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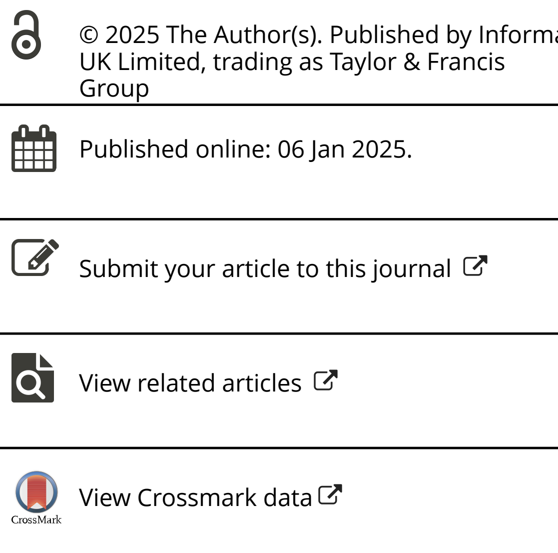

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'We haven't stopped working': changing dynamics of youth and student organising in education at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic is a critical juncture that has impacted various social and political processes, including youth and student activism. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with youth and student activists who are part of a global movement on educational rights, this paper aims to explore their perceptions and experiences of the pandemic's impact on their organising, movements, and activism. The pandemic has caused shifts in both the aims of and approaches to organising, presenting an opportunity for youths and students to centrally position themselves in important decision-making processes in education policy making and programming. These shifts could provide a window into the future landscape of youth and student participation in shaping the global education agenda.

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Introduction

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the global narrative in the education sector seemed to have focused on the global health crisis' negative impact on formal schooling, particularly compulsory education. Policy priorities aimed at facilitating return to schools and, later, making up for the 'learning loss'. In universities, concerns tended to have centred around the quality of instruction in light of the digital divide. Amidst these dominant discourses, there seemed to be limited discussion on how youth and student activism have also been impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Not only have many youth and student movements responded to COVID-19-related issues, but activism and movement building have been important features of academic life, shaping both student experience and educational policy change (Altbach 2007).

At the height of mobility restrictions, many protests and social movements halted, while a few others were able to continue their work (Pleyers 2020). Where youth and students organised, they were, at times, faced with punitive responses: from policing and harassment to online surveillance and intimidation (Millora and Karunungan 2021; Scholars at Risk 2022). Some negative narratives regarding young people circulated such as being depicted as apathetic or too stubborn to get vaccinated and therefore, were 'partying "super-spreaders" who ignored the rules' (c.f. MacDonald et al. 2024, 723). Yet many youth and student organisers quickly got back to work and were at the forefront of various responses to the pandemic, while maintaining campaigns on wider educational issues. They creatively reorganised, re-strategised and recalibrated their tactics around limitations: socially distanced protests, Twitter rallies, rent strikes, mutual aid groups, community

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kitchens and other tactics (Dressler 2021; Luescher and Türkoğlu 2022; Restless Development 2022; Zajak 2022).

In this paper, I am interested in how the pandemic compelled youth and students to think through a 'series of strategic dilemmas in choosing the form that protest should take' (della Porta and Diani 2006, 181). I draw from semi-structured interviews with 11 youth and student activists who are members of a global education movement, to explore their perceptions and experiences on the pandemic's impact on their organising, movements and activism in the education sector and beyond. I situate my discussion within global efforts to involve youth and students in shaping education policy. All interviewees for this paper are part of the youth and student network of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) – a movement founded in 1999, aimed at unifying civil society voices to have a more central role in the global education agenda. In 2015, the organisation, which is headquartered in South Africa, made steps to engage youth and student organisations in their campaigning: from inducting youth representatives in their governing board (since 2018) up to the recent convening of an elected youth action group. More information about the GCE can be found on their website: https://campaignforeducation.org/en/.

My analysis reveals that the pandemic has caused shifts in the aims of (e.g. advocacy focus, changes in goals) and approaches to (e.g. changing tactics, more individualised forms of activism) organising. Youth and student organisers saw this as an opportunity to challenge tokenistic participation and centrally position themselves in the global decision-making processes in education policy and programming. Against the backdrop of global coalitions' commitment to centre the role of youth and students in their advocacy (such as the GCE), this paper ends by reflecting on how an understanding of these shifts could provide a window into the future landscape of youth and student participation in shaping global education agendas.

