Abstract

Framed by critical literacies, the author adapted ethnographic methods to virtual spaces to examine radio as an alternative way to enhance adult understanding of children's COVID-19 experiences. Drawing on a subset of child-produced radio segments from March 2021, she foregrounds how children in an extracurricular program strategically used radio to share their pandemic experiences with their community. Supplemented by 5 months of virtual observations, she identified how child-DJs used radio to share how—through the COVID-19 pandemic—they cared about and for their community. Ultimately, she argues radio is one tool for coming to know children as community change agents.

KEYWORDS

childhood, COVID-19 pandemic, elementary education, informal learning, radio

INTRODUCTION

Once considered a ‘new’ force in education (Ryan, 1938), radio (or, recently, podcasting) has long been considered a powerful teaching tool (Armstrong et al., 2009; Bosch, 2007; Morgan, 2015; Wilson et al., 2012). Scholars have examined youth's digital creations across childhood, digital learning and media studies. Still, few have explored children's use of radio technologies to enhance understanding of community or to reimagine preferable social futures (Green, 2011; Wilkinson, 2018). Partnering with Be Loud Studios—an extracurricular organization—my study considered children's use of radio
as ‘a tool to carve out opportunities in which ideas of self and other are imagined, produced, and lived’ (Bosch, 2007, p. 277).

Located in New Orleans, Louisiana, United States—a majority Black city hard-hit by COVID-19—Be Loud is a socially engaged youth organization that, like me, understands children as active participants in society who co-produce knowledge (James, 2007; Shier, 2001; Uprichard, 2008). Children enrolled in Be Loud’s after-school programming generate story topics and conduct interviews with local leaders, which are later played weekly on local radio. Working with and alongside Be Loud’s community teachers and child-DJs (aged 9–12), I used a case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) to consider the following:

1. How did child-DJs strategically use radio to share their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic with their community?

Understanding that ‘children’s voices are situated within a particular time and place’ (Khoja, 2016, p. 320), I open by contextualizing COVID-19 within New Orleans. I find it imperative to detail the COVID-19 context because I understood and theorized the child-DJs as social actors who constructed their ‘everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future’ in their recorded radio segments (emphasis original, Uprichard, 2008, p. 311). I then offer readers background information about Be Loud before providing an overview of relevant literature and my framing. Next, I detail my methods and, in turn, describe the findings, highlighting how children used radio to share insights into personal experiences of COVID-19. Finally, I foreground how children’s stories might be useful across formal and extracurricular learning spaces.

**COVID-19 in New Orleans**

New Orleans had a unique experience with COVID-19. In early 2020, COVID-19 still was only identified in distant geographies. But, following the annual Mardi Gras celebrations in late February 2020, hospitals were almost immediately overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients. This was partly due to a massive number of tourists joining Mardi Gras; the city reports that nearly 1.4 million people typically visit during the yearly celebration. After the city announced the first presumptive case on 9 March, hospitals saw an influx of infected patients. Officials identified more than 200 cases 10 days later, and three people had already succumbed to COVID-19 by then. By 31 March, 239 Louisianans had died, and 5200 people were infected (most in New Orleans).

The rapid growth of COVID-19 cases, alongside the World Health Organization’s proclamation of a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, influenced Louisiana leaders’s choice to close schools on 16 March. Almost immediately after, the state’s governor announced a stay-at-home order through April. However, when the governor declared a Phase 2 reopening, he extended restrictions until 5 June; these remained in place until 11 September when he initiated a Phase 3 reopening. In November 2020—9 months after New Orleans’s first COVID-19 case—the state reinstated Phase 2 restrictions. Phase 2 restrictions remained in place until 10 March 2021, when New Orleans moved into a modified Phase 3 due to the increased availability of COVID-19 vaccines and the fact that 10% of New Orleanians were already vaccinated.

The back-and-forth nature of phased reopenings in New Orleans and the return to restrictions served as the impetus for child-DJs’ scripts on 29 March 2021, which became this paper’s focus. As I detail, Be Loud teachers encouraged child-DJs to look forward to possible improvements in the months ahead, even describing the script as a chance to reflect on ‘how things are getting better’. Nevertheless,
as I argue, the ebbs-and-flows of COVID-19 the previous year likely encouraged child-DJs to do so with cautious optimism.

