

Navigating the “Dual Pandemics”: The Cumulative Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Rise in Awareness of Racial Injustices among High School Students of Color in Urban Schools

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Abstract

We explored the psychological and educational impact of distance learning during the COVID-19 and racial injustice pandemics. The sample included 19 urban high school students of Color from the San Francisco Bay Area. Interview data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis revealing seven themes: (1) challenges learning from home; (2) shifts that impact students' experience with school; (3) emotions emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic; (4) increased awareness and engagement related to racial

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injustices; (5) emotional reactions to the rise in awareness to racial injustices; (6) shifts in identity due to social isolation; and (7) coping strategies and support needed.

Keywords

Racism, Social, School Counselors, Urban Education, Adolescent, Subjects, Pandemics, Racial injustice, Covid-19

More than two years after the world first “shut-down” due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, most US public school districts have moved to some form of in-person classes. Yet, we are still grappling with the ongoing threat of new Coronavirus variants that fuel our uncertainty about the future of schooling. The inequities emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic have been further exacerbated by ongoing racial injustices highlighted by the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020 and hate crimes targeting the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. We seek to better understand the psychological, social, and educational impact of distance learning and social isolation on students’ lives by exploring the experiences of a sample of urban high school students of Color as they navigate these “dual pandemics”: the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased attention to ongoing racial injustices.

Why Urban Schools?

We define “urban education” using Milner’s (2012) conceptual framing of school contexts that are *urban intensive* or centered “in large, metropolitan cities across the United States” (p. 559). These schools are unique due to their size and density and because they are situated in large cities. We focus on the San Francisco Bay Area as an urban site not only because of its long history dealing with challenges associated with poverty, housing, and a lack of educational resources, but also because of its well-established commitment to combating racial injustices. We believe it is important to understand how students of Color in this particular urban context and sociopolitical moment navigate and cope with the dual pandemics and its associated challenges. We are also concerned with how urban schools respond to this moment in terms of culturally relevant pedagogies and counseling support.

“Dual Pandemics”

Writers have used the term “twin pandemics” to describe the complications Black individuals have experienced during COVID-19 due to racial inequities

and a rise in awareness of police brutality (Stolberg, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2021a) has expanded this idea to the “four pandemics” to include COVID-19, racism, the threat of economic collapse, and the climate crisis. She asserts that the pandemics can provide an opportunity for PK-12 schools and universities to engage in an “reset” that can move toward justice (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). We use the term “dual pandemics” to refer to current events happening alongside one another. However, we recognize that referring to racial injustices as a *pandemic* (Shullman, 2020) is flawed and does not fully encapsulate the historical context of White supremacy (Patton, 2020).

There are very few studies about the cumulative impact of both racial injustices and COVID-19 perhaps, due to the lack of data collected and shared by public health agencies (Pilecco et al., 2020). The COVID Tracking Project at The Atlantic (2021), offers data on COVID-19 cases and deaths by state and race, revealing that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), with Black people suffering at the highest rates. In addition to the increased risk of COVID-19, the high-profile police killings of unarmed Black and Brown individuals have reignited the discussion of police brutality directed towards this community. Wrigley-Field (2020) found that racial inequality is more deadly for Black individuals than COVID-19 is for Whites, underscoring the connection between racial stress and health disparities (Goosby & Heidbrink, 2013). There has also been an increase in anti-AAPI discrimination and violence stemming from COVID-19 rhetoric and racial slurs such as “China Virus” and “Kung Flu”. In fact, between March 19, 2020 to September 30, 2021, 10,370 incidents of anti-AAPI racism were reported to Stop AAPI Hate (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021), demonstrating the increased risk of the dual pandemics for AAPI communities (Cheng & Conca-Cheng, 2020).

Yet, during these racial injustices and subsequent social protests, many students remained at home, socially isolated. In fact, the shift of many students to distance learning illuminates how the ecological contexts and dynamics of home, family, peers, and school, reciprocally inform one another to impact students’ education, relationships, and mental health (Yeh et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1992) is a helpful framework to understand how students are navigating multiple roles, relationships, settings, and systems during the dual pandemics. It also underscores the fact that

students learn in a variety of settings--not just at school (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). Bronfenbrenner posits that students develop from interactions across five ecological systems. The *microsystem* comprises people or things that are directly associated with the student, such as parents, guardians, siblings, extended family, teachers and school peers. The *mesosystem* is the interaction of two or more microsystems. For example, a parent-teacher conference is a merger of the parent and teacher microsystems. The *exosystem* includes contexts that indirectly impact student development because they directly influence someone or something that is part of the student's microsystem. Examples of the *exosystem* include their parent's job site or friends, mass media, and the surrounding neighborhood. The *macrosystem* encompasses the larger cultural context, such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the racial conditions of the student's setting. The *chronosystem* are any transitions or changes that occur throughout a student's life. Some examples include the COVID-19 pandemic, parental job loss, social protests, and presidential elections.

Each of these ecological systems interacts with another, influencing a student's learning in complex ways. For example, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, students' *microsystems* shifted primarily to home, but they were still impacted by the *exosystem*, such as social media, especially during a time of heightened awareness of racial injustices. The dual pandemics also shaped their *chronosystems*, through social and historical events (e.g., the 2020 presidential election). Using ecological systems theory, we argue that the ways urban schools respond to the dual pandemics, both in school and in the community, are vital to the ways students engage in their learning and navigate structural oppression and racial injustices. Understanding students' challenges and strengths during the dual pandemics also informs culturally relevant pedagogy and counseling in urban schools (Borrero et al., 2021).