Youth and student movements in education

Even prior to the pandemic, youth and student movements already played an important role in shaping local, national and global discourses in education. They have been considered a powerful force in higher education (Altbach and Klemencic 2014) and wider social revolutions (Altbach and Luescher 2019). Students organise around a number of contentious issues. Neoliberal and market-oriented policies saw students marching against tuition fee increases in Canada (Bégin-Caouette and Jones 2014) and South Korea (Shin, Kim, and Choi 2014). The failure of universities to address neo-colonial and racist practices saw students demanding that Rhodes must fall in South Africa and UK students asking, *why is my curriculum white?* (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018). Beyond education, young people have been at the forefront of climate action and wider issues around racial injustice.

Social movements 'provide the engines of lasting educational transformation' (Apple 2003, 519), including those that are youth and student-led. The Chilean student movements in 2006 and 2011 are emblematic of the power of student-led mass collective action to redefine a country's educational agenda (Bellei, Cabalin, and Orellana 2014; Salinas and Fraser 2012). Students who protested in the streets, occupied their universities and held public assemblies have led to changes in public funding for education in Chile, including an increase in scholarships and a reduction in student loan interest rates (Bellei, Cabalin, and Orellana 2014). The example of Chile highlights how student-led movements play an important role in facilitating education policy change.

Since the adoption of the 1989 Rights of the Child and the so-called 'participatory turn' in public governance (Kiilakoski 2020), a number of global actors in education have been taking concrete steps in engaging youth and students in key global processes. The UN Youth Strategy towards the 2030 Agenda, for instance, includes the instalment of a youth focal person in each UN country and setting-up youth advisory boards within relevant UN entities (UN n.d.). In 2021, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), 'the largest global fund solely dedicated to transforming education in lower-income countries' (GPE n.d.), partnered with youth activists in Africa, Asia and Latin

America as representatives in high-level policy platforms on educational issues such as financing (Saunders 2021). The framework behind these efforts is clear: decisions in education need to consider the concerns of students, the sector's biggest beneficiaries and stakeholders.

However, youth and student activism are not always celebrated and supported. Youth and student activists are faced with criminalisation, extreme policing, delegitimisation and surveillance even within educational contexts (Millora and Karunungan 2021, 2024). A recent report documented 391 attacks on higher education in 65 countries – 40% of which were directed towards student protest and expression (Scholars at Risk 2022). Students participating in protests were getting expelled or imprisoned – with the report revealing a record-number of students seeking refuge and assistance (e.g. scholarships to other countries) to flee from these threats. Several campaigns from global student coalitions, such as the Global Student Forum have called for the recognition of student activists as human right defenders (Høgsgaard, Ulloa, and Vespa 2022; see also Millora and Karunungan 2021).

This section highlighted that through activism, youths and students could indeed become significant political actors in educational change, despite multiple efforts to stifle their acts and voices of dissent. Activist movements within educational spaces and beyond, therefore, are not 'distractions' from academic life but are important ingredients in ensuring academic freedom, equity in educational access and social justice (c.f. Altbach 2007). It also becomes clearer in this section how ways of organising by youth and students are influenced by wider social and cultural factors. In the next section, I discuss concepts that have assisted me in making sense of these shifts.

Shifts and changes in youth and student organising: conceptual considerations

A number of researchers have described the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'critical juncture' that will potentially have a long-term impacts on a number of social and political processes, including social movements (della Porta 2021; Green 2020). Critical junctures are significant situations that can disrupt social, political and economic relationships. The pandemic has been described as an extraordinary moment that presented unfamiliar situations that needed to be addressed swiftly using unconventional responses (della Porta 2021; Green 2020). Amidst the disruption, critical junctures also offer opportunities: they can 'open the door to previously unthinkable reforms' (Green 2020, 1) and lead to self-empowerment through self-organising, innovation and learning (della Porta 2021).

This paper focuses on the more granular impacts of critical junctures, specifically on how youths and students were setting up and implementing their activist work. To this end, I employed the notion of 'repertoires of social action'; defined as 'whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals' (Tilly 1986, 2 as cited in della Porta and Diani 2006, 168). Repertoires of social action, in this paper, could be understood as the variety of tactics employed by youths and students to claim powers and/or to disrupt power imbalances – from protests, occupations and strikes to volunteering, membership in community councils and public meetings. Shifts in the repertoires of social action are influenced by socio-cultural factors (della Porta and Diani 2006). For instance, the pervasiveness of social media has shaped the ways activists organise and interact with each other, using tactics such as microblogging, Twitter storms and hashtag activism (Murthy 2018; Sorce and Dumitrica 2023). Elsewhere, social media have been found to democratise movement leadership, allowing for quick, uncoordinated spread of campaigns even transnationally and facilitating what has been described as 'leaderless movements' (Mander et al. 2019).