**About Be Loud**

Be Loud (https://beloudstudios.org/) is an extracurricular educational organization. The co-founders were colleagues at a New Orleanian charter elementary school and desired an alternative for commonplace literacy interventions for the learners with whom they worked. Grounded in the belief that children need more space to practice being ‘loud’, the co-founders created Be Loud to offer children a safe space to express their opinions, ideas and perspectives through the digital. Be Loud began in radio: the co-founders initiated BricoRadio (https://bricoradio.org/) to counter regimented and racist pull-out literacy interventions developed for children deemed ‘below benchmark’.

Seeing elementary students thrive with a mic in hand, the co-founders established Be Loud to ensure more children could benefit from radio. Be Loud filled a local need by designing programming for third- through eighth-grade children. Few other city organizations encouraged ‘tweens’ to become productive and positive digital creators. Instead, most extracurricular programs geared towards teaching digital skills to secondary students. Hence, Be Loud dedicated their programmatic efforts to serving 9–12-year-old New Orleanians.

Initially, the co-founders implemented a week-long summer camp focused on digital production. As classroom-turned-community educators, they remained committed to amplifying all children’s voices, especially historically marginalized children. They established scholarships for children from economically disadvantaged homes to attend camp, and, annually, over 50% of campers receive scholarships. Caretakers must only self-report financial need on their camp application (by denoting their child received free/reduced school lunch or by contacting Be Loud) to receive a scholarship. Importantly, caretakers are not required to provide documented proof of need, an intentional move to ensure anyone who wishes to attend camp can do so.

Since, Be Loud has continued to innovate. In fall 2020, they launched their inaugural after-school program. They welcomed a cohort of 18 child-DJs from across the city to weekly production meetings, studio sessions, and ‘hot seat’ interviews with local leaders. Be Loud led weekend community field trips when permitted by public health measures. Here, children met local change agents, including artists and horticulturalists. Together, this first cohort of child-DJs, whom I focus on in this paper, represented a racially and economically diverse subset of children. Before detailing my work with the children, I first contrast traditional and recent educational scholars’ understandings of what constitutes civics education and the possibilities for informal civics education. Then, I describe studies where radio intersects with education before detailing how I used a critical literacies approach to frame my inquiry.

**CONCEPTUALIZING CIVICS EDUCATION**

On a basic level, most Americans consider civics to be about the relationships between community members and government, including the general rules and laws that govern society (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Often included in this is an understanding that a spectrum of politics exists and that there is inherent value in hearing all perspectives (Alarcon et al., 2017), especially if the United States wishes to cultivate community members skilled in ‘honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives’ (Swan et al., 2013, p. 33). Likewise, many understand civics as participatory: individuals within communities act—through formal voting processes in elections or
more informal humanitarian traditions like donating blood—as part of a democratic society (Mitra & Serriere, 2015).

Many scholars who conceptualize civics as action-oriented understand civics to be about ‘making a change’ (ideally, towards a more equitable and just society; Mayes et al., 2016). In other words, definitions of civics aim to, as Blevins et al. (2016) proposed, help children ‘cultivate a commitment to civic participation to become active members of vibrant communities’ (p. 345). For example, Blevins et al. (2016) described how middle-grade youth explored self-selected topics related to their community and larger social problems during a civics camp. Through scaffolded civics learning, Blevins et al. (2016) anticipated that youth might refine their skills as knowledgeable and critical active citizens.

Similarly, Mirra and Garcia (2017) proposed that understandings of civics must shift from strictly participation to civic interrogation and innovation. They argued that civics education typically focuses on American ‘progress’ on large-scale social issues to forward a patriotic imaginary whereby the ‘infrastructure of our democracy is sound’ (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p. 127). However, as they noted, this framing disregards how systemic inequities persist, particularly for (children from) historically and continually marginalized communities, populations Arnstein (1969, 2019) referred to as society’s ‘have-nots’ (p. 24).

To support their call for a paradigmatic shift in how civics is conceptualized, Mirra and Garcia (2017) offered informal noticings about how United States youth generated civic understandings and actively redefined civics through digital forms of expression (i.e. online engagement, hashtags). Youth explicitly challenged stagnant notions of civics and unjust power structures through innovative approaches to cultivating a civic identity using the digital. The youth's actions could be read as a response to Arnstein's (1969, 2019) call for ‘the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future’: youth sought to ‘induce significant social reform’ through the digital (p. 24). Therefore, civics cannot be bound to formal classrooms or named as something individuals cannot partake in until voting age. Instead, we must understand how youth are always already innovating ways forward, whether through school-based lessons or more innovative approaches like camp experiences (Blevins et al., 2016) and digital spaces (Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Herein, I discuss another alternative space for civics—radio.