COVID-19 and Racial Injustices Impact on Learning and Mental Health

At the time of this writing, we could not locate any research studies focusing on the cumulative impact of the dual pandemics on high school students of Color. However, a few studies examined the link between COVID-19 racism and mental health. Cheah et al. (2020) found that COVID-19 experiences of racial discrimination were associated with high levels of general anxiety disorder and depressive symptoms in both children and their parents. Koo et al., (2021) explored experiences and perceptions of racism among 18 international students from six different countries using virtual

focus group interviews. The participants described explicit discrimination and fear of threats, feelings of being unwelcome and unsafe, and balancing the tension between relief and isolation during quarantine.

Racial disparities also impact learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The US Department of Education conducted an investigation on fourth and eighth-grade students that found racial disparities in reopening plans. In January and February of 2021, only 27% of White students were learning fully remotely compared to 56% of Hispanic, 58% of Black, and 68% of Asian American Pacific Islander students. The disparities may be due to location, school resources, or family choice (Kamenetz, 2021). For example, many AAPI students continued with distance learning due to increases in AAPI hate crimes and the fear of returning to in-person schooling (Balingit et al., 2021).

Recent research has also focused on the social, emotional, and educational impact of COVID-19, especially among school-age children and youth. Bruner et al. (2020) shared the stories of eight high school seniors, who expressed themes such as grief in losing the school community and activities and challenges in learning from home. They also shared positive outcomes stemming from the pandemic, including engaging in creative hobbies and spending more time with family. Fitzpatrick et al. (2021) used mixed methods to investigate the mental health concerns and needs of children, youth, and their caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic and found significant behavioral and emotional needs for children.

Another large quantitative study ($n = 1512$) based in Italy explored middle and high-school students' emotional response to the pandemic and found that adolescents were more depressed, anxious, and less interested in activities than an adult control group (Povero et al., 2022). Gazmararian et al. (2021) investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of 761 students from two semi-rural high schools in Georgia using a cross-sectional, one-time online survey. They found that close to 25% of respondents were extremely/very worried about the pandemic with higher rates found among students who are racial/ethnic minorities, of lower socioeconomic class, female, and in higher grades. Although this study highlighted the added stressors experienced by low-income female students of Color, it did not research the stress of racism and racial protests, especially as it impacted students of Color in urban schools.

The dual pandemics may affect students of Color in multiple ways. Many students received school-based mental health support and the loss of in-person counseling may exacerbate student mental health concerns (Thahkur, 2020). The disruption in normal routine combined with social isolation and loss of community support systems may negatively impact

students' mental health, especially when students are repeatedly encountering social media reports and posts about racial injustices.

Purpose of the Present Study

We explored how urban high school students navigated and coped with the dual challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of a rise in awareness of racial injustices. We also investigated students' perceptions of resources in urban schools to help identify needed support systems. Hence, our research questions are as follows: (1) How did the move to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic impact high school students of Color and their experience of schooling and learning? (2) What challenges do high school students of Color face in and out of school as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? (3) How has the increased attention to, and awareness of, racial injustices impact high school students of Color, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? and (4) What school-based supports and resources do high school students of Color need to support them in their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and with racial injustices?

Method

Participants. Participants included 19 high school students (11 female and 8 male) across 13 high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. In terms of racial background, seven identified as Black/African-American, six identified as Latinx, four identified as Asian American, two as biracial. The participants ranged in age from 14 to 18, with a mean age of 16. Twelve participants qualified for free or reduced lunch, six did not qualify, and one did not disclose. We used free or reduced lunch as an indicator of socioeconomic status (Pérez-Gualdrón et al., 2016).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a school-based college access program primarily serving historically excluded and first-generation students across multiple high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. The program was facilitated by school counselors and during the stay-at-home order, the program was offered virtually. After the program, students were invited to participate in a paid interview. We interviewed students in order of who responded to us. We continued to interview until we reached saturation, when additional interviews did not present new themes, resulting in 19 interviews. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

We collected data from participants via semi-structured interviews (45–60 min) using a video-conferencing platform. We conducted 17 of the interviews in English and two in Spanish, and audiotaped and transcribed the recordings shortly after the interview was completed. Spanish interviews were translated into English and back translated for semantic equivalence and accuracy (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Interview Protocol. The *COVID-19 and Racial Injustices Interview Protocol* is a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the authors for the purpose of the study (Table 1). The questions were developed based on (1) literature on COVID-19 and education and racial injustice; (2) the authors' counseling experience in working with urban high school students of Color during the dual pandemics; and (3) feedback from an expert in education and racial injustices research. The interview questions were divided into the following areas: (a) reflections going to school during the shelter-in-place order; (b) challenges with "going to school" from home and due to COVID-19 more generally; (c) their experiences with, and perceptions of, the increase attention to racial injustices; (d) students' self-reflections; (e) school counseling interactions and resources; and (f) support needed. Each section of the interview first began with open-ended questions then specific follow-up questions were used as needed. Prior to the interview, participants had also completed a demographic information sheet.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006), a theoretically flexible approach to open coding which has been used in numerous fields including counseling psychology and education (Braun & Clarke, 2020). RTA analyzes qualitative data by answering general or more specific research questions about an individual's experiences and perceptions of certain phenomena. It is inductive and deductive, semantic and latent, as well as critical realist and constructionist, or a combination of these. Moreover, congruent with our ecological approach, the context of the participants is considered.

Since RTA acknowledges the influence of the researchers' lived experiences and biases, the authors met weekly to discuss their expectations and biases associated with the research questions. We expected some students to feel isolated, anxious, or sad due to the shelter-in-place orders. We also expected many of the students to feel anger, stress, and worry about the increase in awareness of racial injustices. We also thought the students would share challenges related to learning online and not having access to teachers, counselors, school staff, and other resources in person.

