



Introduction: Student Experiences of COVID-19 Around the Globe: Insights from the Pandemic Journaling Project

Heather M. Wurtz^{1,2,3} · Katherine A. Mason^{3,4} · Sarah S. Willen^{1,2}

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has taken a significant toll on the mental health of many students around the globe. In addition to the traumatic effects of loss of life and livelihood within students' families, students have faced other challenges, including disruptions to learning and work; decreased access to health care services; emotional struggles associated with loneliness and social isolation; and difficulties exercising essential rights, such as rights to civic engagement, housing, and protection from violence. Such disruptions negatively impact students' developmental, emotional, and behavioral health and wellbeing and also become overlaid upon existing inequities to generate intersectional effects. With these findings in mind, this special issue investigates how COVID-19 has affected the mental health and wellbeing of high school and college students in diverse locations around the world, including the United States, Mexico, Brazil, China, and South Africa. The contributions collected here analyze data collected through the Pandemic Journaling Project, a combined research study and online journaling platform that ran on a weekly basis from May 2020 through May 2022, along with complementary projects and using additional research methods, such as semi-structured interviews and autobiographical writing by students. The collection offers a nuanced, comparative window onto the diverse struggles that students and educators experienced at the height of the pandemic and considers potential solutions for addressing the long-term impacts of COVID-19. It also suggests a potential role for journaling in promoting mental wellbeing among youth, particularly in the Global South.

Keywords COVID-19 · Mental health · Global mental health · Health inequity · Students · Life projects

I really miss my friends. I miss going out to eat with them, like we did every week [before the pandemic]. I'm tired of video calls, which are better than nothing, but it's sad and depressing to me. Now I understand how our pets feel

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

when they never leave the house. After this pandemic, I am going to take my dog on a walk every day...¹

—Full-time student (male, age 19) living in Guanajuato, Mexico (July 2020)

Introduction

Worldwide, worsening mental health outcomes among youth were raising alarm bells even before COVID-19 struck, and these trends have only been exacerbated by the heightened stress associated with the pandemic, especially among young people whose lives are constrained by socio-political inequities (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Meanwhile, we see growing evidence that students at all levels, from elementary through post-graduate, are experiencing severe disruptions in education and declining academic outcomes (Viner et al., 2022). Despite growing awareness of these concurrent crises, the relationship between the two is not yet well understood. Particularly absent are the perspectives of youth and youth advocates themselves. In this special issue, we explore the relationship between disrupted educational landscapes and youth mental health by foregrounding young people's lived experiences of , especially in their capacity as students. The pieces bring together a diverse group of authors from the Global North and the Global South, including academics, educators and—crucially—students themselves.

As the contributions in this collection make clear, school closures during the COVID-19 crisis—which impacted over 1.5 billion children and youth across all education levels (Thanh Vu & Oral Savonitto, 2021)—had a significant impact on youth mental health. During the pandemic, many students struggled with depression, anxiety, and other mental health symptoms (Brausch et al., 2023; Elharake et al., 2022; Erden & Aliyev, 2023; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023; Panchal et al., 2021; Rauschenberg et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022; Washio et al., 2022; Yeasmin et al., 2020). In addition to the traumatic effects of loss of life and livelihood within many students' families, many also contended with severe disruptions to learning and work (Appleby et al., 2022; International Labor Organization, 2020; Kinzie & Cole, 2022); decreased access to health care services (Carretier et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Mambo et al., 2021; Merrick et al., 2023; Mmeje et al., 2020; Szucs, 2023); emotional struggles associated with loneliness and social isolation (Ernst et al., 2022; Loades et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2023); and difficulties exercising essential rights (Augusti et al., 2023; Cohen & Bosk, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2023; Kyeremateng et al., 2022; MacLachlan et al., 2022; Mogotsi et al., 2023), including rights to civic engagement, housing, and protection from violence. Such disruptions negatively impact the developmental, emotional, and behavioral health and wellbeing of students, and they become overlaid upon existing inequities in ways that can have