**RADIO IN EDUCATION**

The first reports of radio's educational benefits for Kindergarten–12th-grade schooling emerged in the 1930s (Ryan, 1938). Today, many scholars study podcasting instead of radio (Bruce & Lin, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2019). Often, such research only examines collaborative child–adult broadcasts, children’s final productions, or how podcasting might support disciplinary learning (Bonati, 1997; Liao et al., 2013; Morgan, 2015). Few studies yet explore children’s use of radio to enhance understanding of community or reimagine preferable futures without fetishizing youth voice (Soep & Chávez, 2010). Furthermore, scholarly considerations about radio’s role in providing an autonomous and largely uncensored vehicle for children’s communications remain peripheral in the literature.

Although scholars have documented the digital worlds children inhabit, how children are prepared to engage in virtual spaces, and what children take away from digital worlds as they return to their ‘real life’ in communities (Marsh et al., 2018; Vasudevan et al., 2010), research documenting children’s digital practices during COVID-19 is still emerging. Many children experienced a rapid shift into virtual worlds because of COVID-19. Informed by the swift changes to daily life and the stated need that child participation must be ‘understood in the cultural milieu within which it is happening’ (Emerson & Lloyd, 2017, p. 121), investigating children’s digital and community practices during this precarious time became all the more urgent.
In this study, I considered children's expressed experiences of COVID-19 through their radio productions. This investigation was largely possible because digital production presented possibilities for ‘learning anywhere, anytime’ (Turner et al., 2017) and because radio eased the restriction of when and where to teach while increasing communicative channels with families and communities. Additionally, as Green (2011) noted in her study of 12 secondary Black youth's radio productions, ‘radio remains an accessible medium of communication that cuts across socioeconomic lines’ (p. 28). Moreover, historically and today, radio serves as a ‘critical source of sociopolitical information’, especially within Black American households (Green, 2011, p. 28). Through radio, I saw a way forward in understanding how racially diverse children shared (hi)stories in a time of sustained physical distancing.

As a scholar committed to amplifying the experiences of consistently marginalized individuals in society—especially children—I engaged a critical literacies approach to consider how child-DJs’ radio segments alluded to larger systems of power while highlighting their social concerns in their community (Vasquez, 2014). However, I must note that radio is not a ‘cure-all solution for disenfranchised and silenced young people’ (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 334). Simultaneously, the diversity of Be Loud’s child-DJs cannot simply be ‘gloss[ed] over’ or considered as a ‘homogenous group’ (James, 2007, p. 336). Instead, it was imperative for me to seriously contemplate how child-DJs’ identities and institutions of power influenced their lifeworlds (Lewis et al., 2007), and a critical literacies approach afforded me such opportunities.

**ON CRITICAL LITERACIES**

Many often conflate critical literacies with critical thinking, but it is vital to understand that critical literacies are not an instructional approach or a checklist of skills. Critical literacies are a way of being in the world (Vasquez et al., 2019). In this way, critical literacies are both a theoretical and a practical framework, rooted in Freire and Macedo’s (1987) call for individuals and communities to read the word and the world. In taking heed of Freire and Macedo’s (1987) work, I understand teaching, learning and action related to critical literacies as fundamental for creating a more equitable society whereby all individuals thrive rather than merely survive.

In practice, critical literacies offer numerous avenues for considering, critiquing, and transforming unequal power relations to create more just social futures (New London Group, 1996). Such work is not easy, however, as it requires looking at the external ‘dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, institutions, and political systems’ (Luke, 2013, p. 22) while also gazing inward at how our identities and positionings operate in the world. I used critical literacies to guide my analysis of child-DJs’ words and work as power-imbued processes which reflected a sense of agency (Lewis et al., 2007; Shier, 2001). Additionally, I considered how their radio segments reflected their understanding of how power is produced and enacted through social processes (Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994; James, 2007).

Critical literacies are inherently tied to justice and, especially, to politics of space and place (Pandya & Ávila, 2014). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such tensions became seemingly more apparent. On the one hand, there perhaps existed a globally shared experience of living in the early days of the pandemic. With workplaces, schools, daycares, and playgrounds worldwide shuttered, nearly all bodies were regulated similarly. On the other hand, experiences with COVID-19 remained differentiated, even fragmented, for individuals. Globally and in New Orleans, historically and continually marginalized persons—People of Colour alongside disabled, immunocompromised, and poorer communities—suffered material, economic, and personal losses as COVID-19 raged.