Table 1. The COVID-19 and Racial Injustices Interview Protocol.

Section	Interview questions
School experiences	<p>Where were you when the shelter in place took effect in March?</p> <p>What was it like to be a student during shelter in place overall?</p> <p>During the pandemic who helped you through this time? How did they support you?</p> <p>How would you describe your experiences with your school this past semester?</p> <p>What experiences were meaningful or useful to you as a student?</p> <p>What challenges did you experience associated with shelter in place? with distance learning?</p>
COVID-19 Challenges	<p>What kinds of challenges did you face as a result of COVID-19 pandemic? (Note: ask about each challenge)</p> <p>How has COVID-19 affected your family?</p> <p>How has this been for you?</p> <p>Could you describe your feelings during shelter in place? (Note: probe for examples of different feelings)</p> <p>Can you describe the ways you have dealt with the challenging times?</p> <p>How has your experience with COVID-19 impacted your responsibilities at home? (Note: ask for examples)</p> <p>How did you cope with these challenges? (Note: coping strategies may differ for each challenge so ask specifically about each challenge mentioned)</p>
Experiences and awareness of, racial injustices	<p>Did you experience racism or were you targeted due to your race or background during the Covid-19 pandemic? (Note: give examples of xenophobia to normalize)</p> <p>If yes, can you describe this/these encounters? (Note: ask about each one)</p> <p>Did you or a loved one experience unfair policies or practices during this time?</p> <p>If so, please describe.</p> <p>What types of injustices did you become aware of during this time?</p> <p>How were you impacted by the increased public awareness of racial injustices?</p>

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Section	Interview questions
Students' self-reflections	How did this racial injustice pandemic make you feel?
	Can you describe some of your experiences with this?
	How did you cope with these challenges? (Note: coping strategies may differ for each challenge so ask specifically about each challenge mentioned)
	What do you think it will take for our country to heal and move forward?
	In thinking about the two pandemics (Covid-19 and racial injustices), What have you learned about yourself?
School counseling interactions and resources	How have you changed due to these pandemics (Covid-19 and racial injustices)?
	How do you think differently about yourself and identity? How has your identity changed or shifted?
	What words would you use to describe yourself before the pandemic? How about now?
	What kind of contact did you have with your school counselor this past spring and this fall?
	What kind of interactions would you have liked with them?
Support needed	What kind of support or resources did you have access to?
	What kinds of resources would you have wanted?
	How would you describe the role of the school counselor during shelter in place?
	In the ideal world, how could this role be reimaged so it would be more meaningful to you?
	Who do you turn to for support during the pandemics?
What other support do you feel you need at this time?	
What have I not asked you about that you would like to share with me? Do you have any questions?	

Coding in RTA is a collaborative process that does not focus on inter-rater reliability but on how the researchers' unique perspectives on the same data supports the development of themes and subcategories. Themes are not

considered emergent, but as conceptualized and established from the data and centered on the research questions. In RTA, themes are created to represent participants' accounts and meanings. The use of an ecological theoretical framework gives the raters multiple interactive contexts to consider, but the analyses are not bound to an ecological framework (for example, we do not code for *microsystems*). The researcher serves as a storyteller of the data through their own perceptions and positionality, academic background, cultural identities, and ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since we were guided by our research questions, prior research, and student reports, we chose a deductive, semantic, critical realist coding method.

Three raters read each of the transcripts and began open coding to develop themes and subcategories based on participants' experiences and our research questions. We used axial coding to bring together related codes which then led to our main themes. We used selective coding to finalize our most common and meaningful themes and subcategories using our own perceptions and viewpoints. As a measure of trustworthiness, we asked an auditor (an educational expert in culturally relevant pedagogy and racial injustices) to review our transcripts and themes and offer feedback in terms of clarity, meaningfulness, and relevance to our research questions (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Results

We identified seven main themes that participants experienced related to the "dual pandemics": (1) challenges learning from home; (2) shifts that impact students' experience with school; (3) emotions emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic; (4) increased awareness and engagement related to racial injustices; (5) emotional reactions to the rise in awareness to racial injustices; (6) shifts in identity due to social isolation; and (7) coping strategies and support needed. Below we discuss each theme, related subcategories, and representative quotes from the participants (pseudonyms are used).

Theme 1: Challenges Learning from Home

All of the students expressed various difficulties that emerged when they moved to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we identified four subcategories: (a) challenges in motivation, (b) family obligations, (c) technology/physical space issues, and (e) financial stress. These subcategories highlighted the psychological, familial, logistical, and financial

stressors that students experienced. Specifically, all of the students interviewed described *challenges in motivation*. Greg (Asian American male, 17) states:

And that's when I felt really unmotivated. I didn't go to school at all online. I just didn't like it. I didn't like how it changed so much and I wasn't really prepared for that. So, I just didn't go to school. I didn't know what to do.

Another student explained, “during this time it is really easy to lose motivation and like, not wake up. Like, you have classes, but like, I want to sleep in, you know” (Kayla Black, female, 16). These quotes reveal how hard it was for students to feel motivated to attend school online.

Many students also shared that when they went to school online at home, there were many *family obligations* that hindered their ability to concentrate in classes and distracted them from school. For example, Kayla (Black female, 16) mentioned:

We all go to school, except for my parents, of course, and I have an adopted sister who has special needs. And so, I was like, how's that gonna work? Like she can't walk or talk or anything. How was her school gonna work?

This is an example of how students had to deal not only with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also had to navigate an increase in family obligations and health issues while simultaneously going to school. It is clear from Kayla's quote that she was worried about how accessible school would be for her younger sister as well.