¹ Original Spanish quotation: “Realmente extraño mucho a mis amigos. Extraño las salidas a comer que hacíamos cada semana. Ya me cansé de las videollamadas que son mejor que nada, pero es muy triste y deprimente para mí. Ahora entiendo cómo se sienten las mascotas que nunca salen de casa. Después de esta pandemia voy a sacar a mi perro a pasear diario.”

intersectional² effects (Crenshaw, 1989; Haffeejee et al., 2023; Khoury et al., 2023; Schoon & Henseke, 2022). For instance, the negative consequences of the pandemic have been particularly hard for young women, youth from minoritized communities, and youth in low-income countries (Anders et al., 2022; Bessaha et al., 2023; Burns et al., 2023; MacNeil et al., 2022; Romano et al., 2023; Roulston et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2022).

Background

This special issue features three research articles, one perspectives essay, two commentaries, and a podcast, each taking a distinct perspective on students' experiences during the first several years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection analyzes data collected through the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), a combined research project and online journaling platform designed to chronicle everyday experiences of COVID-19 among ordinary people around the world (Mason et al., 2022; Willen et al., 2020; Wurtz, 2022). PJP was created by two of the guest editors of this special issue (KAM and SSW). The project's first phase (PJP-1) launched in May 2020 and continued on a weekly basis through May 2022.³ The platform, which ran in English and Spanish, was open to anyone in the world with access to a smartphone or computer, including teens aged 15–17 who received permission from a parent or guardian. Each week, participants were invited to create two journal entries, guided by suggested narrative prompts. Journal entries could be submitted in any combination of written, audio, or photo formats, and in any language. Between 2020 and 2022, nearly 27,000 journal entries were contributed to the platform by over 1800 people in 55 countries. Nearly a third of all PJP contributors ($n = 542$; 30%) identified as students.

The majority of student participants in PJP-1 were between 20 and 25 years old (69.37%), identified as female (72.14%), and resided in the United States (U.S.) (74%). The second most represented region of the world among student participants was Latin America, with nearly 8% of all student participants coming from Mexico. U.S.-based students identified with a variety of racial-ethnic backgrounds⁴ including White (30%), Hispanic or Latino (19%), Asian or Pacific Islander (11%), and Black (11%) (see Table 1).

² Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape, and often exacerbate, the impact of discrimination and social inequity (Crenshaw 1989).

³ After weekly journaling drew to a close, the PJP team adapted the platform in two key ways. First, PJP's second phase (PJP-2) invites participants around the world to create periodic journal entries about COVID-19's enduring impact in their lives on a quarterly as opposed to a weekly basis. Second, the team has developed a number of spin-off studies, including a three-year, National Science Foundation-funded study of the long-term impact of the pandemic on first-generation college students and their families.

⁴ Given the difficulty in translating U.S. racial/ethnic categories for global audiences, we asked about racial/ethnic background in two different ways. Participants who listed the U.S. as their country of residence were asked a closed-ended question based on U.S. census categories. Additionally, all participants, regardless of country of residence, were offered an opportunity to name the "racial or ethnic group(s) that best describes you" in a separate, write-in question. Here we report only responses to the closed-ended question.

The idea for this collection began to germinate in the second year of the pandemic, after PJP's bilingual platform had been running for over a year. At that point, over one-quarter of PJP participants were high school or university students. Many of their journal entries foregrounded the emotional difficulties of coping with school closures and related experiences such as social isolation, changing relationships with family and friends, and the loss of opportunities for personal and educational development. This large collection of student journals became a launching pad for subsequent sub-projects, including targeted analyses of students' shifting perspectives on evolving pandemic realities, as well as a major study of COVID-19's impact on first-generation college students and their families in the U.S. Three papers in this collection—by Flores and Mason (U.S.), Wurtz, Hernandez, and Baird (Mexico), and Mason and Xie (China)—analyze original PJP data along with data gathered using complementary methodologies. The papers explore the nuanced ways in which students in these three countries responded to broader structural changes during the pandemic, including shifts in living arrangements, new approaches to education, and altered family dynamics as a result of remote schooling and quarantine.