The sociopolitical landscape, therefore, likely exposed child-DJs to multiple perspectives and afforded them new insights into whose take on pandemic-related matters was given credence or, more
simply, ‘counted’. Using a critical literacies lens, I saw how child-DJs’ communicative practices and social action connected to broader ethical issues (Pandya & Ávila, 2014). Bridging critical literacies scholarship with childhood studies (James, 2007; Shier, 2001; Uprichard, 2008), I sought to illustrate the degree to which children understood and acknowledged the social texts they crafted as a sort of ongoing interaction with New Orleans. Ultimately, I detailed instances wherein I saw children engage critical literacies to forge new ground by sharing their (hi)stories and COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

METHODS

Using a case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and adapting critical ethnographic methods (Britzman, 2000) for virtual spaces, my overall research goal was to generate insights into how child-produced radio offered alternative inroads for children to share how global events (e.g. COVID-19) impacted their community.

Research partnership and study site

As mentioned, the focal site was Be Loud’s extracurricular programming. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19 public health restrictions, nearly all of Be Loud’s programming during spring 2021 was offered entirely online. All meetings—with adults who constituted the Be Loud team and with child-DJs—occurred on Zoom, the popular cloud-based communications app.

To a great extent, this project was a collaborative effort with Be Loud. The co-founders saw themselves as active partners in my work. As an organization, they viewed the project as central to their growth, particularly as they expected my findings could enhance programming efforts with New Orleanian children and enrich their connections to other educational professionals. Importantly, this was not our first foray as partners; it extended the reciprocal relationship the co-founders and I developed the previous 2 years, wherein we used each other as thought-partners. For instance, I located relevant research for them and consulted how to meaningfully document children’s experiences, a critical task for them to secure grants from external funders. Our cross-sectional partnership allowed us to shift from mere reciprocity into one another’s relevant networks and professional communities.

Working alongside Be Loud’s leaders, we collaboratively planned for my time in the field and discussed how I would generate, organize and analyse digital data. While much of the ideation was collaborative, as the principal investigator, I was fully responsible for all stages of the research. Still, because of the time-intensive, qualitative data generation and analysis methods, Be Loud’s co-founders and community teachers typically provided supplemental data and assistance as necessary.

Because the primary participants were children, Be Loud’s co-founders supported me in gaining consent from child-DJs’ caretakers. Likewise, the co-founders answered questions about the study’s purpose. They assured children they did not have to provide assent—the typical way children confirm participation—even if their caretaker signed a consent form (Kirby, 2020; Parsons et al., 2016). This was a deliberate move in that we worried ‘the children might have felt obligated to accept my invitation to participate’ (Khoja, 2016, p. 317). We did our best to ensure child-DJs understood their involvement was of their own volition through ongoing conversations while reiterating they would suffer no consequences for not engaging (Gaches, 2021).

Additionally, Be Loud leaders and I discussed protecting children’s identities—a markedly vulnerable population—from the research inquiry stage to the final publication of results. Given that the
children's voices and—on social media—their faces were already publicly available, we deliberated how to make this a feasible task for me when writing about and presenting the data. Together, we decided to use the children's DJ tags. Notably, DJ tags were names children generated for themselves that were (1) personal, (2) specific and (3) positive/fun. Children often opted to name themselves according to interest (i.e. anime, Minecraft) or an activity (i.e. basketball, theatre), while others sometimes referenced family, community name or food. I provide additional information about focal child-DJs in the findings. However, to support readers, I included an overview of their demographics in Table 1.

About the researcher

My experiences as a classroom teacher in post-Katrina New Orleans heavily informed my relationship with Be Loud's teachers and the child-DJs. Before the study, I was already familiar with Be Loud's co-founders, having started my career in education in the same year they did. One co-founder had been a helpful thought-partner in my early years as a teacher. We shared ideas about classroom practice and engaging in the New Orleans community. In the last few years, we reconnected, primarily due to Be Loud's launch. After 2 years, we had established an ongoing, reciprocal relationship. Together, we imagined how my skills as a researcher might facilitate new learnings for the co-founders.

My time as an elementary educator in New Orleans influenced how I understood my positioning related to Be Loud and child-DJs. I began my career as the city was still in the process of recovery and renewal following the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. As such, I brought a rich understanding of the city's history and cultural practices and trauma-informed, child-led pedagogies like the ones used by Be Loud. Still, as a highly educated cisgender white woman who no longer resided in the community, I understood vast power differentials existed. With Be Loud's community educators, I tried to mitigate these as much as possible, including positioning Be Loud children and adults as experts who had much to teach me (Clark, 2011).