The changing repertoires of young people's social action have been met with 'crisis narratives' or overall concerns around a 'dip' in youth political and social participation (O'Toole 2016). However, researchers have argued that such critiques are often rooted in a narrow view equating youth participation to more 'duty-based' (Dalton 2008) forms of political participation such as voting or membership in political parties. An alternative conceptualisation argues that it is not withdrawal from democratic life that we are witnessing, but the 'emergence of different modes or norms of political participation, particularly among young people' (Norris 2011; O'Toole 2016, 226).

This includes activism through lifestyle changes (e.g. veganism, cycling to reduce carbon footprint), everyday volunteering, creating local groups to respond to local problems and embedding politics in everyday lives (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017; O'Toole 2016).

In summary, the concepts reviewed in this section offer a lens through which to understand the pandemic as a critical juncture that is having multiple impacts on the already dynamic and changing repertoires of young people's social action. In this paper, I focus on these specific shifts and their implications to youth and student participation in the global education agenda.

The present study

This paper draws from semi-structured interviews conducted in April–May 2022, with 11 youth and student activists in eight (8) countries (i.e. Austria, Honduras, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria, Palestine, Peru and the Philippines) who are engaged in the Global Campaign for Education's youth and student network and Youth Action Group. The interviewees were 22–32 years old at the time of the interview. While youth age groups vary across contexts and cultures, wide-ranging regional/ national policy definitions of 'youth' were adapted in this research, which in some cases extended up to 35 years old. For instance, the African Union Youth Charter defines young people as those between 15-35 years (African Union 2006) while the first Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) youth development index indicates youth as 15–34 years old (ASEAN 2017).

The young people interviewed were then either in university, recently completed university and/ or were working on education-related campaigns. All interviewees were part of youth-led or youth-focused organisations of varying structures and size of the constituency. A common feature across all the groups was their focus on education and adjacent advocacies such as academic freedom, youth participation, gender empowerment, educational financing and educational technology. A profile of the interviewees is in Appendix A.

The interviews were conducted as part of a GCE-commissioned research project, with the research and writing conducted by me as the research lead, exploring the state of youth and student activism during the pandemic. The project aimed at gathering evidence for GCE to further strengthen its youth and engagement strategy and to provide inputs for research and evidence-based advocacy. Therefore, the report was chiefly written to inform advocacy on youth and student engagement to policymakers, funders and development practitioners. This current paper is a more theoretical/academic analysis of the interviews using new conceptual frameworks (see above) as lenses to understand the data.

Semi-structured interviews

I employed semi-structured interviews as it allowed for a certain degree of standardisation (and therefore allowed for comparison between the interviews) while also 'open' to acquire 'personalized information about how individuals view the world' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 509). Because of the flexibility, semi-structured interviews helped reveal insights into the more informal or less visible aspects of the interviewees' work (c.f. Belina 2023). The questions revolved around three key areas: their organising before COVID-19, their organising during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and their lessons learned. It quickly became clearer during the interviews that talking about the 'pandemic period' is complex. At the time of the interviews, COVID-19 restrictions were still present at varying levels in the countries where the activists worked. When referring to this time period, most interviewees spoke about the heightened government restrictions, particularly lockdowns and school and university closures as markers of a 'COVID-19 phase'.

The interviews, which lasted 40–90 minutes, were mostly done online through Zoom using the GCE professional account. Due to poor internet signal, two participants asked for their interviews to be conducted on WhatsApp (with end-to-end encryption). Most interviews were in English. For participants in the Philippines, we spoke partly in Tagalog, the national language. GCE also

provided simultaneous interpretations for two interviews in Spanish with participants from Honduras and Peru.

Participant recruitment

Even before collecting data, GCE's youth and student network were already aware of the research through coalition meetings and discussions. When it was time to recruit participants, I emailed the network with the help of GCE's youth and student engagement officer to let them know about the data collection phase. About 10 individuals showed interest in participating from this initial announcement, with the number growing as the research progressed and as GCE tapped into its wider youth and student working group network. Working with GCE's youth engagement and learning officer, we ensured regional representation and gender balance as much as possible, utilising purposive sampling (c.f. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013). We asked interviewees, for example, to suggest potential groups of youth leaders to which to advertise the research. Interested participants filled in a consent form and information sheet before the scheduled interview.

