Curating Spaces of Connection and Resisting Pandemic Isolation Through Innovative Digital Practices

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In this time of global pandemic, there has been much adult discourse around what children need both academically and at home, emphasizing structure and continued learning across content areas. Missing from these discussions and recommendations are the perspectives of children themselves. Children, many of whom lack access to their own communication devices as well as social media and personal e-mail accounts, have felt the impact of separation from peers. This article examines ways in which a diverse group of 9- and 10-year-old children resisted the isolating circumstances early in the COVID-19 pandemic through creating and repurposing digital spaces to connect with friends, classmates, and family members.[1]

Discourses of Childhood and Remote Education

No matter where in the world we are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, there are discussions around the impacts on children and schooling. These conversations and resulting policies and practices are shaped by perspectives on childhood. While childhood itself seems "so familiar that we tend to assume its universality" (Farley & Garlen, 2016, p. 221), when discourses within a specific context are examined closely, ways in which childhood is constructed are revealed. Farley and Garlen (2016) discussed how childhood is continuously being negotiated by adults, nations, markets, and even children themselves, referring to childhood as "a discursive conflict zone" (p. 222). Prout and James (2014) similarly noted how "different discursive practices produce different childhoods" (p. 22). These negotiations are evident in discussions around children and education during the pandemic. This section examines how childhood in general and specific groups of children were constructed through discourse around the pandemic and emergency remote learning. It explores possibilities of what other constructions of childhood, namely a sociology of childhood perspective, can add to conversations around education in pandemic times.

Mitigating Learning Loss

Discussions around education and children's needs early in the pandemic largely focused on adult perspectives. With mandated social distancing, popular press articles noted how caregivers were faced with the challenge of "how to keep their kids from bouncing off the walls or melting into blobs in front of glowing screens, while *also* avoiding backslide

and learning loss" (Fetters, 2020, n.p.). Parenting and childhood experts emphasized maintaining routine and limiting screen time (Cornfield, 2020; Simmons, 2020). These authors stressed how children needed structure to develop and to prevent any regression. These discussions were based in assumptions that adults are best positioned to understand and meet the needs of children.

Similar conversations were occurring within education. With the rapid onset of the pandemic, schools were forced to transition rapidly to remote education, an unfamiliar practice in most places. Emergency remote teaching has been defined as a "temporary shift of instructional delivery" due to a crisis situation (Hodges et al., 2020, n.p.). In the case of K–12 schooling in the United States, this was a shift to fully remote teaching with a planned return to in-person instruction. States drafted guidelines, with some focusing on continued learning toward standards, while others emphasizing reinforcing skills already taught and providing enrichment (Reich et al., 2020). Schools and districts developed new policies and practices for meeting students' academic and social–emotional needs (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020; Peterson et al., 2020). These guidelines were primarily aimed at mitigating projected learning loss and negative impacts on academic achievement caused by school closures (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020).

Scholars have begun to examine these impacts worldwide, quantifying learning loss in literacy and numeracy and comparing these across racial and socioeconomic groups. A few studies have focused on projecting learning loss based on previous research around interrupted learning such as summer breaks and natural disasters. The findings

noted how educators and policy makers "need to prepare for many students who are substantially behind academically" (Kuhfeld et al., 2020, p. 562), suggesting learning losses as great as 3 to 6 months (Aurini & Davies, 2021) with more substantial losses predicted for students of color (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Other studies compared data before and after school closures and transitions to alternate forms of instruction. These similarly suggested learning losses of one fifth of a school year (Engzell et al., 2021) or 66% of previous learning gains (Sabates et al., 2021) and emphasized widening gaps for students from families that are economically disadvantaged.