Data sources

Zoom meeting recordings

My interactions with Be Loud occurred via Zoom. I video-recorded the 50+ engagements with Be Loud's co-founders and producers as we planned the weekly sessions. I video-recorded my 32 engagements with child-DJs \( (n = 36 \text{ h from mid-January to mid-May 2021}) \), including 16 whole-group Monday meetings (16h), 12 small-group ‘Studio Sessions’ on Tuesdays (12h) and four (more sporadic) 2-h ‘Hot Seat’ events on Thursdays (8 h). Unlike the other adults, I participated like child-DJs on Mondays.

| DJ name          | Demographic information               |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| DJ Dice (he/him) | Fifth-grade, white boy                |
| DJ KJ (she/her)  | Sixth-grade, Black girl               |
| DJ Loud (he/him) | Fifth-grade, Black boy                |
| DJ Pride (she/her/he/him/they/them) | Fifth-grade, White pangender child  |
| DJ Storm (he/him)| Fifth-grade, Black boy                |
and Thursdays, floating between whole-group and small-group activities. Conversely, on Tuesdays, I acted as a community teacher (what Be Loud leaders call a ‘producer’). I provided child-DJs feedback about scripts and recordings and asked them about their production processes. Weekly, I transcribed recordings and kept a running record of my noticings, writing fieldnotes in a physical notebook (Emerson et al., 2011) alongside digital conceptual memos (Heath & Street, 2008).

**Child-produced artefacts**

I also generated data by downloading and transcribing child-DJs’ weekly segments. First, I downloaded child-DJs’ initial recordings they produced during the Monday meeting. DJs could revise their segments (such as during the Tuesday Studio Session). Thus, I downloaded updated recordings on Fridays, the day when children's final recordings of their segments were ‘due’ to Be Loud if they wanted to have their segment played live on local radio. I kept a close record of the children's recordings as I transcribed, and, like with Zoom meetings, I kept a log of my noticings about their segments from January to May 2021.

**Be Loud-produced artefacts**

While the meetings and child-produced segments served as primary data sources, I also collected data Be Loud community teachers generated. For example, I gathered lesson plans and slides from the weekly whole-group meetings and email communications. Additionally, I copied assessments Be Loud used to ascertain how satisfied child-DJs and families were with the programming (i.e. weekly surveys children completed; annual surveys families completed).

**Data generation and analysis**

This project took place in three phases. In Phase 1 (January 2021), I used participant observation (Spradley, 1980) to get to know the child-DJs across the three weekly sessions. I remained alert to community issues of importance during informal conversations with them. As child-DJs learned the processes and tools of radio production, I found collecting Be Loud instructional materials helpful. These documents and conversations with Be Loud founders and child-DJs helped me develop a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973).

During Phase 2 (February–May 2021), I traced how child-DJs identified specific people and spaces critical to their community's (hi)stories or identities. I inquired about their choices regarding the stories they shared and the technologies they used, in ways common to prior digital research (Vasudevan et al., 2010). I also observed how children engaged in production practices. Building on my past research procedures (Brownell, 2021), I typically focused on one child or a small group as anchor points during whole-group meetings (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Doing so provided me with fine-grained observation of how radio production constructed possibilities for children's creativity and digital literacies.

Most Tuesday Studio Sessions, I engaged with a small group of child-DJs to revise and re-record their segments. When possible, I did an adapted version of the retrospective analysis described by Dalton et al. (2015), which I used in previous research (Brownell, 2021). I asked child-DJs to think aloud their production process and detail their decision-making. Like when I reviewed child-DJs’
segments. I paid particular attention to child-identified social issues and whether/how their productions connected to their identities, individually and as community members (Uprichard, 2008).

Because data generation was an ongoing process, my analysis was iterative. I recursively wrote reflective memos and created a database to log my observations (Miles et al., 2014). In Phase 3, I layered transcripts with video to support a multimodal interaction analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Adapting Wohlwend et al. (2018)’s methods of video data analysis, I catalogued and summarized child-DJs’ clips and tagged them (alongside supplementary photographs or fieldnotes) with identifiers related to (1) who the child producer was; (2) the type of tool(s) they used for planning, designing or creating; and (3) the purpose/topic of their production practice, mainly focusing on how productions might be related to their COVID-19 experiences. Using axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I noted themes across child-DJs’ productions and related to study objectives. I then layered in child-DJs’ meaning-making garnered during our retrospective conversations. Ultimately, I identified two overarching themes for children’s scripts: care about community and care for community.