In addition to research papers that analyze PJP data, the special issue also includes contributions that explore the pedagogical and therapeutic value of online journaling in classroom settings. Since PJP's inception in May 2020, educators from nearly 20 colleges and universities around the world have engaged PJP in their coursework. The [Educator Resources page](#)⁵ on PJP's website was designed to support these efforts by providing sample assignments and suggesting ways to engage PJP in order to strengthen students' capacities for observation, reflection, and critical thinking. The potential value of online journaling in university classroom settings is the focus of contributions from Willen, Baines, and Ennis-McMillan, all university-based educators in the U.S., and from Vicente da Silva and colleagues, three Brazilian university students who participated in PJP in the classroom along with their professor, Laura Murray.

Two other contributions are based on collaborative engagement and dialogue between the PJP team and Global South partners who developed student- and youth-centered initiatives outside of classroom settings. First, Trok and Jacobs' commentary details the development of a writing group for Black South African secondary school students that involved weekly journaling along with other documentary approaches (e.g., audio recordings, photography).⁶ Second, Márquez Rodríguez outlines a digitally-based, youth-centered project that engaged marginalized young people in Mexico in weekly journaling on the PJP platform. Journaling was paired with a psychosocial intervention involving weekly therapeutic sessions and the creative use of media to create reflective episodes in a podcast. For both projects, the authors mobilized elements of the PJP model to engage collaboratively with young people in order to help amplify their voices while at the same time providing non-clinical opportunities for therapeutic support. These contributions also show how archival projects can meaningfully be adapted to the distinct contexts of young

⁵ <https://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/educators-2/>

⁶ The journals prepared by students in South Africa have been archived alongside the journals from PJP-1 at the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR) at Syracuse University (Jacobs, 2024).

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of students from PJP-1 sample

	#	%
Gender		
Female	391	72.14%
Male	131	24.17%
Other	18	3.32%
No answer	2	0.37%
Total	542	100%
Age		
<20	105	19.37%
20-25	376	69.37%
26-30	32	5.90%
30+	27	4.98%
No answer	2	0.37%
Total	542	100%
*Race		
Asian or Pacific Islander	53	11.25%
Black	50	10.62%
Caribbean or West Indian	3	0.64%
Hispanic or Latino	88	18.68%
Middle Eastern	2	0.42%
Native American or American Indian	6	1.27%
Other	2	0.42%
Two or more races	56	11.89%
White	141	29.94%
No answer	70	14.87%
Total	471	100%
Country of residency		
Australia	1	0.18%
Brazil	6	1.11%
Canada	8	1.48%
China	13	2.40%
Mexico	41	7.56%
South Africa	6	1.11%
United States of America	403	74.35%
Africa (other)	4	0.74%
Asia (other)	5	0.92%
Europe	19	3.51%
Latin America (other)	36	6.64%
Total	542	100%
Country of birth		
Australia	1	0.18%
Brazil	7	1.29%
Canada	4	0.74%
China	21	3.87%

Table 1 (continued)

	#	%
Mexico	44	8.12%
South Africa	7	1.29%
United States of America	344	63.47%
Africa (other)	8	1.48%
Asia (other)	24	4.43%
Europe	18	3.32%
Latin America (other)	61	11.25%
Total	542	100%

*Only asked in English survey

people’s lives, with attention to their specific positionalities, life stages, and social networks. In South Africa, for example, the writing group was of particular interest to secondary school students because it gave them the opportunity to practice their English and continue honing their writing skills during an extended period of school closures. For young people in Mexico, the combination of journaling, talk sessions with a therapist, and the opportunity to create a podcast episode—all using only a cell phone—had two-fold benefit. Not only did it give participants an outlet for their creativity by engaging audio recordings, music, and photography for the podcast, but it also provided respite from the solitude of isolation.

