site of racialized tension, particularly for Asian students, as anti-Asian rhetoric surged during the pandemic. Although not of Chinese descent, Alex felt alienated when videos pushing “China virus” narratives circulated on social media among classmates. This added to her already marginalized school experiences for being a hard-working student, which reinforced the stereotype of “nerdy Asian.” She recalled an incident in which classmates recorded her answering a teacher's question during an online class, then mocked her in group chats for “wanting to go to Harvard” (Interview #3). For Alex, the move to remote learning did not alleviate bullying; instead, it made it easier, more persistent, and more directly tied to her racialized identity.

**FAMILY-RELATED CHALLENGES.** Furthermore, prolonged stay-at-home periods during the pandemic contributed to the emergence—or worsening—of domestic conflicts for some students. For them, the emotional toll of tense or unsafe home environments intensified the stress of returning to in-person schooling, especially when familial conflict intersected with immigration-related barriers and identity-based struggles.

Kode, an 18-year-old Black immigrant student from West Africa, experienced abuse by her stepmother during the pandemic, which caused a toxic and chaotic home environment and eventually led to a lawsuit

against her stepmother. This conflict posed an intersectional challenge due to her lack of familiarity with the U.S. legal system and the language barriers she faced, because unlike the other participants, Kode immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, and English was her second language. Thus, the first year of her return to school was a process of juggling schoolwork alongside legal obligations, such as attending court and trying to understand unfamiliar legal language. She expressed her language anxiety,

I don't know how this system works ... but I have to speak for myself, and I don't feel comfortable, because anytime I go to court ... I don't know what to say ... like, I don't know English. ... English in court is different than what we learn in school. (Interview #4)

Kode's situation was further complicated by a lack of familial support. She explained that taking the conflict to court—essentially suing her stepmother—was seen by her extended family as “disrespectful,” since the patriarchal cultural norms in her home country discouraged challenging parental authority. As a result, she felt estranged from most of her family. Her experience reveals how domestic conflict, immigration status, and linguistic barriers converged to create a uniquely challenging home environment.

Similarly, Jamie, a 17-year-old nonbinary Vietnamese student, struggled with family tensions rooted in cultural and generational differences. During the lockdown, Jamie began to explore and embrace their gender identity, but living in an immigrant household created tensions, because their mother rejected the idea of a non-binary gender since it was incompatible with their traditional home culture. Jamie, who had already been managing mental health challenges before the pandemic, described this period as “awakening the dragon that’s asleep” (Interview #3). Their mental health declined further, leading to increased absence during remote schooling, alcoholism, and even suicidal ideation.

Thus, Jamie's initial experience of returning to school was a combination of struggles from home conflicts, lack of affirmation of their new identity, and the academic challenges of adjusting to school. These struggles only began to ease after Jamie started to reconnect with supportive peers in person at school and their mother's eventual shift in attitude, marked by her agreeing to family therapy in the second semester after the school reopened, 18 months after Jamie's gender discovery. However, Jamie's experience still highlights the profound difficulties that LGBTQ youth can face when familial rejection, mental health struggles, and academic challenges converge as schools recover from disruptions like the pandemic.

Overall, the challenges our participants faced went far beyond simply readjusting to in-person schooling after a prolonged disruption. For marginalized students like those in our study, the return to school was shaped by a combination of residual impacts from the pandemic—such as mental health struggles, financial instability, and family conflict—and new challenges that emerged in the school environment. Their multiple marginalized identities made this transition far more complex and difficult than for their more privileged peers, revealing how systemic inequities continued to shape their educational experiences even as schools reopened.

### SITUATED AGENCY OF YOUTH—ROLES OF FAMILY VS. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Despite the intersectional marginalization they faced, we also found that the students demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity in navigating their challenges during the pandemic and the transition back to in-person schooling. By late spring 2022, four of the five participants (Amari, Jamie, Alex, and Kode) were graduating from high school and were admitted to universities, while Laura was actively seeking job opportunities to begin an independent life. Their agency was not an isolated trait but deeply embedded in the social and institutional contexts surrounding them (McGann, 2014).

In this section, we highlight how their agency was shaped through interactions with family, school, and community support, which offered both affordances and constraints.

### **FAMILY AS SOURCES OF STABILITY AND**

**COHESION.** Family emerged as a key factor differentiating our participants' experiences. While some students struggled with conflict or instability at home, as described above, others were empowered by strong familial support that fostered resilience and a sense of direction.