I document in the findings how children used radio to demonstrate how circumstances of COVID-19 informed who/what they cared about, namely their community. Furthermore, I illustrate how children’s timely radio segments showcased their experiences in a majority-Black city hard-hit by the pandemic. Specifically, I highlight child-DJs’ use of the mic and their productions for creative political expression (Wilson et al., 2012); they used radio as a vehicle to be heard as change agents who care for their community as they discussed masking and vaccines (James, 2007). As I argue, these nuanced stories from children about their COVID-19 pandemic experiences enrich conceptualizations about children’s capabilities as social beings, now and in the future (Uprichard, 2008). Likewise, child-DJs’ segments challenge historical understandings of children as uninterested in ‘political’ engagement, contributing yet another voice to the chorus of scholars in early civics (Halvorsen, 2017) and critical literacies (Vasquez, 2014). Furthermore, as the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child contended, the excerpts I included in the findings demonstrate child-DJs’ capability to cultivate their views on COVID-19 and related public health matters (United Nations, 2009).

**FINDINGS**

During the final weekly meeting of March 2021, Be Loud’s community teachers decided it was worthwhile to provide child-DJs space to share their COVID-19 experiences. At the time, New Orleans’ and the broader United States’ vaccination efforts were quickly ramping up, with individuals older than 16 qualifying to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, many children in the city, including the child-DJs, attended school predominantly face-to-face (with masks!). Thus, an atmosphere of hope existed for a more radical shift to ‘normal’ and the prevalent way of life before COVID-19.

The community teachers created a reasonably open-ended prompt to guide the child-DJs’ reflection on year one of the COVID-19 pandemic. They gave child-DJs a sentence starter that read, ‘COVID taught me….’ Building from the prompt, DJ FlipPhone (a Be Loud co-founder) asked: ‘What is one lesson, one value, one idea, or even maybe one skill you’ve learned because of COVID this year?’ He continued, ‘The only thing I’m asking, make it personal. Think about the thing. Don’t just be like, oh, I’ve learned how to wear a mask, or I’ve learned how to wash my hands, right? We’ve all had to do that. What is the one thing that you, DJ KJ, you, DJ Dice, have had to learn because of COVID?’

The child-DJs turned their heads down in their Zoom frames to scribble their scripts. Afterward, they moved into Zoom breakout rooms with peer DJs and a teacher to read their script aloud and offer peer feedback. Returning to the whole group, they discussed a recording tip before returning to the same breakout room to record their segments. In each findings section, I include excerpts that
best illuminate the themes of caring about and for community, and I illustrate the interrelated nature of child-DJs' negative and positive learning experiences from COVID-19. Additionally, I identify instances wherein their learning deviated from mainstream adult perspectives.

Caring about Community

Having heard a handful of children's scripts shared in small groups during the focal meeting, I was already somewhat familiar with the scripts when I began analysis. Still, I was perhaps unprepared for the depth of the child-DJs' learning evidenced in their final recordings. In planning for this reflective prompt on their pandemic experiences, the community teachers had anticipated, even encouraged, the child-DJs to consider how the extended stay-at-home orders perhaps improved their lives. The community teachers had mentioned that child-DJs could write about something they learned to do during COVID-19, such as a new hobby. The teachers suggested children consider lessons from learning online or new chores they were assigned, like watching a sibling or caring for a pet. Despite teacher examples, child-DJs' recordings depicted seemingly different lessons than adults predicted.

Many recorded segments illustrated children's learning to care about community. For instance, several of the child-DJs reflected how the pandemic reified the value of the people in their lives. One child-DJ, DJ Dice—a fifth-grade white boy—described how the pandemic taught him ‘not to take the little things for granted’. Included in this was ‘hanging out with grandparents’. Similarly, DJ Dice noted that because of the lockdowns, ‘a lot of things that used to be normal are not doable anymore because of the restrictions’. Specifically, DJ Dice stated, ‘I couldn’t see my friends anymore’ in his recording. Ultimately, the back-and-forth between reopenings and phased restrictions helped him ‘realize how valuable it is to do these things and how you can be impacted when you cannot do them anymore’.

Notably, DJ Dice was not alone in noticing he was more attuned to the value and necessity of remaining connected to loved ones because of the pandemic, a common theme for many child-DJs as they shared about their forced separation from friends and family. While this felt distance and loss resulted in many child-DJs reevaluating their future engagement with community, others saw the state-wide stay-at-home orders as beneficial.

DJ Loud—a fifth-grade, Black boy—used his radio segment to share how the pandemic helped him ‘appreciate family more’. DJ Loud realized how much sadness COVID-19 brought many people, noting ‘almost a million people dying from COVID and having family members and friends dying from it’. Citing his experiences ‘watching the news and seeing how many families lost people in their life’, DJ Loud shared that from such tragedy, he realized his good fortune to have his family. Thus, he appreciated them more.

