ALL OF WHO I AM:
Perspectives from Young People
About Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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


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The images on the front cover are self portraits created by the students of Benito Juarez Community Academy in Chicago, Illinois.
OVERVIEW

Over the past several years, a growing consensus has emerged across a range of disciplines—including brain science, developmental psychology, and education research—about how learning happens. The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (the Commission) played a vital role in advancing this consensus and accelerating a growing movement toward a more integrated learning paradigm. The landmark 2019 report, *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope*, outlines a set of recommendations that are helping to guide the field. Integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development in and across all the places young people learn and develop holds great promise for helping many more young people—particularly those who have been ill-served by our current systems—succeed in school, work, and life.

What do young people think about the approach *A Nation at Hope* recommends? How do young people describe learning within schools and after-school programs already practicing an integrated approach to youth development? The Center for Promise, the applied research institute for America’s Promise Alliance, set out to listen deeply to a diverse group of young people across the country to learn more.

Using a rigorous qualitative approach, the Center for Promise conducted semi-structured group interviews with more than 100 young people across six locations. The six sites selected for the research intentionally integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development. Three are public high schools, two are out-of-school time programs, and one is an after-school partner embedded in a public school. The young people who participated in the study are primarily youth of color and many of them speak a second language at home.

*All of Who I Am* describes young people’s interview responses and considers how their insights contribute to knowledge about how learning happens. The report’s title, drawn from a young person’s own words, encapsulates the biggest insight this research offers: that these learning environments are nurturing young people’s sense of themselves as valued, multi-dimensional community members. They are math students, peer mentors, planners, goal-setters, public policy researchers, stewards of their family’s dreams for their future, and more.

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

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

3 Questions, 6 Sites, 103 Young People

The Center for Promise designed this qualitative study to explore the perspectives of young people on three key questions about how learning happens:

- How do young people understand and describe connections among the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of their learning experiences?
- Under what conditions do young people describe the integration of social, emotional, and academic dimensions in their learning settings?
- How aligned are young people’s experiences in these settings with the recommendations in *A Nation at Hope*?

The research team conducted semi-structured group interviews at 6 sites, engaging a total of 103 young people, most of whom are young people of color and many of whom speak a second language at home.

See the full report for further detail on the methodology, the six research sites, and the youth demographics.
Specifically, the findings underscore the importance of:

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

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

**FINDINGS AND LESSONS FROM YOUTH VOICES**

The young people whose voices were the driving force behind All of Who I Am described a holistic, youth-centered educational experience—what one young person called a “learning ecosystem.” Importantly, their perspective mirrors the field’s advances toward a more integrated understanding of social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The research team conducted interviews at six sites:

- Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning, a public school in the EL Education Network in Portland, ME;
- Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación (CCATE), an after-school program in Norristown, PA;
- Developing K.I.D.S., an after-school program in Detroit, MI;
- EduCare Foundation/Social Justice Humanitas Academy at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies, a School-CBO partnership in Los Angeles, CA;
- River Bluff High School, a public school in the EL Education Network in Lexington, SC; and
- Tacoma School of the Arts, a public school in Tacoma, WA.

Six interconnected themes emerged from listening to 100+ young people across the research sites.
The research team interprets all six as important aspects of young people's experiences, both individually and working in concert with one another. Taken together, these themes characterize both how young people describe connections among multiple dimensions of learning and the conditions under which that learning occurs.

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

"Your [group] is designated as soon as you become a freshman at [this high school]. It's a group of like 10 to 15 people and you stay with those same people throughout all of high school. So in challenges and in good times, you get to know each other ... and it's meant to give you a group of people that you can rely on and feel comfortable talking to. ...

I felt close to my [group] for a long time, but this year I've realized just how important that has become, especially because senior year asks so much of you in terms of looking at where you want to be in your future. So it's like having a group of people that you can relate to and talk about [those things with], and it's a close-knit group. It's great...I call them my family in school."

The way that the themes emerged from interviews underscores an interconnectedness among the conditions young people described. The full report explores each of the six themes, with attention to the relationships between and among the themes based on qualitative analysis and a review of existing literature.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center for Promise prioritizes understanding youth perspectives as an essential aspect of advancing better research, practice, and policy. The following recommendations capture the essence of what young people identified as the critical factors driving their learning and development. They align with the themes and insights that emerged from the youth-centered research, in concert with the prevailing wisdom of researchers, educators, and youth-supporting professionals offered in A Nation at Hope.

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

- **Create new pathways for listening to and engaging young people.** The findings in All of Who I Am point to the importance of moving beyond the act of simply listening to young people to a participatory frame where young people's voices are authentically and consistently engaged. Creating a culture where young people feel encouraged to speak up and can trust that their voices will be heard takes more than individual structures like advisory groups, youth councils, or youth representatives on a board. The Youth Engagement Guide, published as a companion to this report, offers considerations and action steps for organizing conversations that are modeled on the group interviews for All of Who I Am. Adults who are responsible for policies, practices, or direct services affecting young people can use the guide as a roadmap for eliciting regular youth feedback—both formally and informally—to create a foundation for sustained youth-adult collaboration.
• **Co-construct learning opportunities that are meaningful to young people’s circumstances, future goals, and identity development.** Whether writing an interdisciplinary essay, using math and public speaking skills to advocate for re-use of a vacant lot, or investigating the rising cost of college, young people described being engaged in their learning when they had choice over content, when the purpose of learning activities was clearly communicated, and when their learning served their current and future selves. Offering opportunities like these requires intention, explicit communication, and the willingness to trust young people’s choices. Like creating relationship-rich environments, putting this recommendation into practice takes time and skill. Policy and practice leaders can encourage risk-taking and learning among youth and adults in order to make this happen.

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

**CONCLUSION**

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

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

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

1 See the Commission’s work, including *A Nation at Hope* and related reports. [www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/national-commission-on-social-emotional-and-academic-development](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/national-commission-on-social-emotional-and-academic-development)

2 Each quote is from one of the 103 young people who participated in the group interviews. The findings section in the full report utilizes young people’s voices to illustrate each of the six themes. To protect the participants’ privacy, names and other identifying information are not used.


9 For example, descriptions of the work underway by the Education Trust can be found at [edtrust.org/resource/sead-through-a-race-equity-lens](http://edtrust.org/resource/sead-through-a-race-equity-lens) and City Year in conjunction with the Everyone Graduates Center recently published this evaluation of their approach, Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2020). Connecting social-emotional development, academic achievement, and on-track outcomes: A multi-district study of grades 3 to 10 students supported by City Year Americorps members. *The Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education*. [www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EGC_CityYearReport_BalfanzByrnes.pdf](http://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EGC_CityYearReport_BalfanzByrnes.pdf)

For the full report, including references and appendices that describe the methodology, the six research sites, and youth demographics, go to [www.americaspromise.org/report/all-who-i-am](http://www.americaspromise.org/report/all-who-i-am).