With distance learning, almost all of the students faced *technology/physical space issues* such as having limited internet access or a private or quiet place where they could attend class online and be able to concentrate. As Carla (Latina female, 15) stated:

Um, I felt a little bit sad. I didn't know if anybody else was experiencing it. But then I heard other students were also having like, glitchy situations with their Zooms and couldn't hear. Everything on the screen was frozen.

In addition, many students mentioned not having a space of their own to do school work and not being able to concentrate while in school. As Talia (Latina, female, 16) describes:

Yes, my sister and I had disagreements. At the time, we were living with my grandparents, so we shared a room and we were both there with our computers. I could hardly concentrate and I couldn't go outside (the bedroom) because my grandparents were talking.

During the pandemic, many workers shifted to remote learning, or lost their jobs creating cramped rooms in the home. Hence, families went to school and worked remotely in shared spaces. Talia's quote illuminates how difficult it was for students to be in a small space and how it impacted their learning.

Participants also discussed the hardship of the pandemic in terms of *financial stress*. As Ricardo (Latino male, 18) mentioned:

Right now, my mom is the only one working...and she works with kids and so she's like, at a higher risk. I know that my mom is struggling like, keeping me at bay and keeping like, the house at bay and keeping the house stacked up with food and her being the only salary that's coming into the house.

Another student, Greg, (Asian American male, 17) stated:

My mom is unemployed, she actually got laid off this year, and she doesn't have any kind of (education) degree. So, we're kind of struggling with that... with money and we always have to think about how we're gonna have dinner. How we can balance out because there's not one person paying for it all the time. Like, sometimes I'll chip in or my brother will. So that kind of turned into an obligation.

During the pandemic, many households experienced dramatic changes in their financial and occupational status. For example, Greg did not qualify for free or reduced lunch before the pandemic, but with his mother being laid off he then became eligible. In fact, we found that the interviewees who qualified for free or reduced lunch were more likely to discuss financial hardship during the pandemic and more likely to have responsibilities at home than those who did not qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Theme 2: Shifts That Impact Students' Experience with School

Data reveal that participants experienced many educational changes which impacted their learning and social experiences. The subcategories include: (a) lack of school communication and (b) missing friends and activities. Most of the students described a *lack of school communication* which resulted from COVID-19 specifically in regards to the plan for distance learning. Noah (Black male, 18) described:

We're getting ready for our first track meet and we were walking there. And then while we had to check our bags in our hand someone pulled out their phone and saw an announcement and said "guys, track is canceled." And

then when we went back everybody at the school was kind of just lost. And then we left early. We didn't come back to the school for about you know, for weeks and weeks and then you know, we didn't know if school was going to be cancelled completely.

Another student Talia, (Latina female, 10) stated:

Well, at first, we weren't sure if we were going to come back but then we said to ourselves that we were going to come back and that we wouldn't stay online. At first you were that happy because you can be home and I wasn't going to get up early and I usually try to eat while walking to school and I don't have to walk anymore. But after being here (home) for so long, I think I realized that being a student online is something of a deficit. And I think it is not something for me because makes learning difficult.

Participants also described a lack of communication from their teachers. Joel (Asian American male, 18) described:

It's also hard because it's if we were in school, we would be able to talk to teachers about our grades, go to their classrooms, you know, talk to them how to get better like our grades like personally my grades are okay. But it's like sometimes it drops. Sometimes it needs to be better, especially with my AP class because I take AP calculus and that's really difficult. So, it's like in school, we would be able to go to tutoring sessions, but now all we have are office hour links and it's hard because we are in class all day through Zoom. So, we don't want to go to another Zoom class just for tutoring. It's also hard because like if we email a teacher, we're not really sure if they can see that email and teachers have a lot of emails that they have to go through on a daily basis. So, it's kind of hard for them to respond in the time that you need them to respond.

Moreover Abraham (Biracial male, 16) stated:

I'd honestly say it's better and easier to go to our friends for help, than the teacher directly because they themselves are getting swamped with so many emails from students in our situation...you know, asking a question could take days to answer.

Along with distance learning, most of the students expressed their feelings about *missing friends and activities*. Joel (Asian American male, 18) reported:

I missed like half of my junior year...I didn't get to do my volleyball season and started off my senior year not doing anything, not being able to see anybody. So, it's kind of upsetting because like, we don't know if we're ever going to go back to school. We don't know if we're going to be able to graduate

onstage and have a prom. But like, and I was also elected as my ASB president, like so the President of the whole school.

With school being online, it is clear that students are missing being involved with various in-person activities and events. Abraham (Biracial male, 17) discussed the school play being canceled saying:

My school was ready to put on a play. That everyone was just really excited about and we were hearing bits of COVID in the air. But we didn't think it would affect us as badly as it did. And we actually all would say, "Okay, guys, when we get back to school in two weeks, we're going to give it our all." But obviously, that never happened and after that, we were given the news that we won't and everyone around me was just very sad. And I'd say, obviously that had an effect on me, but I was, it's strange. I was more saddened by the fact that everyone around me was sad. Rather than the play being cancelled or the fact that there's a disease going around. I guess my mind couldn't just process that for some reason.

Ricardo (Latino male, 18) mentions:

I'm a very outgoing person. I'll do everything in my power to like, meet someone new, or just like, have fun with someone, but I'm also very closed. Okay, staying home only just playing video games or doing whatever and I think one of my biggest obstacles is the fact that I had to quit volleyball. This year because my family didn't want me to be at risk so I don't see my friends and miss them.

Theme 3: Emotions Emerging from the COVID-19 Pandemic

As participants described the move to distance learning and their subsequent social isolation from friends, activities, and in-person school, they revealed a range of emotions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including (a) sadness, (b) stress and (c) worry and fear.