Reanalysis of data

This paper reanalyses some of the data produced through the GCE report[1] which I also researched and co-authored. Analysis in this paper focussed on the similarities in the participants' experiences and perceptions, although, whenever relevant, I discuss contextual differences that could assist in understanding. What I had attempted in this paper is similar to what Wästerfors, Åkerström, and Jacobsson (2014, 467) described as 'disentangling [*sic*] of data … and framing [them] in a new way'. The report was produced through a thematic analysis (Peel 2020) of interview data alongside other sources (see Millora 2022 for a full description of the methodology of the report) which I revisited and re-analysed, creating new connections between them and with the wider literature.

While a number of key themes from the report remained, they have now been discussed in light of the wider literature and theoretical frameworks. For instance, the section on 'Increased demand for meaningful participation' in this paper focuses heavily on youth and student activists' perception of their identity and positionality in decision-making processes (discussed in relation to the works of della Porta 2021; Pleyers 2020). In the report, this section focused on the specifics of the 'demand' alongside stakeholders' perceptions of young people's role in global educational movements. Through the re-analysis, I was able to 'disentangle' and re-establish connections from former perspectives and advance academic thinking in this area (Wästerfors, Åkerström, and Jacobsson 2014).

The research was conducted within the research ethics protocols of GCE. Consent forms were provided to all participants which emphasised, among others, that participation in the research is voluntary. As the report is open access, it can be used/referred to in subsequent research papers such as mine. However, I received written permission from GCE, through their Youth and Students Engagement and Learning Coordinator, to reanalyse research data and publish it in an academic journal format. In fact, they encourage the dissemination of insights from the report findings to a variety of audiences.

Shifting tactics and aims amidst lockdowns and restrictions

Across the interviews, many youth and student activists expressed that 'they have not stopped working' at the height of pandemic restrictions, rather, their tools and modes for organising, as well as their advocacies and aims have shifted.

Online forms of organising in contexts of digital divide

The role of technology, social media and digital spaces in activism gained fresh attention in the literature during the height of the pandemic (see for instance Sorce and Dumitrica 2023). Similar to the findings of these studies, several of the interviewees expressed that their activities had to shift online to work around government-mandated lockdown and mobility restrictions. Meetings and general assemblies were held via Zoom, coordination mainly done via WhatsApp, training and capacity-building programmes happened virtually, and campaign activities made use of social media more heavily (posting short videos, online dissemination).

Activists in Palestine and in Nigeria, noted that by turning to social media and other online platforms, local issues were propelled to a 'global stage' creating what have been described elsewhere as global solidarities (c.f. della Porta 2022). Similar to what Sorce and Dumitrica (2023, 582) found in their analysis of the digitisation of the Fridays for Future movement, online spaces 'afforded the movement opportunities to network and build community with existing followers and issue-proximate groups'. In this study, activists from Nigeria shared the example of the #EndSARS movement that saw dispersed protests against police brutality in different cities across the country:

> … online campaigning gave way to worldwide mobilising. There's a hashtag for what happened in Nigeria, #EndSARS which was so widely spread across the globe. That solidarity from the people across the world also inspired many youth activists here, and pushed the government pay attention to these demands – P2, 32, Male, Nigeria

Apart from facilitating transnational movement building, the quote demonstrates how global solidarity had an impact on local organising: the worldwide attention had put pressure on the local government and, as the youth activist in Nigeria described, placed the issue as priority. This adds to previous examples of how social media activism interspersed with offline forms of activism and impact (Sorce and Dumitrica 2023) and how protests, during the pandemic, were developed 'in tandem with other forms of resistance' (della Porta 2022).