Grassroots Collaborative Ethnography

Since its inception in May 2020, PJP has been rooted methodologically, epistemologically, and ethically in a commitment to *grassroots collaborative ethnography* (Willen et al., 2022). We define grassroots collaborative ethnography as “a research approach that emphasizes both broad public accessibility and the coproduction of knowledge with our interlocutors” (Wurtz et al., 2022, p. 4), in part by “empowering people to see their own stories as worth telling, and sharing” (see Willen et al., 2023, this issue, p. 10). These commitments have informed every step of PJP’s collaborative work, including the design of the journaling platform, which was created to encourage broad participation and ease of use; our outreach efforts, which focused on ensuring that the voices of people often left out of the historical record would be documented for posterity; the platform’s download feature, which ensured that participants’ contributions would be theirs to keep; and our decision to archive PJP data in a data repository that others can access, now and into the future.⁷

⁷ For a period of 25 years, through 2048, PJP-1 data will be accessible to interested researchers via the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR) at Syracuse University (Willen & Mason, 2024). Researchers are required to obtain appropriate permissions and follow QDR data protection protocols as well as the procedures and policies of their own institutions’ IRBs. Beginning in 2049, all PJP-1 data will become a fully-accessible public archive through QDR.

We advance our commitments to collaborative knowledge production and community engagement by framing this special issue as a conversation among PJP participants, research colleagues, and community partners regarding the challenges—and opportunities for growth—experienced by students around the world during the first several years of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ Building on insights generated through this dialogue, we also highlight innovative models that have the potential to help mitigate mental health distress and support the wellbeing of students and their communities.

Our commitment to grassroots collaborative ethnography aligns with broader efforts in the social sciences to think more deeply and responsibly about researchers' obligations to their interlocutors, and to the communities with which we work (Bourgois, 2003; Farmer, 2009; Lassiter, 2005; Scheper-Hughes, 2000). As feminist scholars have argued since the 1970s, collaborative social science research methods that ensure research participants have control over how, and why, their stories are told can “yield more humane and dialogical accounts that more fully—and collaboratively—represent the diversity of experience” (Lassiter, 2005, p. 89; see also: Westcott, 1979; Klein, 1983). Producing publicly accessible research that is relevant to broader public concerns and populations will depend on ensuring that diverse perspectives and experiences are well-represented in our scholarship (Jaarsma, 2002).

A grassroots collaborative ethnography of student experiences of COVID-19 is important for two key reasons. First, community-based interventions to promote mental well-being and resilience among youth, especially during periods of crisis and in post-crisis contexts, are of growing interest to researchers, public health practitioners, and policymakers around the world (Azevedo et al., 2022; Campion et al., 2022; Haffejee et al., 2023). In countries where mental health services are scarce—including the Global South countries represented in this collection—the need for creative solutions that involve local knowledge systems and resources is especially urgent (Haffejee et al., 2023). Community leaders and youth are best equipped to impart emic knowledge, based on their lived experiences, about their communities' mental health challenges and needs. The successful design and implementation of solutions will hinge on their participation, and their perspectives.