In terms of *sadness*, Mary (Latina female, 15) shared, "My emotions are kind of like everywhere now. I feel like, sadder, I guess...It's like my emotions are mixed and like all over the place." Another student described, "So it hasn't really affected me that much. It did make me depressed for like a little while, but it was, it wasn't anywhere close to what other people went through" (Rosa, Biracial female, 16). Participants also described feeling *stress* during the start of the pandemic and through their distance learning experiences. For example, Kayla (Black female, 16) said:

And we have two cousins, who are in foster care. So, my mom gets money from that, but so we're just lucky like that. But other people are homeless and things.

It's so stressful because like I said college apps, all this work. It's just so much. I don't think they know we have lives, we have stuff to do. And it's like double the work. I don't know what is going on, but it's just so much work.

Another student stated, "I think it was a bit stressful because I had teachers that I didn't know and I didn't know the materials. And I had two more difficult classes than I have this semester" (Talia, Latina female, 16).

The participants also described having *worry and fear*. For example, many students talked about possibly having contracted COVID-19 and needing to socially isolate or having a family member being exposed to COVID-19. Talia (Latina female, 16) mentioned:

The worry of not knowing if my family was okay because my mom had to go out to work every day is what worried me. And I think they put the curfew on. I was afraid that I would do something to [alert] the police because I had to work late sometimes.

Another student struggled with fear to even log into her Zoom classes. She said, "how do I find the courage to even go into the Zoom call. And then there's the problem of like, oh what if I forgot everything over the summer and everyone realizes it and I look stupid" (Riley, Black female, 15). In addition, Adam (Latino male, 17) stated:

It was hard not being able to have a party. And going outside knowing, going outside during a pandemic is just bad because you know, you have to worry about, "Am I going to get COVID? Am I going to get sick? Am I going to get someone else sick?"

Theme 4: Increased Awareness and Engagement Related to Racial Injustices

Along with COVID-19, there was the dramatic increase in awareness of racial injustices which spurred greater social interest in the Black Lives Matter movement and social protest. All of the students discussed how this sociopolitical moment increased their own awareness of and engagement in racial injustices. There are four subcategories related to students' reactions to this movement: (a) role of social media, (b) dissatisfaction with the Trump Administration, (c) importance of protests; and (d) awareness of specific movements and current events.

During the racial injustice movements, the *role of social media* was tremendous in influencing the level of students' engagement and awareness. For example, Greg (Asian American male, 17) shared:

Um, when I was on social media. I was posting a lot and liking stories about how you can donate (to Black Lives Matter and AAPI anti-hate causes). I donated just a little money. And I'm also telling my parents a lot about it too. Because they know that it matters. But they have that perspective like older people where they kind of see a lot of violence with everything. So, I think it's really just like informing people and teaching them about how they can just be the best they can.

Ricardo (Latino male, 18) stated:

Typically, I tried to avoid learning things through Instagram. Like when I'm going to seek out social justice, I'm going to do it through reliable sources and research and stuff like that. And sometimes, again, I would find the information and Instagram. Like, no. disrespect to Instagram, but sometimes you know they have some like false info and stuff.

Mary (Latina female, 15) expressed:

Well on Instagram. Actually, they always post informative posts (about Black Lives Matter). And I read them like people's stories and or share them too. And so that's how I've been up to date and then also my older brother watches the news.

In terms of the subcategory, *dissatisfaction with the Trump Administration*, many students shared their disagreement with his views and actions. As Mary (Latina female, 16) puts it:

The way he responded sounded like how an immature person would say things. He could have been more mature about the situation and like, help out his citizens like, understand what is going on in the world and how we could all be united in one, instead of having different races like, go against one another and like the political parties as well.

Adam (Latino male, 17) mentions:

The one thing that I dislike a lot is that Trump said "racism doesn't exist." That is something that got me mad. I was frustrated because of that and everything going on with the pandemic. Adding that on top of it made it worse.

In addition, Kayla (Black female, 16) said:

Trump is sending out the military to some cities and like I'm like this is crazy... The environment is just not right and it's just like, ooh, and then you see people

from my school like being racist or whatever, social media bring racist, like, saying Black Lives don't make sense Black lives don't matter. It's all lives matter right? George Floyd, he meant to be killed like he was on drugs.

Another subcategory is the *importance of protests* which took place across the US and especially in urban cities in the San Francisco Bay Area where these students resided. Carla (Latina female, 16) shared:

Keep protesting. Do as much as you can, as a group, or as a big community just to spread awareness and keep talking about the important point of why they should stop killing and abusing these African Americans, because it's hurting people's lives that have done nothing just live their lives and do what whatever they're doing.

Riley (Black female, 15) shared:

Yeah, it was cool, because at first, I was super nervous because there were a ton of people at the protest and I was not expecting that many people because it was like a school-organized protest generally school-organized things don't get a lot of attention. And I was like, wow, there's like way too many people that count here. That's cool, but it was actually a lot of fun. When we got to the police station and we were yelling at the officers. I felt so powerful.

In looking at the subcategory *awareness of specific movements and current events*, many of the participants brought up police brutality, and the recent killing of George Floyd. Ricardo (Latino male, 18) shared:

Well, I try to understand why it's happening on many different levels. Like, defunding the police. When I first heard that, I guess you can say I kind of thought that was a crazy idea. But I mean I definitely know where they're coming from with like all the equipment that they have. That's very expensive and stuff. But the way I viewed it is how can their budget be spent differently because I know that there's always the conversation that police should stop having so many responsibilities. And I remember seeing this article on the different responsibilities that the police have to handle from civil unrest to drug overdoses and stuff. And so, they should have programs for those who are addicted to drugs. But how can we move this money? I know that things must change.