However, some of the youth activists, particularly those based in the African region, were also quick to point out the challenges of operating purely online in contexts where digital divides are so stark. While they emphasised that they had already been using technology in the past, digital tools became more popular during the pandemic. Shifts to online forms of organising happened quickly, often only within a couple of days with young people having little to no support. A youth activist in Namibia described this as 'acting on your toes and seeing how you can best respond to challenges changing constantly' (P3, 27, female, Namibia). She also emphasised that the shift to more digital forms of organising occurred in the context of widening inequalities in internet access and availability of digital tools:

> The biggest challenge for me was the digital divide and how it has broadened during the pandemic. It has always been there, but COVID made it worse. In our meetings, those who are living in the cities have the means to access a smartphone or a laptop … but this is not true for everyone, especially those in rural areas … data is very expensive … and it doesn't even end here … it's not only access but also the knowledge on how to even use the laptop, how to use Zoom … – P3, 27, female, Namibia

This experience is echoed by several others and highlights how digital platforms remained inaccessible for many members – seemingly closing-off spaces for some while opening-up for others. When individuals did get access online, there remained the challenge of using the various online tools making the experience frustrating: '*I go on Zoom and for the next 30 minutes, I say "hello", "hello", "hello" can you hear me?*' (P1, 29, male, Nigeria). Therefore, many emphasised that they maintained person-to-person initiatives as well, no matter how small. For example, they would conduct in-person meetings or brief community education classes in an open-air venue while social distancing within what was allowable by local COVID-19 policies. These examples demonstrate that 'although some forms of action [e.g. online/digital] could be adapted to more than one situation, many others cannot' (della Porta and Diani 2006, 183).

The findings also show that online tools were not only public facing but were also used to maintain internal relationships and connections. The choice of which repertoire of social action to take, according to della Porta and Diani (2006, 179), serves an internal purpose because it can facilitate a 'sense of collective identity' and cultivating 'internal solidarity', for instance, in the midst of social distancing and isolation. However, in cases where many members are unable to access/use online tools, this can also cause alienation among tightly linked groups.

Recalibrating the aims of activism

In addition to changes in the *ways* young people organised, they also expressed that the pandemic opened up new issues to advocate for. While several remained focused on helping address COVID-19's impact on formal schooling (e.g advocacy for re-opening face-to-face classes, and more accountability in education quality), others have ventured into less usual territories such as providing food packets (as in the experiences of young people in Nigeria and Zambia) or conducting mental health training in the workplace (as in the experience of a student in Honduras).

These shifts are emblematic of what della Porta (2022, 29) described as movements being able to transform tactics and contribute to 'the most urgent task in a tragic moment: the production and distribution of services of different types'. Youth and student activists also worked on combating 'infodemic' that became pervasive during the pandemic. For example, the activists in Nigeria put together a website on verified COVID-19 information to counter fake news on the topic. In Peru, the organisation set up information sessions on youth, health and well-being. These examples demonstrate how young people do not only see 'education' as a sector negatively impacted by the pandemic but that education (i.e. educating others) could be used as a tool to combat COVID-19's ill effects. With this expanded view, youth and student movements were able to make links between different issues (e.g. between health and education) making their response interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral.

Overall, this section shows how youth and student movements and organisations were able to effectively respond to social issues as they changed overtime through (micro)transformations and tweaks in both their organising tactics and aims. Within these dynamics, technology played an important role in facilitating internal connections as well as global solidarities – although young people were quick to temper expectations because of stark digital divides in the communities where they work. Furthermore, the recalibrating of aims and repertoires of action means that youth and student movements do not only respond to the crisis, but as Zajak (2022, 135) noted, they 'also creatively shape and construct agency and new ideas about what to do'.

Increased demand for meaningful participation

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a 'major stress test of current assumptions about how the world works, and our institutions and practices' (Green 2020, 11). In other words, the pandemic 'threw [*sic*] the status quo and power relations into the air' (Green 2020, 1). From the perspectives of the interviewees, the shift in power relations occurred alongside an increased commitment, from global education bodies, to involve youth and students in international policy discussions. Without having to travel, they spoke at important political forums in educational policies, served as panellists in region-wide webinar events, joined advisory councils, and engaged in knowledge-sharing initiatives. Yet young people remained frustrated with the persistence of tokenistic forms of participation. For example, youth activists in Peru and Austria shared:

> We have seen the intention of policymakers and organisations to build a youth agenda that represents the youth at global levels. But it's not really a thoughtful representation. They don't really invite us to import an agenda. They only invite us to generic events, so they can take their picture and post this to say that they have engaged with the students. – P5, 25, male, Peru

> During this crisis, even more attention was given to schools and students because the challenges we face are more obvious than ever. We participate in online meetings, you're talking to high level partners, or decision

> makers saying, 'international solidarity!' or 'nothing about us without us' – we were heard, but I'm not sure that we were really listened to. – P8, 22, female, Austria