These discussions around children's educational needs during the pandemic are illustrative of developmental perspectives of childhood, which are prevalent in education and in society at large. Childhood is thought of as a progression toward adulthood, which can be measured against a set of norms, most often developed around white, middle-class, Western standards. From this perspective, it is assumed that children will be behind due to school closures and remote learning and the focus is on measuring how far behind and on making recommendations for support. In addition, learning loss is predicted to be more significant for children of color and children from families who are economically disadvantaged. While these studies provide important insights into the disparate impacts on children and offer specific strategies for mitigating learning loss, they focus on what children did not learn and how far behind they may be. This framing also positions adults as holding the knowledge necessary to formulate solutions and positions children as passive recipients of these interventions.

Centering Children's Perspectives and Ways of Learning

A sociology of childhood framework adds to this conversation, shifting the focus to understanding children's educational experiences during the pandemic in different ways. Researchers from this tradition promote the view of children as knowledge holders and producers, "with knowledge claims that compete with adult understanding on the grounds of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and age" (Malewski, 2005, p. 217). They call for a focus on children's perspectives and lived experiences and how these can influence theory and practice (Diaz Soto & Swadener, 2005). This approach includes an understanding of childhood as a social construction influenced by specific sociocultural contexts and emphasis is placed on recognizing children's role in shaping their experiences (Horgan, 2017).

Several researchers have emphasized the need to reframe discussions of learning during the pandemic, including conceptualizing learning beyond standards and recognizing the connections among academic learning, social–emotional well-being, and sociopolitical contexts (Bang et al., 2021; Gabriel, 2021; McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021).

Central to this perspective is the agency of young people and the wealth of knowledge in families and communities (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). Scholars have highlighted the significance of studying young people's experiences of the pandemic and remote learning from their perspectives. Ioana Literat (2021) examined how young people shared experiences of online learning early in the pandemic through the social media platform, TikTok. Literat (2021) argued that planning for and creation of online learning must begin with "a deep understanding of how young people are experiencing online learning in their everyday lives—and how this experience varies, as shaped by their social, cultural, and economic contexts" (p. 1). Understanding young people's experiences during this time includes what they have learned both within and outside of school spaces (Gabriel, 2021; McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). As Rachael Gabriel (2021) wondered,

> What if we imagined the "corona kids" had learned ***more*** than previous cohorts? What if we assumed they were more resilient, well-rounded, creative, and had even more potential than previous cohorts because of what they have lived through and lived without? (n.p.)

The inclusion of children's perspectives and experiences is of particular significance for children from nondominant groups. Studies focused on learning loss have illustrated the disparate impacts of the pandemic on the lives and education of students of color (Thomas et al., 2020; Vargas & Sanchez, 2020). However, when emphasis is solely placed on quantifying how far behind students are, this perpetuates deficit narratives of students of color and children from nondominant groups (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). To better understand children's experiences and educational needs, studies are necessary that center children's perspectives and the multiple and varied ways they learned during the pandemic, in particular children whose identities have been marginalized within classrooms.

Children's Social and Digital Lives

Children have and continue to resist and transform school spaces through the social worlds they create within and around official school curriculum (Dyson, 2003). Researchers have emphasized the significance of studying these worlds as they demonstrate both children as agents of their own learning and the central role of play (Dyson, 2013; Vasquez, 2014; Yoon, 2021). Children's play and socializing, which are woven throughout the school day, provide opportunities to experiment and innovate. Within these social realms, children craft identities and "reimagine the world around them" (Yoon, 2021, p. 4). This reimagining is of particular importance for children from nondominant communities whose ways of knowing are not often included within curriculum and classrooms.

Digital technologies and media play a significant role within these social worlds (Flewitt & Clark, 2020; Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017; Marsh et al., 2017). This role took on increased significance for children in this study during the transition to remote learning, when they were required to use digital conferencing platforms such as Google Meet. In addition, with mandated social distancing and caregivers working in and outside the home, children reported utilizing technology to support school learning, to connect with each other, and for entertainment. Studies of children's digital lives provide insights into how children are using digital technologies and media to make meaning of their worlds and to connect with others. Learnings from this field can support researchers in understanding children's experiences during the pandemic.