Theme 5: Emotional Reactions to the Rise in Awareness to Racial Injustices

During the interviews, all of the students expressed a range of emotional responses to the rise in awareness of racial injustices around them, especially during a time of social isolation and distance learning. Two subcategories

emerged: (a) anger and frustration and (b) disconnect and hopelessness. When talking about *anger and frustration*, one student expressed, “I just feel like it’s just sickening to hate a person like when I think about it. Because the color of someone’s skin? Are you serious? We are all human. And it’s scary because we have police officers all around our town, especially during school” (Kayla, Black female, 16). Adam (Latino male, 17) stated, “And you know how Black people have to fight for their rights. Something like that angered me because their rights should be given already so they have to fight for it”. Another student expressed feeling, “mad because of the thing that happened on Wednesday (the January Sixth Insurrection) and they didn’t do nothing but when we have a peaceful protest they want to kill us or beat us” (Valerie, Black female, 16).

The subcategory, *disconnect and hopelessness* was the most commonly expressed emotion in regards to students’ reactions to racial injustices. Joseph (Black male, 16) stated:

Feels like everybody notices it when it’s happening and then forgot about it next week. Like all these killings of stuff that’s been going on by the police over the years. Like we all get sad and then next week, forget about that. Another one happens and we’re like “that’s sad”. And then eventually it just got to the point where like They couldn’t stand it no more. People start coming out and protesting.

Noah (Black male, 18) shared, “I guess it’s because we know we can’t do anything single handedly. We’re not going to be able to do anything to stop it or change anything”. In addition, Christopher (Black male, 15) expressed, “I can’t really do anything about it. Like, I can’t, like, change it, change it, like how somebody people have because like I haven’t. I don’t really have like, somewhat of like, the resources”. Another student shared, “I feel like it isn’t something that should just die down, but at the same time, I expect this. It happens. Literally every time” (Riley, Black female, 15).

Theme 6: Shifts in Identity due to Social Isolation

All of the students in our sample also discussed how their identities changed or grew during the “dual pandemics” and how this time of social isolation gave them an opportunity to learn more about themselves. As such, two sub-categories emerged: (a) growth in discipline, organization, and maturity and (b) self-awareness and acceptance in regards to mental health and emotional needs. Many participants expressed *growth in discipline, organization, and maturity*. For example, one student shared “I have kind of grown up a lot. I have been thinking about the future and what will happen, or what might

happen, or what I need to do so in that sense I have started thinking about my future more and my impact on others” (Rosa, Biracial female, 16). Christopher (Black male, 15) stated:

I’ve started to use to care about like, big things and like, how I used to I used to have a bad attitude towards things like I didn’t like. And so I feel like now. Like, it’s not really worth having a bad attitude towards something. And so just to like being able to go through it. And just like with school and like, homework. I used to not want to do it. But then now I just, I know that it’s getting closer like senior year and I know it counts.

Many participants also expressed greater *self-awareness and acceptance* in regard to mental health and emotional needs. For example, Mary (Latina female, 15) shared, “I guess I’m more responsible and more aware about stuff. I have, kind of like, I’m giving more attention to what my body needs and my mental needs and stuff”. Ariel (Asian American female, 17) described:

I’m learning more about mental health and stuff. And for myself. And before I knew a little bit, but now I am taking action and if I do need someone to talk to you or if something is bothering me. That’s why I was like EJ (her school counselor) I’m going to see you once a week. And it’s and that’s been helping me too. So, I think my identity is definitely more of taking action and knowing what is good for me.

Theme 7: Coping Strategies and Support Needed

Participants found different ways to deal with challenges they faced throughout the “dual pandemics” and they also were able to identify needed resources, especially in the school context. The subcategories included: (a) social support, (b) activities, (c) school counseling, and (d) representative education.

In discussing *social support*, Christopher (Black male, 15) shared:

I’m mostly talking to my mom about it and just my mom and my dad and so they’ve helped me realize stuff that’s gonna get better with everything that’s going on in the world.... So, they’ve been really like helping me through it.

Ricardo (Latino male, 18) expressed, “I’ll go to my sister and her husband because I see [him] as a father figure and so, if I have to talk to someone about something, I definitely talk to them”. Greg (Asian American male, 17) shared his family began to bond more during the pandemic, stating:

Actually, I think we started this towards the middle of the year, but my family and I really started bonding. We started going out a lot trying a lot of new restaurants, which I really liked, and we would just go on hikes and walks. So, I think that's really nice just having that time to do stuff outside of home.

Many students shared that they learned new *activities* during this time. For example, Ariel (Asian American female, 17) expressed, "I've been able to paint more. It's super therapeutic and I'm able to be level headed with everything". Ricardo (Latino male, 18) uses music to cope, describing:

I look towards music. So, if I'm not making music, I'm listening to music. And so I just grab my speaker and put on the max volume and just put on any song I want to. I use that as a release of serotonin that I enjoy and so music is probably my biggest therapy if anything. If I'm ever feeling sad or unmotivated, I just put on a song that has a nice beat quick beat to it and I start cleaning or whatever.

In terms of school counseling, most participants shared receiving academic support from counselors. For example, Nora (Latina female, 16) reported,

Honestly, I don't really talk to my current counselor because I feel like he has other students and it's not like I need to talk to him, but when I do need anything like I'll email him and he's really helpful. I think my freshman year I kind of failed a class, so I needed to retake it. So, he kind of helped me with that process of enrolling myself into a City College class. And he's really helpful in making sure that I'm on track. I think he emailed me a few weeks ago, telling me what I needed to go to a state school or a UC school. So, it's been really helpful.

Other participants shared receiving more personal or mental health support from their school counselor. Ariel (Asian American female, 17) shared, "They have started with wellness, they actually started doing occupational therapy for students. I've actually been talking to Ms. E and we've been doing check ins. But now I'm glad that they have this now".