These experiences and doubts were echoed by several others during the interviews. Some commented on session formats that fail to facilitate deep discussion and debates: such as use of pre-recorded videos, five-minute speaking slots, and non-interactive Q&A sessions. Others have pointed to the lack of 'follow-up' or updates on whether the key recommendations discussed during meetings will be taken up in action. Others were disappointed that many collaborators wrongly assumed that youth and student activists had the resources to join online meetings, often in different timezones. A young person from Namibia described how she struggled to join a board meeting where she was a youth representative because she had no Wi-Fi and had to purchase expensive data out of her own pocket. She commented:

> Even international organisations that are very deliberate about inclusivity and giving youth a seat at the table could be turning a blind eye to these things, although sometimes not deliberately … You can't hand out a pen and not give a paper for somebody to write on – P3, 27, female, Namibia.

Her comment highlights that one of the key impacts of the pandemic on their work was that it compelled them to reimagine their positions and claims of power within global education discussions. Understanding that power relations could be reconfigured during moments of crises and critical junctures (c.f. della Porta 2022), many interviewees expressed the importance not only of their inclusion in these spaces but also in determining the terms of participation. More broadly, the activists from Peru, Austria and Namibia pointed out the need to go beyond lip-service when it comes to youth involvement in key decision-making processes in education.

Furthermore, these demands existed against the backdrop of increasingly narrowing civil society spaces that curtail youth and student dissent. Wider observations of social movements during COVID-19 have already pointed to the 'lack of transparency and low accountability because the proclamation of states of emergencies has been used, in various ways, to curb dissent' (della Porta 2021; Dressler 2021; Zajak 2022). Youth activists in Nigeria, Palestine and the Philippines also experienced state institutions weaponising COVID-19-related laws and guidance to further restrict their activities:

> In the Philippines, there was the passing of the Antiterrorism Law which I think was instrumental in the intimidation of many youth and student activists and organisers and red tagging them as rebels and members of the [armed] New People's Army. During COVID, the government had a chance to impose more power over people. – P6, 22, female, Philippines

As the trenches of inequalities have further been made visible and widened, youth and student activists not only challenged these power differences but also saw this as an opportunity to redefine their roles in global policy discussions in education and beyond. In a way, they point to an issue in participation similar to what White (1996) argued several years ago: that sharing in conversation does not mean sharing in power. In the case of the youth and student activists I interviewed, they were pushing back against tokenistic engagements, demanded accountability and were fighting for decision-making processes that are participatory, 'thoughtful', intentional and cognizant of their needs to participate fully.

Young people's increasing demand for meaningful participation seems to be part of what Morrow and Torres (2013, 97) described as the movement's task of 'rethinking pre-existing social and cultural paradigms as part of a politics of identity'. This 'reimagining' of identities through movements could be observed in the way young people were centring themselves in these significant discussions in the global education agenda. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the pressure on the rights of students and young people in important decision-making processes and as key stakeholders in education systems.

'Everybody was so consumed with surviving': individual impacts and individualised forms of organising

This paper has so far discussed the ways by which the pandemic has impacted young people's aims and approaches to organising. In this section, I focus on how youth and activists *themselves* were also being impacted by the pandemic in significant ways (personally, economically, emotionally and mentally) and the implications of this in terms of their organising. A common sentiment expressed in the interviews was that, as activists, they faced many of the same issues and challenges that they were trying to address. For instance, a student activist in Austria described that as they addressed the needs of students who were unable to cope with the demands of online classes, they also needed to navigate their own university lectures and seminars being made virtual. Commenting on the significant economic impact of limited mobilities during the pandemic, a Nigerian activist pressed: '*Our volunteers need to put food on the table as well!*'. Student and youth activists in Nigeria and Namibia further described these challenges powerfully:

> everybody was so consumed with, you know, surviving [COVID-19], we didn't have the time to come together to say, okay, let's do something, let's find an innovative way to still continue with our activity – P4, 26, female, Nigeria.