Amari appeared to experience fewer challenges during the pandemic. This was largely because of the emotional and financial stability his family provided. While Amari's parents were not always at home, they, along with his uncle and aunt, maintained steady full-time employment, and Amari lived between their households. This co-living arrangement created a secure, multigenerational environment. During the lockdown, when most students experienced shrunken social activities, Amari spent time with his grandparents and young cousin, which gave him a sense of connection and fulfillment. In our interviews, Amari frequently brought up his young cousin and described how he found a great joy in babysitting him: "It's not just taking care of—you have to make their food. You have to clean their bottles, get to, like, put them in like all types of machines. ... But yeah, it becomes a hobby" (Interview #3).

This stability allowed Amari to focus on college applications, which he largely navigated independently due to limited school-based guidance. "I did it all by myself," he recalled with pride (Interview #2). His admission to Tufts University was a notable achievement, but it was made possible, in part, by the emotional and financial resources his family offered during a time of widespread disruption.

For Alex, although her family faced long-term financial hardship, it provided a different kind of stability: a culture of perseverance and shared sacrifice. Her three older sisters were all attending college while working part-time

to support the household, creating a strong expectation for Alex to do the same. Motivated by this environment, she juggled restaurant work, multiple AP classes, and extracurriculars. "If I don't feel overwhelmed, I feel like I'm not doing enough," she said, reflecting on the high internal standards shaped by her siblings' example (Interview #2).

Alex's siblings also played a crucial role in guiding her through the college application process. They helped her select Salem State University for its affordability and proximity to home, compensating for the lack of college guidance at school—a gap that had widened since the pandemic. Her experience reflects the forms of community cultural wealth outlined by Yosso (2005): While her family lacked economic capital, they offered aspirational, emotional, and navigational support that empowered her to persist through the challenges of her senior year.

### **INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT: SMALL SCHOOL BENEFITS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

In addition to family contexts, school environments and community-based resources significantly shaped students' ability to navigate pandemic-related challenges. Participants' experiences reveal how institutional settings—especially the size and structure of schools—either supported or constrained their agency during the transition back to in-person learning.

First, our participants' experiences indicated that large comprehensive high schools faced greater challenges in managing the complexities of reopening during the pandemic, particularly with staffing shortages. Alex and Amari, who both attended large public schools with over 1,500 students, reported that their schools were not implementing effective health measures to accommodate the sheer number of students. Both expressed deep concerns over the health risks posed by crowded cafeterias. Alex noted that cold weather limited their ability to eat outside, while the closure of the culinary

room for CTE training further reduced available space, forcing students to pack into the cafeteria, making virus exposure almost inevitable.

Additionally, while schools faced staffing shortages throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation became particularly severe in Amari and Alex's schools during the surge of cases in early spring 2022. In an interview conducted during this period, Amari expressed concern over the high number of teachers calling in sick and the lack of substitute teachers, describing it as "a lot of empty seats in the class, and a lot of days two or three of my teachers aren't there... Nobody does anything about it" (Interview #3). Alex further illustrated the crisis by continuing her example of her school's cafeteria being used as a temporary learning space: Students whose teachers were absent were sent there to study independently, leading to an unstructured learning environment. She recounted, "For a good week, I had classes only in the cafeteria, but no teachers in the class. Just a bunch of kids sitting in the cafeteria, and we wait till the bells and we go to the next class" (Interview #3). Amari and Alex's experiences highlighted the challenges large schools faced during COVID, as they struggled with shortages of both full-time and substitute teachers while trying to cover many classes. Meanwhile, school management became too overwhelmed to implement policies that effectively addressed the diverse needs of their extensive student body.

In contrast, Laura and Kode, who attended small alternative schools, found their schools supportive, thanks to close teacher-student relationships and flexible policies during this challenging period. Prior to the pandemic, Laura had struggled with chronic absenteeism, swirling around several schools and online programs. Her educational journey took a positive turn at Aspiration Academy, a small alternative school with just over 100 students. What benefited Laura the most was the school's flexible curriculum

that integrated online learning with in-person classes, allowing students to follow a self-paced schedule and drop in for help as questions arose. Laura was highly appreciative of the flexibility: "You can come in at any time of the day, and you can leave at any time of the day" (Interview #3). Since she had to balance full-time work at a hotel while attending school, this flexibility enabled her to maintain a somewhat balanced routine between work and study. For example, she was able to find time at her front desk job to work on class assignments online, using the computers at work during spare moments on her night shifts. In addition to teachers, each student was assigned a crew leader who helped them set daily learning goals and track progress. Reflecting on this support, Laura shared, "You can tell that the teachers there... really care about you" (Interview #3).