Many participants discussed their desires and experiences with *representative education*. For example, Kayla (Black female, 16) stated,

It's hard to feel like, ... your life matters when everything on the outside is just people being racist. But I took an honors Afro-centric class which is like an honors Black studies class last year with my friend and like it was the best class ever. Like, oh my god, like the culture and just learning about everything. From slavery, before slavery and then up to now. I learned so much.

Greg (Asian American male, 17) student stated, “I just want more representative education in school. I want it to be more required”.

Discussion

We identified seven main themes with 21 subcategories that high students of Color experienced related to the “dual pandemics” ranging from challenges from learning at home, emotional reactions to racial injustice, and identity shifts emergent from this moment in history. Specifically, all of the students in our sample identified challenges in going to school from home that impacted all of their ecological systems. In terms of students’ *microsystems*, or immediate environment, students shared difficulties in balancing family obligations and struggles related to their parents’ loss of jobs (the *mesosystems*) and related financial hardship. Specifically, many students reported having to take care of relatives with medical conditions or special needs. This was especially difficult since the dual pandemics exacerbated existing inequities in the students’ *mesosystems*, or spaces that indirectly impact students who may already be suffering due to structural oppression in urban contexts. For example, for people with special health, educational (such as IEP), and mental health needs, there was a lack of access to hospital care or school specialists because of the stay-at-home order and because many hospitals had to prioritize service to COVID-19 patients. Schools must consider these challenges and barriers to resources (Hvalshagen et al., 2021) and gain a deeper awareness of students’ relevant ecological contexts and how they may impact their ability to participate meaningfully in school.

In addition to the above challenges, students experienced a number of educational shifts such as ambiguity and changes in school schedule, canceled school activities, and difficulty receiving help from teachers due to the shift to distance learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021). These educational changes primarily impacted their *microsystems* because they no longer had access to in-person interaction with teachers and peers. The confusion with the shift to online learning was hard for many students and it increased their current feelings of sadness and worry, and stress related to the pandemic more generally.

The challenges associated with changes in the structure of school and learning at home (their *microsystems*) were further intensified by students’ loss of school community, such as their activities, sports, clubs, and friends. Schools, as urban ecological sites, are much more than contexts for learning. They are spaces for developing friendships, extracurricular interests, physical fitness, and leadership skills. Building connections is central to students’ socializations during this developmental period. These types of

experiences are difficult to replace virtually and contributed to participants' feelings of sadness. The loss of activities and sports also impacted students applying to college who may be seeking a sports scholarship or credit for their work in different clubs and activities.

The loss of school community (*microsystem*) contributed to students' emotional reactions to the pandemic. As found in previous research (Povero et al., 2022), students shared a range of emotions including, sadness, stress, and worry which parallels previously documented stories about students (Bruner et al., 2020). Most of them described being alone in front of a computer for several hours a day, without leaving the home or seeing anyone socially. They were also stressed navigating multiple responsibilities at home such as caring for a family member and dealing with sudden parental unemployment (the *exosystems*). Many students had to get jobs to support their families. Researchers are just beginning to understand the degree of psychological problems (such as depression and anxiety) that adolescents are experiencing as a result of the pandemic (Esposito et al., 2021; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). The students we interviewed also shared that they were fearful of their family getting COVID-19—especially when family members worked in frontline jobs such as hospitals or as police officers. Examples of the *exosystem* include their parent's job site or friends, mass media, and the surrounding neighborhood. The *macrosystem* encompasses the larger cultural context, such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the racial conditions of the student's setting. The *chronosystem* are any transitions or changes that occur throughout a student's life. Some examples include the COVID-19 pandemic, parental job loss, social protests, and presidential elections.

Along with all of the challenges and emotions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported an increased awareness and engagement related to racial injustices especially from the mass media, which is part of students' *exosystem*. In particular, the growing Black Lives Matter movement sparked protests across the San Francisco Bay Area and nation reflecting changes in the students' *chronosystem*. Due to the stay-at-home order, many students described learning about these injustices and specific movements through social media and family conversations. Other respondents shared their frustration with the former President Trump and his lack of response to racial injustices, also an aspect of their *chronosystems*. Together, students shared a range of emotions tied to racial injustices such as anger, frustration, fear, disbelief, shock, and hopelessness (Landertinger et al., 2021) and these feelings were intertwined with their own encounters and experiences with direct and vicarious racism as students of Color, reflecting previous literature linking racism with mental health concerns (Cheah et al., 2020; Harrell, 2000; McNeil Smith et al., 2019).

Many students in our sample described the important need for action--not just from the President at the time--but also from their school community and from society more generally. Specifically, students desired more culturally relevant pedagogy from their school, classmates, and teachers (Morales, 2021) so they could engage in meaningful curriculum and action related to the ongoing racial injustices. Borrero et al. (2021) discuss culturally relevant pedagogy emergent from forced distance-learning that specifically highlight student leadership and cultural assets.

Although we describe the unique impact of COVID-19 and racial injustices on mental health, relationships, and learning for students of Color, it is clear there was a cumulative and compounding effect of the pandemics as well. In particular, students describe how they have changed as a result of the dual pandemics in terms of identity shifts. Many students describe their own growth and development during the past year in terms of being more disciplined, organized, mature, and aware of their mental health needs. They attribute these changes to having more time alone to think about their lives and emotional needs. As mentioned, many have had to navigate multiple roles at home--as caretaker, breadwinner, cook, nurse--in order to help out the family during trying times and this has forced them to be more organized and mature.