Second, by showing how journaling can engage youth and foster coping and resilience, the contributions point toward a possible source of durable solutions to the mental health challenges youth currently face. A growing body of evidence has demonstrated that journaling, broadly defined, can provide therapeutic benefits for individuals contending with mental health challenges (Bandini et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kini et al., 2016; Pennebaker, 1997), including people from racially- and ethnically-minoritized populations (De Los Ríos, 2020; Khatib & Potash, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; Williams, 2019). To date, however, research on journaling among youth and young adults has yielded mixed results, making it difficult to evaluate its overall effectiveness (Travagin et al., 2015). The majority of studies on journaling and youth use psychological frameworks and outcome measures to evaluate the impact of specific writing

⁸ All contributions focus on student experiences during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific time period is specified within each piece.

interventions (e.g., expressive writing, gratitude journals), and they rarely capture young people's experiences with journaling from their own perspectives (Travagin et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies on journaling among youth in the Global South remain limited. This collection provides a unique contribution by elevating stories crafted by young adults on their own terms, in their medium of choice, in a space where they hold the reins over how they wish to represent themselves and the things that matter most to them (Eidse & Turner, 2014; Wurtz et al., 2022). In addition, we show how multimedia approaches to journaling (versus conventional writing-based approaches) can help young people cultivate their autonomy, leverage their creativity, and foster connections and collaboration with others (de Jager et al., 2017; Lambert & Hessler, 2018; Wang, 2006; Winton, 2016).

Overview of the Collection

The collection opens with three articles that explore the impact of COVID-19 on the mental wellbeing and educational trajectories of university students in three countries with divergent approaches to the pandemic: the U.S., Mexico, and China. These contributions shed light not only on the struggles that students experienced during the pandemic, but also on the moral frameworks, social practices, and networks of care that helped them to cope with hardship and adversity (Fischer, 2014; Myers, 2016; Ware et al., 2007). Each piece discusses a particular approach that students took to cope with the effects of the pandemic—including reciprocal care between students and their parents, enhanced engagement with technology, and emotional self-care. While each article takes a distinct, contextually-grounded approach, all highlight students' hopes and aspirations for the future, underscoring the centrality of students' "life projects" in cultivating resilience during a time of social crisis (Mattingly, 2014; Wexler et al., 2013).

In the first paper, "'You Would Think She Would Hug Me': Micropractices of Care between First-generation College Students and their Parents during COVID-19," Flores and Mason analyze PJP journals submitted by U.S.-based, first-generation college students and parents between October 2021 and May 2022, along with a series of interviews conducted with three student-parent dyads. The authors argue that what they term *micropractices of care*—the "little things" regularly exchanged between parents and students, like a kind word, small gift, or car ride—played a key role in supporting mental wellness and educational persistence early in the pandemic. They find that mental wellbeing among their interlocutors was best preserved when there was synchrony between practices offered by one dyad member and their reception by the other, and that mental health was often destabilized when there was asynchrony. These findings reveal creative strategies that have helped some "first-gen" families collaborate to support their shared mental wellness and student success during a time of crisis. The authors show how everyday mental wellness is forged in the intersubjective space between people engaged in the pursuit of shared life goals.

In the second paper, "Thriving Despite the Odds: Digital Capital and Reimagined Life Projects among Mexican College Students during COVID-19," Wurtz,

Hernandez, and Baird shift gears to examine experiences of virtual learning among college students in Mexico. The authors describe how students coped with the disruptions of COVID-19 by leveraging “digital capital,” or digital competencies and access to technology (Ragnedda, 2020), often in ways that supported or helped expand their imagined life projects (Chua, 2014; Mattingly, 2014). By cultivating and drawing upon digital capital, students were able to carve out new approaches to social support; develop professional capacities; and consider perspectives about the potential for technology to promote a more inclusive society. The authors conclude that students’ renewed sense of purpose in their educational activities, as nested within their broader life projects and made possible through engagement with technology, not only motivated them to stay in school, but also helped them cope with the mental health distress and isolation generated by pandemic conditions. Their findings show how access to, and use of, technological resources can alternately perpetuate or disrupt social inequities.