In reviewing studies of children's digital literacy practices at home, Kumpulainen and Gillen (2017) discussed how children's uses of technology are "integrated with other aspects of everyday social life" (p. 19). Children are agents in their use of digital technologies and readily employ technology for child-directed means, "moving fluidly between online and offline interests" (Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017, p. 27). Children's digital practices demonstrate the porous boundaries between home and school with both being digitally networked spaces that allow children to communicate in diverse modes with others (Flewitt & Clark, 2020).

One of the defining aspects of children's digital lives is creativity. Using digital technologies and media supports children in constructing spaces and meanings, in communicating dynamically, and in understanding the complexity of their social worlds (Danby et al., 2018, p. 12). The concept of curatorship has been used by scholars to describe children's access to and selection of digital resources and the creation and remixing of this content for meaning making (Dezuanni & Zagami, 2017; Potter, 2012). This (re)creation is done within the context of a participatory digital landscape where individuals come together around shared interests and collaborative activities (Jenkins, 2006; Literat & Glăveanu, 2018). Even the youngest children utilize digital technologies to negotiate relationships and "express meaning across diverse modes and media" (Flewitt & Clark, 2020, p. 447). This participatory culture allows children to create and share, and to receive and provide informal mentorship to other children (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Social participation is a key characteristic of these digital spaces and connecting with others plays a prominent role in children's digital lives (Merchant, 2009, as cited in Beavis, 2017). Children learn about digital technologies (e.g., text messaging and video conferencing) as they engage with them alongside family members and peers, observing and imitating practices (Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017). Children as young as 2 years of age are aware of and involved in social networking, becoming familiar with the role of digital technology in these social practices (Marsh et al., 2017,

p. 54). These uses of digital technologies has been shown to promote social interaction (Plowman & McPake, 2013).

In recent years, children of younger ages are becoming more "savvy and active users of technology" supported by caregivers and educators who provide access to technologies and encourage use of them (Erstad et al., 2020, p. 6). The benefits of such digital participation for children have been documented. Positive impacts on children's motivation and engagement have been shown when popular culture, media, and new technologies are integrated into early childhood curriculum (Marsh et al., 2015, as cited in Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017). In addition, children's digital play has been associated with better scores in literacy and mathematics thinking of older children (Walker et al., 2018). While these benefits have been shown, children in other studies report minimal schoolwork related to digital literacy and children and parents note that educators have little knowledge of children's digital practices at home (Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017, p. 24).

This growing body of work has begun to shine light on children's digital lives and scholars point to the need for further research. Danby et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of capturing children's perspectives in studies through "the 'eyes,' words and actions of children as they produce their social lives across a range of contexts or settings" (p. 3). There is a need to understand more about children's engagement in digital spaces and with digital technologies, including affordances and challenges of specific technologies (Beavis, 2017). In addition, scholars have emphasized the importance of schools recognizing and building on children's digital practices (Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017).

This study heeds these calls for further research, exploring children's digital practices early in the pandemic. Children's experiences and perspectives were and continue to be largely missing from discussions around emergency remote education. To address this issue, this study examined the following research questions: What are children's perspectives on their needs during mandated social distancing and remote learning? What strategies and digital practices do children employ to meet these needs? This research considers what educators and researchers can learn from the insights and recommendations of the child coresearchers in this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in sociology of childhood perspectives and sociocultural approaches to literacy. The underlying assumption is that children are agents in their lives and that childhood is a social construction that depends on the sociopolitical and historical context of a particular community and for a particular child (Christensen & James, 2000; Richards et al., 2015). These commitments allowed me to situate the children with whom I worked within a specific

context, not only of the research site, but of their lives and the time period during which we worked. This was especially significant given the pandemic beginning during the study. Recognizing children as knowledge holders and producers, this study engaged with children as coresearchers across the research process. Participation was negotiated throughout with the goal of creating a dialogic space where we investigated issues from multiple perspectives and shared multivocal research.