Along with identity shifts, students described coping strategies that they adopted to deal with their emotions during these challenging and uncertain times. These included seeking social support typically online (e.g., facetime) or social media (Hamilton et al., 2020). Others engaged in creative and health-related activities such as art or as walks with their family or going for runs in a local park (Bruner et al., 2020).

In terms of coping by seeking help from a professional psychologist, none of the 19 participants shared that they saw a therapist during this time. However, most of the students in our sample did interact with their school counselor via zoom or email for either academic or mental health support. This finding is critical because school counselors face challenges connecting with students during the pandemic due to class schedule changes, the move to distance learning (and distance counseling) and lack of familiarity students may have with online counseling and our findings reveal that they were able to make meaningful connections to students in our sample despite many physical and perceived barriers (Pincus et al., 2020).

Limitations

This sample represented a group of high school students of Color attending 14 different urban public schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, hence, the

results from this study may not be generalized to all students in high school. This project also only showed a snapshot of the experiences of students during the dual pandemics. Future research could include a larger sample size including a range of school settings across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. It would also be relevant to conduct longitudinal research examining how the dual pandemics impact the students of Color over time in terms of their learning and well-being. We also did not ask students about their experiences out of school and in community-based organizations during the pandemic, which could have produced some meaningful findings. The study was also limited because we did not obtain more specific information about the students' socioeconomic status. Part of this was because of the changing nature of students' financial situations due to parent/guardian job loss and transitions and the sensitivity of the topic.

Conclusion and Implications

Clearly, more research on the cumulative impact of the dual pandemics on students of Color is greatly needed. Regardless, our results have important implications for educators and counselors working with students of Color in urban schools. As the participants in our sample reflected on the impact of the dual pandemics has brought sadness, anger, and frustration to students of Color living in urban communities. With the loss of the school community and the ambiguity of the school schedule, the emotional impact of COVID-19 and the rise in awareness of racial injustices weighs heavily. We call upon counselors and teachers to better serve students by understanding the needs of students of Color (Brown et al., 2022) and their academic, cultural, and socio-emotional needs, through an ecological lens of understanding their interacting contexts. This may include ensuring that students' can learn and develop in their *microsystem*, due to all the changes across their *macrosystems*, *mesosystems*, *exosystems*, and *chronosystems*.

For instance, students in our sample mentioned their families having financial hardship, while other students described sadness and loneliness due to shelter-in-place orders. Teachers, community agency workers, school counselors, mental health counselors, and other helping professionals may offer support groups and individual counseling and referrals to students who are navigating multiple concerns. For example, school personnel should be trained to inquire about the different challenges and barriers that students face when dealing with accessing mental health support. This may include how issues of systemic racism and staff multicultural competence may impact students' access to supportive structures. Ladson-Billings (2021b) recommends integrating socio-emotional learning into the curriculum to provide

more support for students. This would greatly lessen the stress students have been feeling related to the dual pandemics and help build school engagement and social connection with others who are experiencing similar challenges.

In addition to developing, culturally responsive supports for students, we also recommend further development of culturally relevant pedagogies in educational contexts (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and several others ignited protests and conversations about policies rooted in White supremacy, including school policies. Students of Color in our sample expressed concern about their schools' response to racial injustices and the need for schools to examine their policies and work towards becoming anti-racist institutions especially in terms of curriculum and course offerings (Gorski, 2019; Rim, 2020). Specific recommendations may include re-designing the curriculum to reflect the values and histories of students of Color (Ladson-Billings, 2021b) and having teachers engage in "authentic discussions and debate strategies, cooperative grouping, and small group activities" (p. 74, Ladson-Billings, 2021b).

Rim (2020) discuss how policies need to change in order for students of Color to be seen and heard. This highlights how schools can offer culturally relevant pedagogies that help students cope with racism-related stressors (Griffin et al., 2022). Specifically, teachers could connect with students through a critical, participatory curriculum (Zaccor, 2022) to provide more support and discussions in the classroom related to racism and racial injustices to promote inclusion, community and a justice-oriented school climate and to build students' cognitive and affective understanding (Thurber et al., 2021).

Findings reveal a mixture of challenges, reactions, emotions, coping strategies, and identity shifts emergent from students' experiences with the dual pandemics. Although many students described difficulties navigating the transition to distance learning--especially during unprecedented protests in response to ongoing racial injustices--they also shared ways that they grew, learned, and adapted to the ever-changing environment. This is an important reminder of the cultural strengths and resilience that many students possess and how schools need to better foster these assets during trying times (Borrero & Yeh, 2021). It is also a reminder of the creative digital possibilities that emerged in response to distance learning. For example, Borrero et al. (2021) describe student, community, and teacher partnerships in response to COVID-19 that featured urban students' cultural assets and family strengths, such as the student-led podcast, *Quaranteen*, and a digital newsletter, *The Corona Chronicles*, created by fourth graders to interview family members about cultural lessons.

We hope that urban schools will continue to foster students' emergent cultural strengths and broaden their approaches to learning from ecological and

socio-cultural perspectives. As we found in our results, parents and family members play a critical role in student learning, development, and identity development. We recommend that school consider the important role of parents and family members and further restructure schools to engage parents and family members in meaningful ways. Ladson-Billings (2021b) recommends using technology to connect with parents synchronously and asynchronously to accommodate various work schedules or changing when formal schooling is offered to ensure parents and family members are available to provide support.

As educators, counselors, family members, and students continue to navigate future challenges emerging from the dual pandemics as an integral part of our lives, we need to move beyond facing these pandemics from a crisis perspective. As we learned from our findings, we need to work in solidarity with students of Color and their *microsystems*, to reframe and redesign urban schools to reflect and foster their lived experiences, socio-emotional needs, shifting cultural identities, coping strategies, and important relationships.


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