Although much of DJ Loud’s segment noted the losses many suffered due to COVID-19, he also shared the upside to lockdowns and sustained public health measures. DJ Loud mentioned that ‘the good things about COVID’ were that he could still be ‘with my family, like my mom and dad’. He told Be Loud's listeners he spent time with his parents ‘like never before’. DJ Loud closed with examples of time spent boiling crawfish (a New Orleans mainstay) and learning how to ride bikes.

To me, the boys’ comments highlighted that, while no doubt much was lost because of COVID-19, much was gained. DJ Loud’s words about how much more time he spent with his caretakers—when paired with DJ Dice's recognition that many often take these kinds of interactions for granted—illustrated how elementary-aged children perhaps benefitted from the pandemic in ways overlooked by mainstream media and political leaders. For these seemingly ‘young’ children, their COVID-19 experiences shifted how they viewed their families and themselves in relation to them. While it is
likely too early to make claims about the pandemic's long-term influence on children like DJ Dice and Loud, it is important to attune to the stories they narrated, now and in the future.

**Caring for community**

From the early weeks of the pandemic onward, public health leaders within and beyond the United States contended that—to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic—individuals across the globe would need to make wise choices for themselves and their communities. While several child-DJs called attention to the need for community in their segments, others used Be Loud's platform to necessitate care for community. Although little was initially known about the virus, in the first year after being detected, public health officials asked communities to remain committed to frequently washing their hands, wearing adequate face masks, and maintaining physical distance as much as possible. Furthermore, as vaccines gained emergency approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and global peer institutions, public health officials encouraged eligible individuals to become vaccinated for their health and the health of loved ones and community members who remained ineligible to be vaccinated.

For DJ Pride—a fifth-grade white pangender child—the production and accessibility of vaccines provided her a sense of relief. In their segment, she stated, ‘I feel safe around someone who's gotten the vaccine because it means it is safe to be around’. However, DJ Pride also noted that vaccines alone would not resolve the pandemic. Specifically, he said, ‘we do still have to wear masks and social distance’. DJ Pride seemed to understand their adult listeners might be hesitant to get the vaccine, offering encouragement for them to do so, telling Be Loud listeners, ‘if you have the option of getting the vaccine, get it. It will help everybody in our community’. By calling attention to the whole-group benefit of having more individuals vaccinated, DJ Pride emphasized the need for all New Orleanians to care for their community and offered vaccines as a vehicle for doing so.

DJ KJ—a sixth-grade Black girl—also commented on the power of vaccines in ways similar to DJ Pride. However, DJ KJ took an innovative approach to express her concern for her community by drawing parallels between COVID-19 and her passion for videogaming. In her opening, DJ KJ said the coronavirus is a game. She argued the pandemic was ‘like this big level that you can never beat’. Continuing, DJ KJ highlighted that if we cannot beat the virus, life will never quite return to what it was. Then, like DJ Pride, DJ KJ offered vaccination as a solution, despite that ‘it took forever to find the vaccine’. Building on her gaming analogy, she proposed to listeners that the vaccine was ‘just like that little power-up that you use’ because ‘it helps you, it makes you stronger’.

Important to note here is that, at the time of the focal meeting, no one under the age of 16 was yet eligible to be vaccinated; vaccine-producer Pfizer would not even submit initial findings of inoculating 12–15-year-olds until 2 weeks after the child-DJs made their recordings. The coronavirus was also notable because, since initial infections, children were far less likely than their adult counterparts to become infected. Globally, children contributed to public health efforts under the guidance of adults by washing their hands, wearing masks, and remaining separated from those outside their households for well over a year. Knowing this, perhaps it is unsurprising that many child-DJs appeared staunchly committed to public health measures. Nevertheless, as DJ KJ alluded to, some feared vaccines and other public health measures—from masking to vaccines—had become politically polarized social issues.

DJ Storm, a fifth-grade Black boy, more explicitly articulated the doubt many in the community perhaps had about public safety measures. Differently from his peers, DJ Storm framed his segment around the word ‘scared’, stating, ‘I picked the word scared because some people in my neighborhood...
don't wear masks because they think COVID isn't a thing'. DJ Storm elaborated, articulating that those who think the pandemic is not real likely believe 'it's just fake' and, perhaps, part of a larger conspiracy. Specifically, DJ Storm noted that such conspiracy theorists might think COVID-19 is a tool from powers that be to 'make people stay inside of their houses and don't do their job'.