> Now you're juggling between having lost a grandmother just yesterday to having a friend in ICU because of COVID to now having a child-headed household because two parents just passed to being an activist, fighting for the rights and interests of others – all these brought a lot of burden on us, student activists. – P27, female, Namibia

The quote from the youth activist in Nigeria, *everybody was so consumed with surviving,* captures how the pandemic's demand from youth and students' time shifted them away from their wider activist work. Changes were occurring in multiple directions, not only in their activism but also other facets of their lives: online classes, virtual birthdays, Zoom funerals, lack of employment opportunities and poor access to health services. The youth activist from Namibia further emphasised that they occupy multiple roles in their personal and social lives (beyond being an activist) – they were students, friends, breadwinners and were therefore not immune to the physical, emotional and mental stressors brought about by the pandemic. The activists emphasised that these multiple identities need to be recognised, otherwise, as an activist from Austria shared, '*people might start "normalising" the violence and struggles that youth activists face as "part of the job"*' (P8, 22, female, Austria)

Furthermore, interviewees shared that often, these identities and roles were rarely siloed or compartmentalised. Challenges accompanying these roles, exacerbated by the pandemic, would compound each other. For example,

> Sometimes it gets hard to differentiate between something that gives me power, or that inspires me or makes my day better and my other work, those requiring hard work and not very fun! – P8, 22, female, Austria.

> It became really clear how the pandemic affected the youth in general, and even myself, included. Students couldn't socialise and go to schools, people's jobs were affected, they couldn't connect with their family, some needed to move abroad. I'm not going to generalise, but I felt that a lot of people were questioning the purpose of some of our causes. – P7, 28, female, Palestine

The quote from the activist in Austria above demonstrates how expectations, challenges and activities that youth activists may have in one aspect of their lives interspersed with those in others. Recent research on the links between activism and mental health has found that activism could lead to burn-out, activist guilt and exhaustion (Conner, Crawford, and Galioto 2023). The quote from the activist in Palestine adds another layer to this as she suggests that the weight of the challenge has caused her to question their causes and advocacies. Aware of the challenges that they face, some of the youth activists have noted a decline in participation, caused in part by competing priorities and personal challenges.

However, some of the activists shared that they have also observed the shift to more individual forms of activism that were not necessarily part of an organised group. A youth activist from Nigeria, for instance, shared that she continued doing individual research to blog and publish about COVID-19 and how it was impacting young people. In Peru, the interviewee shared that he saw the rise of volunteer movements in local communities. He described this as different from 'political activism' which has a strong advocacy component – the former was more of a response to immediate problems such as health and environmental issues.

These individual and everyday forms of activism demonstrate that the repertoire of young people's social action (beyond voting) has been expanding contrary to the crisis narratives described above (O'Toole 2016). These examples could be described as 'engaged citizenship' (c.f. Dalton 2008) whereby young people's politics and activism are embedded in their everyday lives and practices as opposed to joining formal groups.

Findings in this section shed light on the mental health impacts of youth and student activism to youth activists which others (such as Conner, Crawford, and Galioto 2023) have found remains a gap in the literature. Juggling various challenges in their school, work, family and activist lives, young people have also resorted to more individualised forms of organising and participation where they continue to educate and advocate through everyday activities.

Concluding thoughts: what implications to youth and student organising in education?

This paper demonstrated how moments of intense change transformed tactics and forms of activism and movements (della Porta 2020). The pandemic has revealed and widened cracks in social systems, including education, presenting new challenges to advocate for and shifting the ways youth and student movements respond to these challenges (Pleyers 2020; Sorce and Dumitrica 2023; Zajak 2022). This paper highlighted that youth and students' agency have played key roles in the shifts and changes in repertoires of social action. Their continued commitment and creativity, amidst intersecting challenges of the pandemic, had given shape to new ways of organising and solidarity-building. Evidence from this paper demonstrates the capacity of youth and student movements to be flexible and resilient: despite working with minimum resources and faced with overlapping, complex challenges (e.g. digital divide, shrinking civil society spaces), youth and student activists interviewed in this paper and those elsewhere (c.f. Luescher and Türkoğlu 2022) get the job done by shifting their approaches and aims. Therefore, while some repertoires of social action are 'tried and tested', many continue to change, transform and recalibrate both in response to the needs of the current struggle as well as the activists that employ them.

While many of their initiatives remain focused on education, the pandemic has deepened young people's recognition of the interconnections between education and broader developmental objectives, such as health, poverty reduction, and equitable partnerships. Looking towards the future of youth and student organising, this seems to suggest that young people's advocacy in education will become less siloed and pave the way for more interdisciplinary approaches. Furthermore, this holistic view of issues may lead to further collaborative work among different student and youth networks aided by the use of social media and other digital tools (c.f. Sorce and Dumitrica 2023). Global coalition building has already been happening on the international stage such as the development of the Global Student Forum of student and university unions, representing over 300 million learners.