In the third paper, “Seesaw Precarity: Journaling Anxious Hope on a Chinese University Campus During COVID-19,” Mason and Xie draw on journal entries submitted to PJP by students at a university in Guangzhou, China. The article, co-written by the students’ former teacher (JX) and one of PJP’s co-founders (KAM), examines the experiences of a group of Chinese university students who spent nearly their entire college experience living in a state of what Mason and Xie call “seesaw precarity.” For long periods, daily life for students in China was characterized by unpredictable and at times wild swings between openness and closedness, relative freedom of movement and immobility. Amidst the considerable mental distress these swings caused students, however, the authors also observed what they refer to as “anxious hope”—a relentless “can-do attitude” of optimism embedded in feelings of deep anxiety. For students, the knowledge that they might suddenly become trapped in their dormitory rooms at any moment was extremely unsettling. Yet the very real possibility of freedom from quarantine at any moment—and a high level of confidence, heavily promoted by government messaging, that their sacrifices would eventually result in a decisive end to the pandemic—nurtured a sense of hope that helped them weather prolonged periods of uncertainty and precarity. The authors’ findings suggest that concerted efforts to engage in emotional self-care can help support the viability of both long-term infection control measures and the acceptability of suddenly abandoning those measures.

The next three contributions explore the role that journaling can play in the toolkits of educators and those who design community interventions for youth. In “Cultivating Voice and Solidarity in Times of Crisis: Ethnographic Online Journaling as a Pedagogical Tool,” three U.S.-based medical anthropologists, Willen, Baines, and Ennis-McMillan, reflect on their experiences bringing PJP into their classrooms during the tumultuous first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors, who include one of PJP’s co-founders (SSW) and two faculty members who invited multiple cohorts of students to engage with PJP in their classes (KB and MEM), discuss how ethnographic journaling helped them meet their pedagogical aims while also supporting students’ mental health and wellbeing. In the authors’ experiences, ethnographic journaling offered students opportunities to recognize and value their own perspectives as both observers and analysts of the turbulent world around them—in

part by illuminating connections between course content on health, healing, and (in)justice and the real-life pandemic circumstances they were living through.⁹ For many students, ethnographic journaling had additional benefits as well, among them helping to reduce feelings of isolation, fostering solidarity and social support, and helping to address social dimensions of student distress. The authors conclude by considering how these insights can support pedagogical approaches that mesh classroom learning with efforts to promote student mental health and wellbeing.

The next two essays highlight initiatives in which local educators leveraged ethnographic journaling methods to engage youth in Global South settings in locally relevant ways. Trok and Jacobs' commentary, "Reaching Out from Lockdown: A Writing Group for Young Black South Africans," offers a window onto the potential value of journaling for secondary school students in South Africa. The authors describe a project they developed as a way for rural Black South African high school students to chronicle their own pandemic experiences and document the changing world around them. For Trok (an educator and author of young adult literature) and Jacobs (a historian), ensuring that voices of rural Black students in South Africa were part of the historical record was a key priority. While many students journaled in written format, some integrated photos and interviews with family members in their reflections as well. Like Willen and colleagues (2023, this issue), Trok and Jacobs found that this flexible and open-ended approach to journaling was able to support student wellbeing and also generate social support through the formation of kin-like ties between mentor and students.

The therapeutic potential of journaling also figures centrally in the final commentary, "Writing to Create, Mend, and Rebel: Three Reflections on Journaling as *Escrevivência* for Afro-Brazilian Public University Students during COVID-19," by Murray, a professor at a Brazilian university, and three of her students, Vicente da Silva, Assunção Alves, and Ribeiro Montenegro. In this piece, students reflect on journal entries they submitted to PJP between December 2021 and May 2022. This was during Brazil's period of isolation—the time in which Black and Indigenous communities suffered the country's highest numbers of deaths, due in large part to extreme inequality and structural racism. Central to their contribution is the idea of *escrevivência*, a writing practice developed by the Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo (2017), in which writing functions as a way to elevate voices that have been left out of historical accounts. The practice of *escrevivência* offers the student authors, all of them from Afro-Brazilian backgrounds, a meaningful framework for reflecting on what they learned about themselves by writing about their pandemic experiences. Their narratives take on three-fold meaning: as acts of resistance and collective responsibility; as a way of documenting untold histories; and as a form of revolt against neoliberal, colonial, and racist logics. In this context, writing in general, and journaling in particular, become necessary forms of action, protest, and possibility for creating futures that are more equal and more just.