In addition to calling attention to the real feelings of fear he felt related to individuals in the community who doubted COVID-19 was real, DJ Storm shared other sentiments similar to his peers. In his segment, he stated, ‘One thing that COVID-19 taught me was to be aware of my health and other people's health’. This reflection is perhaps a commonplace life lesson discussed among adults who have long been concerned about COVID-19's impacts. However, DJ Storm's articulation of care, both for himself and his community, illuminated for me how young people, including elementary-aged children, learned to care for others amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic.

DJ-ing offered children a unique opportunity to document their COVID-19 experiences in their own words. The sociopolitical backdrop made this work all the more urgent because there has never been a greater need to turn towards children to learn about their perspectives and practices. Thus, this work is significant because it provides much-needed evidence about children's experiences of and with the digital in an era of prolonged uncertainty and unrest.

DISCUSSION

Children enrolled in Be Loud's after-school program produced and shared radio programming with limited adult interference. In turn, they amplified their role as community ‘knowledge creators’ as they described their learning to care about and for community amidst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic (Armstrong et al., 2009, p. 88). As the child-DJs wrote scripts and engineered recorded audio ahead of the actual broadcast (Ryan, 1938), they also honed their critical (digital) literacies as they critically reflected on their COVID-19 experiences (Turner et al., 2017).

I understood the child-DJs' rhetorical moves within their scripts as strategic. They were aware their segments were broadcast to adults in their community (arguably, individuals with more power than the children). Carrying the knowledge that, at least to some degree, the child-DJs would have the ear of their adult counterparts, and each child-DJ appeared to challenge commonplace narratives about children's COVID-19 experiences.

DJ Dice and Lou held up to live out an critical literacies approach as their segments documented a seemingly more positive spin on the pandemic. This perspective is arguably less prevalent within mainstream media. Similarly, their fellow DJs—Pride, KJ, and Storm—also engaged in critical literacies as they used their platform to acknowledge and problem-solve contemporary issues like vaccines and masking. Child-DJs often used the microphone to discuss topics they may not approach as easily off-air; their productions became outlets for creative personal and political expressions (Wilson et al., 2012).

Cumulatively, the nuanced stories of children's radio compositions shared herein can inform classroom and community teachers of the benefits and possibilities of child radio for forwarding children's positioning as cogent and capable social actors (Shier, 2001; Vasquez, 2014). Furthermore, child-DJs' stories can enrich contemporary conversations about the necessity of ‘shed[ding] light on children's enjoyment of their participation rights’ as related to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; emphasis original, Emerson & Lloyd, 2017, p. 121). Specifically, Articles 13 and 17 of the UNCRC discuss how, for children to participate in decision-making, the state must refrain from interfering in children's access to information and freedom of expression. This links to my study
as I examined ‘least interfered with’ child-radio. In contrast, previous research primarily looked at radio wherein children's full participation was traditionally limited in some way.

Therefore, this inquiry has implications for and is likely of interest to many. For example, for adults—educators, researchers and caretakers—my qualitative focus on children's critical (digital) literacies and sustained community engagement may enrich understanding of children's experiences and needs as they engage in digital creation, especially in precarious moments like those of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bekker et al., 2015; Jocius, 2018).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Children's current and future civic involvement are indeed essential considerations, particularly if we understand and theorize children as co-constructors of knowledge and culture (Uprichard, 2008). However, because the COVID-19 pandemic is evolving, little current research has explored how to engage children in a community-based, virtual project. An ethical imperative therefore exists for gaining qualitative understanding of how children are experiencing global events like COVID-19. Creating and studying (digital) spaces for collaborative, critical thinking among children remains essential in our politically polarized era, especially in a time of sustained or back-and-forth physical distancing.

As Be Loud child-DJs' voices reverberated in their community, they demonstrated how radio acted as a pedagogical tool; it strengthened child-DJs' abilities to ‘critically consume and create digital, multimodal texts’ (Turner et al., 2017, p. 123). My research-practice partnership with Be Loud can enhance the field's knowledge about contemporary possibilities for radio and what it can elicit, particularly in terms of how child-DJs broaden their understanding of community. In turn, my findings can enrich our understanding of how communities are impacted by global events and offer new possibilities for bolstering children's confidence as equity-oriented change agents by examining the possibilities of child-produced radio for civic action.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study received ethics approval from the Ethics Review Board at the University of Toronto (application #40065). All children assented to participate in the study and their caretakers signed consent forms that granted the use of their voice and likeness as well as materials they produced to be shared.
in academic articles and presentations. Likewise, adults involved in the community-based partner site also signed consent forms.

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