For Kode, whose home environment presented significant challenges, returning to in-person schooling provided a much-needed respite. She attended a specialized public school for approximately 400 newly arrived immigrant English learners. Unlike students in larger schools who faced frequent disruptions due to staff shortages, Kode described her school as stable and well-organized: "When one teacher got sick, what they do is to get a substitute and everything will just go normal, like always" (Interview #3). Additionally, she expressed strong appreciation for the academic and social support available through the closer teacher-student connections. In particular, she highlighted a school initiative where students were encouraged to go to different classrooms to participate in various learning activities and then share their perspectives with the school to influence decisions. From this experience, Kode felt that her voice was being heard. Recognizing the challenges the pandemic brought to immigrant families like Kode's, her school even introduced opportunities for students to earn money. These resources and support helped to keep Kode motivated and invested in school while going through the challenges of COVID and her tough relationships at home.

In addition to schools, we also found that some community-based organizations provided crucial support, in some cases making up for what the schools failed to provide. For example, in addition to considering her school overall supportive, Kode believed that the most useful help her school provided was connecting her to a local organization called *Dream House*, which specialized in helping students of color. This organization provided Kode with various supports, spanning from college education to expanding her professional networks:

They even helped me with college stuff and everything. They talk to me...I even got a scholarship of 1,000 dollar from that place...They have many connection[s] with different companies, different schools. And because I work there, and they just suggest that, oh, this is a good opportunity. (Interview #3)

With the help of *Dream House*, Kode was able to complete her college application and was accepted to a public university. In the last interview with us, Kode was consulting her mentors at *Dream House* to weigh her options of living in a dorm, which could help her stay away from the toxic relationship with her stepmother. This way, support available through school and *Dream House* bolstered Kode's agency in overcoming her challenge and moving forward with her life.

Jamie also found strength through community-based support, particularly through music. In 2021, they began learning guitar at a local music organization, *Illumination*, initially to cope with depression. As Jamie described, "At the beginning, I go to this music school and do stuff trying to keep depression at bay" (Interview #3), but after learning to play the guitar for several months, music became both a creative outlet and a source of confidence for them. Jamie even progressed from learning to play the guitar to teaching it, eventually securing an internship with a professional musician and envisioning a career in music therapy.

This way, Jamie's experience reflects both their own agency, which was shown through their resilience and evolving pursuit of music, and the crucial structural support a community-based organization provided to cultivate and sustain that agency.

Overall, our findings illustrate that while students exhibited strong agency in navigating the challenges associated with their marginalized identities, this agency was deeply shaped by the intersecting influences of their social positions and the structural conditions they encountered. Intersectionality was central to understanding how these structural conditions, such as race, immigration status, economic hardships, and gender identity, created complex barriers during the transition back to in-person schooling. At the same time, their agency was *situated* within the affordances and constraints of their immediate environments, including families, schools, and community-based organizations. These institutional and relational supports were crucial in either enabling or limiting their ability to persist academically and personally.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we have highlighted the experiences of five minoritized high school youth transitioning back to in-person schooling following the prolonged disruptions caused by COVID-19. Our findings reveal that each of the participants faced distinct challenges during the pandemic, yet they also demonstrated remarkable resilience and situated agency in navigating these difficulties. In this section, we elaborate on two key themes that emerged from our analysis: (a) the intersectional marginalization exacerbated by the pandemic and (b) how different contextual factors shaped students' situated agency in coping with the challenges. We also discuss the implications of our findings on research methodology, educational policies, and social support that would empower and better address the needs of minoritized youth.

First, through in-depth qualitative analyses, we demonstrated that returning to school was far more complex for minoritized students than merely easing back into pre-pandemic academic routines. Their intersecting marginalized identities—including race, SES status, immigrant backgrounds, linguistic barriers, and gender identities—not only magnified their vulnerabilities to various challenges but also complicated their ability to recover from them. This means multiple layers of hardship as they returned to school: Residual struggles that rose during remote learning combined with new challenges emerging during the school reopening. On top of academic challenges, Alex's financial pressures, Laura's chronic absenteeism and quasi-homelessness, Kode's traumatic home environment, Jamie's non-affirming family dynamic, and Amari's anxieties about family health concerns and lack of institutional response all vividly illustrate how intersectional identities shape their educational experiences (Crenshaw, 2013).