In the final contribution, Mexican researcher and youth advocate Márquez Rodríguez introduces the *Escucha* podcast project, the culmination of an eight-week

⁹ Sample assignments can be found on PJP's Educator Resource page: <https://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/educators-2/>

program for youth and young adults from various locations across Mexico. In this project, which Márquez Rodríguez spearheaded during the second year of the pandemic, participants engaged in weekly journaling on the PJP platform in combination with individual phone sessions with Márquez Rodríguez or another youth mental health specialist who provided psychosocial support. Participants' poignant audio accounts convey not only their struggles, but also the ways in which their perspectives—on society, their relationships, and their sense of self—shifted because of those experiences. Their testimonies also highlight resources that helped them cope with and overcome difficult life experiences, including the empowering process of naming their emotions and, above all, the experience of being heard. In the podcast, Márquez Rodríguez describes listening as a “revolutionary act.” We find evidence of this claim in podcast participants' reflections on the therapeutic value of their participation in the podcast project, in which they felt recognized and in solidarity with others, despite the isolating conditions of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Taken together, the papers in this collection have far-reaching empirical, methodological, therapeutic, and theoretical implications. In empirical terms, they illuminate common drivers of pandemic-related mental distress among young people in a wide range of sociocultural and sociopolitical settings. By presenting first-person perspectives on how pandemic challenges have unfolded for students in real time, the collection sheds new light on the emotional impact of these various drivers. These include social isolation and prolonged uncertainty; difficulties with online schooling; intra-family tensions; financial instability; frustration with disrupted life plans; and the illness and loss of loved ones. For many young people, existing inequities have compounded the impact of the pandemic and further constrained their life possibilities—for example, by increasing exposure to risk, or by limiting access to material resources.

In addition to spotlighting students' pandemic challenges, the collection also has therapeutic implications. Especially for students living under challenging circumstances, journaling offered a helpful way to cope with and resist hardship and adversity, cultivate agency, and engage in meaningful practices of creativity, solidarity, and mutual care. For many students, contextualizing and historicizing the present moment helped them think critically about and find meaning in their experiences, especially amid the physical immobilization and existential “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009) of the pandemic. Educational activities involving journaling helped some students maintain a sense of purpose and a focus on their future aspirations and life projects. They also helped some students cultivate resilience, at times through intersubjective practices of family support (Flores & Mason, 2023, this issue) and emotional self-care (Mason & Xie, 2024, this issue), or by leveraging digital capital (Wurtz et al., 2023, this issue). We also see how opportunities to journal, either alone or in combination with activities such as classroom discussion (Willen et al., 2023, this issue) and media production (Márquez Rodríguez, 2024, this issue), can help students process complex emotions, engage in critical and creative thinking,

feel less alone in their experiences, and deepen their understanding of how oppression and inequity yield uneven life chances—both in their own lives and in society more broadly.

While more research is needed, these findings highlight the potential of journaling as an extra-clinical therapeutic tool—either on its own or alongside community-building interventions—that can bolster educators’ capacity to create caring, supportive learning spaces in which students can learn to process their experiences in creative ways. Evidence from non-educational contexts has shown that journaling may be an effective intervention for mental health support as an adjunct to standard forms of therapy such as talk therapy or pharmaceutical treatment (Graf et al., 2008; Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007; Redwine et al., 2016; Sohal et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2018). Research to date has focused primarily on the treatment of specific mental health disorders (e.g., addiction, depression)—and, importantly, it has focused on clinical settings (Crawley et al., 2018; Redwine et al., 2016; Schache et al., 2020). In this collection, we extend these findings by demonstrating how journaling activities in educational and community settings, such as classroom dialogue (Willen et al., 2023, this issue) or “active listening” phone sessions with a youth advocate (Márquez Rodríguez, 2024, this issue), can complement psychosocial support to promote mental health and wellbeing among youth.