Young people's demand for meaningful participation could be seen as a means for them to carve their space in shaping the global education agenda. In emphasising the need for terms of participation that are cognisant of their needs and multiple roles, youth and students are 'rejecting [*sic*] notions of citizenship that connect inclusion and participation with attributes belonging to social groups already in power' (Cortina 2011, 119). These claims to power further galvanise the role of student and youth groups as important stakeholders in policy making, especially that, as

Klemenčič (2014, 398) noted, 'higher education policy making around the world is becoming … less hierarchical, with policy decisions being negotiated and mediated among several stakeholders rather than simply imposed by the authorities'. This seems true with decisions around shaping the global education agenda and youth and student collective representation, such as the GCE youth and student network, 'can supply relevant information, expertise and legitimisation of policy outcomes' (Klemenčič 2014, 399).

Finally, this paper adds to previous literature that has long challenged the 'crisis narrative' in young people's apathy (see for instance Norris 2011; O'Toole 2016). On the contrary, young people remained active but with tactics and efforts that might be less familiar compared to earlier models of youth participation such as voting or member politics (Klemenčič 2014). COVID-19, as a 'critical juncture' has helped make visible forms and combinations of repertoires of social action that youth and student activists deployed. A greater appreciation of these diverse and lifestyle-related activism and politics, as well as the multidimensional impacts of crises on youth and student activists themselves seems important if organisations seek to involve young people in educational policymaking.

The pandemic is indeed a 'critical juncture' that not only impacts education systems but also social movements – from the underlying basis for organising to repertoires of social action. Following Green (2020, 13), youth and student activists, and perhaps youth- and student-involving organisations and state institutions, facing a crisis with this impact, need to 'invest time and mental bandwidth in understanding the changes in the political, economic and social landscape arising both from the pandemic itself, and the responses to it'. And perhaps such moment of significant rupture could lead to thinking of 'alternative futures' (c.f. Pleyers 2020) for the role of youth and students in shaping the global education agenda.

Note

1. GCE gave written approval for the report findings be used for this paper. The report is available Open Access at GCE's website: https://campaignforeducation.org/en/resources/publications/setting-spaces-for-youth-and-student-led-advocacy

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Appendix. Brief profile of interviewees.

Interviewee 1 (P1)	29, male, based in Nigeria. He is executive director of a youth organisation and initiative based that advocate for good governance, political participation and championing the SDGs. He has worked on issues such as youth leadership, education financing and educational technology.
Interviewee 2 (P2)	32, male, based in Ghana. He works in a students' coalition that is composed of student organisations from over 50 countries in Africa. His current role involves capacity building in the organisation and he was previously in charge of research and programmes management.
Interviewee 3 (P3)	27, female, based in Namibia. She is a student activist and leader within the Southern African Region. Their group's advocacy work encompasses research and development, academic freedom and issues around accessibility and affordability.
Interviewee 4 (P4)	26, female, based in Nigeria. She is a student activist, development economist and early career researcher. She leads and is a member a few youth advocacy groups in education, women's advancement and youth development.
Interviewee 5 (P5)	Male, based in Peru. He is a student leader/officer of an organisation composed of various student leaders in the region. His role is currently towards monitoring and evaluation of their group's projects and making sure these are aligned to national campaigns.
Interviewee 6 (P6)	22, female, based in the Philippines. She is a youth leader of a local political organisation based in a Philippine university. She is also a member of a group that focusses on education against poverty and have been instrumental in campaigning towards the passing of free higher education tuition fee in the country.

Interviewee 7 (P7)	28, female, based in Palestine. She currently works as a psychosocial support facilitator for communities prone to violence. She is also a member of a campaign for education for all in the arab region where she represents the youth arm of the organisation.
Interviewee 8 (P8)	22, female, based in Austria. She is a student leader who has already been an activist as early as 15. Currently, she is a board member of the organising bureau of a student union based in Europe that serves as a platform for cooperation between different groups in the region.
Interviewee 9 (P9)	28, female, based in Honduras. She is youth leader, education and civil society advocate passionate about the fight for inclusive and equitable education at all levels. She is currently a youth representative in an international organisation for education partnerships.
Interviewee 10 (P10)	27, female based in Ghana. She is currently a programme office for a students' union in the African region. She is passionate about inclusivity and quality education for all.
Interviewee 11 (P11)	24, female, based in the Philippines and is co-coordinator of a feminist youth-led network. She facilitates convenings of various member groups and creating linkages to share knowledge and best practices between these groups. Her activist work has long focused on comprehensive sexuality education.