Drawing on a sociocultural approach to literacy, this study recognized and valued the multiple ways of knowing that children bring with them and develop in families and communities as well as in classrooms (Ghiso, 2016; Gutiérrez, 2008; Pacheco, 2012). This approach highlights the dynamic nature of literacy practices that move across spaces (e.g., home, school, community, and online) and times (Moje, 2015) and calls for an interrogation of whose knowledges are legitimated and whose are ignored. For this study, the child coresearchers and I examined children's perspectives on the pandemic, in particular those of younger children who lacked access to personal communication devices and social media accounts. Four of the children identified as girls from nondominant communities (three as Latinx and one as South Asian), whose literacies have been historically overlooked and devalued within curriculum and classrooms (Delgado Bernal, 2002; González, 2016; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Viewpoints of children, and specifically children from nondominant groups, were largely absent from conversations around emergency remote education and children's needs. The results of this study provide new insights to be considered and suggest new lines of research to explore.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a participatory approach, focusing on 9- and 10-year-old children's perspectives and life experiences and how these can influence theory and practice (Diaz Soto & Swadener, 2005). Children were engaged as coresearchers and elements of youth participatory action research (YPAR) were woven into this study as they added the importance of research inspiring transformative learning and advocating for social action (Irizarry, 2011; Mirra et al., 2016).

Research Context

This research is part of a larger qualitative study focusing on children's literacies of research, which are conceptualized as the social practices that children employ to investigate issues that matter to them. The research site was a public elementary school in a small city in northeastern United States. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency closure of the school, our research group transitioned to a virtual space, utilizing the school district's digital platform.

Participants

I worked closely with the school administrator and classroom teachers to recruit a small group of children representative of the diverse school population (in terms of race, gender, languages spoken, and socioeconomic status) who were interested in engaging in research with me. I viewed child assent as an ongoing process throughout the research process, continually revisiting it with children to ensure they knew what they were agreeing to and wished to continue (Barker & Weller, 2003; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Rogers et al., 2016). Eight children participated in the larger study. When we transitioned to a digital space due to the pandemic, five of the original eight children were able to continue, four girls (Bella, Billie, Cristina, and Sienna) and one boy (Paul) (see Table 1).[2] I was unable to connect with families of the three other children regarding continuing with the study. This might have been for a variety of reasons given the challenging context of the pandemic and remote learning. I also was unable to contact children directly as their email was restricted internally within the school.

Researcher Positionality

I entered the study with a belief in the importance of forwarding children's perspectives within discussions of their learning. This is of critical significance for students of color and students marginalized due to their identities (e.g., racial, linguistic, cultural, and gendered), whose ways of knowing are often not recognized within classrooms (Lizárraga & Gutiérrez, 2018; Love, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2014). As a White researcher, I have a responsibility to join researchers of color in this work. Through this study, I hoped to acknowledge, value, and document the children's innovations and ingenuity and to advocate for change alongside them (Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Pacheco, 2012). I reflected on how to position myself, as I was not a teacher nor parent at the school, and on how I was positioned by the children. One child suggested that I was a visitor, both to the school and to the children's lives. I was a visitor who was also a researcher, a former educator, and a mother of two children of similar ages. These, sometimes conflicting, identities informed how I engaged with the children.

I strove to join the child researchers as a coconspirator (Love, 2019), to use my power and privilege in ways that supported children from non-dominant groups. As a White, middle-class, cisgender woman, my identities reflect the majority of teachers in the research context and in elementary schools across the United States. I used this power while navigating discussions with administration and classroom teachers to create a space, first physical and then virtual,

TABLE 1
Child Coresearchers

Child pseudonym	Children's self-description of identities	Racial/ethnic demographics
Bella	Girly girl, loves shopping and make up, loves food, her family, and Starbucks, Puerto Rican	Latinx
Billie	Loves writing and reading, her family, her cat, food (chocolate, hot Cheetos, pizza, and spicy)	Latinx
Cristina	Smart, singer, danceful, shy, quiet, amazing, kind, caring, loving to family, listener, awesome, wants to learn Spanish, Puerto Rican	Latinx
Paul	Likes art, food, dance, amazing, loud, weird, cute, small, fashionable	White
Sienna	Loves science experiments, piano and cello, watching TV, spending time outdoors, adventures, likes dogs, the color cyan and to eat kaliyah; Indian, South African, Polynesian, and Iranian	Asian