Finally, the contributions collected here offer powerful evidence that an explicit focus on archival activism, which Carney (2021) describes as “radical history-making activities performed by ordinary people” outside of institutions of power, can further enhance the impact of journaling, particularly for students from marginalized populations. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted the educational trajectories of many students, which significantly hampered their ability to pursue what Mattingly (2014) describes as “ground projects”—their ability “to live in keeping—or at least in conversation—with the values, ideals, and moral commitments that define our sense of who we are in relation to ourselves, our loved ones, and the communities to which we feel connected” (Willen, 2019, p. 17). For students from modest backgrounds, especially first-generation college students and students from the Global South, successfully completing their education was a key step toward achieving what they and their families considered to be a “good life” (Mattingly, 2014; Fischer, 2014; Chua, 2014; Myers, 2016; Willen, 2019). When COVID-19 threatened to halt or postpone the achievement of their goals, many students felt they were losing control over their life trajectories—and their life narratives—and struggled with mental health challenges as a result. For some, the opportunity to record their own experiences—and, furthermore, to know that their narratives would become part of the historical record—helped mitigate these effects.

Not only did this form of story-telling help students process difficult life events in realtime, but it also helped them cultivate a sense of agency over their longer-term life trajectories by bolstering their sense of “autobiographical power” (Myers & Tali, 2016). This effect was especially evident among youth from marginalized communities, who often have fewer opportunities to voice their perspectives or see themselves represented in public conversation than students from more privileged backgrounds (Eidse & Turner, 2014). Students learned that their voices mattered, that their lives were worthy of recording in the history books, and that the wider

world could and should know what was happening to them. As one student author put it, “I feel a growing responsibility for how each written word will be read in the future, and how it will echo in different bodies and minds. I want to keep writing about these pandemic times, with the possibility of learning from the past, creating another present, and freeing a future imprisoned by the capitalist-neoliberal system” (Vicente da Silva et al., 2024, this issue). For at least some students, journaling with PJP gave them hope that they could create change in their own communities.

In short, the contributions to this collection highlight the value of making space in our classrooms, and in our research projects, for journaling and other creative, history-making interventions that elevate the voices of those often left out of the history books. Endeavors like these have strong human rights implications. They can deliver on human rights-based commitments to conducting research that is participatory and collaborative, and in which participants play a significant role in deciding what kind of knowledge is going to be collected, on what terms, and for what purposes (Wurtz, 2022). In addition, efforts like these may also have at least three forms of salutary effect: They can support the mental health, wellbeing, and resilience of our students; they can provide a platform for young people to write towards societal change; and they can contribute to the crucial work of decolonizing knowledge production (Mbembe, 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). By experimenting with innovative forms of research collaboration and pedagogical experimentation, this collection reflects values that many of the students represented in this special issue modeled for us: recognition of the urgent need for change, and an insistence that hope for change is both possible, and necessary.

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Authors and Affiliations

Heather M. Wurtz^{1,2,3} · **Katherine A. Mason**^{3,4} · **Sarah S. Willen**^{1,2}

✉ Heather M. Wurtz
heather.wurtz@uconn.edu

¹ Research Program on Global Health and Human Rights, Human Rights Institute, University of Connecticut, 405 Babbidge Road, U-1205, Storrs, CT 06269, USA

² Department of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, 354 Mansfield Road, Unit 1176, Storrs, CT 06226, USA

³ Population Studies and Training Center, Brown University, 68 Waterman Street, Providence, RI 02912, USA

⁴ Department of Anthropology, Brown University, 128 Hope Street, Providence, RI 02912, USA