Second, our findings also make an important theoretical contribution by highlighting student agency as inherently situated. Despite the intersectional challenges our participants experienced, their stories are narratives of resilience and creativity in coping with these difficulties. However, while popular narratives often celebrate marginalized youth as agentic individuals (e.g., Williams et al., 2020) or emphasize individualistic interpretations of agency such as *grit* (Duckworth, 2016), our findings align with theories that define agency as relational and contextually mediated (McGann, 2014; Panelli et al., 2005). The students' stories underscore agency as something that emerges through dynamic interactions with the social structures and institutional contexts they inhabit. Therefore, it is more meaningful for educators and researchers to consider such interactions, i.e., what affordances and constraints their environments provide to their agency. For instance, Amari's resourcefulness was largely enabled by stable family relationships that provided emotional and practical

support. By contrast, Kode, Laura, and Jamie, while deprived of family support to a similar degree, found different kinds of support through schools and community-based organizations and integrated them into their coping strategies. For Alex, despite her family's financial struggles, her siblings' guidance and encouragement, the family's sense of cohesion, and their shared perseverance provided aspirational, familial, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) that contributed to her self-discipline in pursuing higher education. Thus, understanding such situatedness of their agency is essential for us to consider our roles as educators in students' learning experiences.

Methodologically, our study emphasizes the necessity and significance of elevating youth voices, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, in educational research. Although youth voice has gained attention, research still often marginalizes young people, limiting their involvement to tokenistic consultations or single-point data collections (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017) or reduced their complex experiences into simplistic deficit-based narratives by research focuses like learning loss (Ishimaru & Rodriguez, 2025). In contrast, by conducting multiple in-depth interviews over the course of a school year, we documented nuanced shifts in students' experiences, feelings, and strategies over time, thereby capturing their own narratives across home, school, and broader social contexts during the returning process. While pandemic-related limitations prevented us from collecting more diverse ethnographic data, we strived to strengthen the youth voice through repeated in-depth interviews. Future qualitative research should integrate sustained engagement with youth participants and field observations to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, particularly the complex, evolving experiences of youth marginalization and agency.

Our findings offer several theoretical and policy implications for supporting minoritized youth during periods of large-scale

and prolonged school disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. First, since student experiences are typically the results of multiple intersectional factors, any top-down educational policies that are created to address single factors, be it English learner identity (Kanno & Kangas, 2023) or students' SES (Eriksson et al., 2021), are unlikely to be effective solutions. Rather, new policy frameworks are needed to address the complexity of these marginalized youths' experiences. For example, a more autonomous school leadership informed by local knowledge is supported by COVID-related research (Fahle et al., 2024; Harme & Moss, 2023).

Second, our findings illuminate how institutional size and structure could influence students' educational experiences during disruptions. Across our cases, students in large, understaffed schools encountered greater barriers to engagement and support, whereas those in smaller, more specialized institutions experienced more flexible curricula, stronger relationships with adults, and greater opportunities for personalized guidance. Such differences suggest that the smaller schools might be better positioned to respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs during periods of instability. This is a particularly important consideration for policies regarding school consolidation as a response to enrollment and resource problems, such as a recent controversial plan to close or merge public schools in the Boston Public Schools system (Hilliard, 2025). Our findings emphasize the benefits of small, flexible educational environments for supporting marginalized students' complex needs.

Another takeaway is the need to reexamine how schools, families, and communities intersect in supporting youth, as our participants' experiences highlight the critical role they each play. It is important to acknowledge that school is just one part of this larger ecosystem, and that it cannot be treated in isolation. Yet schools often operate as if they are independent and central entities in students' lives, separate from communities

and families, which places the burden on youth to orchestrate competing demands, for example, when schools' pandemic policies fail to consider the diverse family needs. Moreover, our participants' experiences with the community-based organizations and youth programs show how these out-of-school time (Greer et al., 2024) spaces offer vital opportunities for healing, identity development, and support often unavailable in formal school settings. Recognizing this, schools should position themselves as part of the broader ecosystem surrounding students and actively partner with these different stakeholders to build more comprehensive support systems. Such partnerships are particularly crucial for addressing the challenges faced by marginalized students, especially during times when school-based services are disrupted.

## CONCLUSION

Listening to youth is essential to understanding the complexity of their lived experiences, especially during times of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the equally challenging process of recovering from it. This study illustrated how minoritized students navigated intersectional marginalization while also exercising remarkable agency. Centering their voice and focusing on their nuanced struggles provides a way to show their complex experiences, which could be overlooked or reduced to deficit narratives if viewed solely through lenses such as achievement gaps and learning loss. Through the lens of situated agency, we highlight how marginalization and agency are intertwined: Youth act within constraints, yet they draw on cultural and community resources in powerful ways. As educators and researchers, our responsibility is to unfold such complexity and respond with strategies that not only address challenges but also celebrate and leverage students' strengths. Schools should reimagine support systems that are attentive to students' situated experiences, enabling them to fully realize their potential as active agents of their own learning and futures.

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