within the school day to foreground children's literacy practices and to follow children's leads (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The children advocated for time for sharing, which became increasingly significant during the pandemic. They expressed their need to talk with each other, to share life happenings, and to play together. The children and I worked with the digital tools at hand to find ways to do this. This study shifted and morphed from its original proposal in response to the needs of the children amid the uncertain social context of the pandemic. Sometimes I succeeded in my role as coconspirator and at other times I failed. Through self-reflective field notes and research memos I was attentive to when I surveilled the noise level or shifted discussion topics. I wondered with the child coresearchers how to navigate the in-between space of our group, negotiating how to be together and how to hold space for multiple perspectives and disagreement.

Research Design and Data Sources

As a research group, the child coresearchers and I met once a week for an hour during the school day over the course of the 2019–2020 school year for a total of 25 sessions (19 in-person sessions and six virtual sessions). These sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. This article focuses on data collected during the six sessions when the group came together virtually. The research process and activities were negotiated throughout our time together and the work moved back and forth between data collection and analysis. Our virtual sessions continued with the general structure that was used during in-person meetings. I came to each session with an outline of activities for the group. The activities shifted based on suggestions from the group, the directions that activities led us in, and unforeseen circumstances (e.g., which children joined, school schedule changes). As many researchers have discussed, flexibility is an integral part of researching with young people (Calderón Lopez & Thériault, 2014; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). Children advocated for open sharing time as an essential

aspect of our time together and we began each session this way. Every week a few children would independently bring photos, drawings, toys, and other objects of significance, asking for time to present them. Each session closed with a game, another element of the research process developed by the children. As Yoon and Templeton (2019) emphasized, when researchers follow children's leads, we are able "to wander into more exciting spaces of possibility" (p. 80). This space for connecting, sharing, and playing during our virtual sessions was integral to understanding children's experiences of remote learning and the creative ways they met their needs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States and schools closed, the larger study was paused. The child coresearchers and I had just finished exploring ways in which they research and were moving toward identifying issues of significance for collective inquiry. When the group came back together several weeks later, we could not simply pick up where we left off as the world, school, and our research space as we knew it were in flux. The pandemic affected families in disparate ways. Some children were able to participate regularly, while others sporadically, and internet and technological issues disrupted our conversations. We needed to reconnect as a group, and I began by asking the children how they were doing during the pandemic.

The children were eager to share what they had been up as well as how much they missed seeing each other, friends, and family members. The child coresearchers continued to talk both about the unique social context of mandated social distancing and of attending school remotely. They highlighted this as a topic of significance and the research process shifted in response to these realities. The research questions for this study were built around this issue of interest and were framed as they are written in this article by me. Following the children's lead, I researched sources that presented children's experiences during the pandemic from different perspectives including children in the United States, children internationally, and adult perspectives. I introduced these to the group along with critical tools for analyzing

these resources. The child coresearchers compared these with their own lived experiences, asking questions of each other and themselves. In addition, they continued to request time for open sharing, and this took on added significance during our virtual meetings. The digital platform allowed children to take over facilitation of the group in ways they could not during our in-person meetings, such as sharing their screen and directing our attention to sites of interest. They were able not only to talk about family members or pets, but to actually bring them into our meetings. As a result, our time together as a research group was shaped in response to the mandated circumstances of gathering virtually and to the needs of the child coresearchers.

When we were together in-person we had brainstormed a list of ways the children could share their findings with the school community (e.g., photo exhibition, video, grade-wide assembly). However, the disruption of the pandemic both shifted our collective inquiry and possibilities for sharing. Collaboratively compiling and sharing findings proved difficult due to the demands of emergency remote schooling on children, teachers, and families. Children were negotiating use of available devices and working through learning plans. Caregivers were managing children's schedules and supporting learning alongside working. Teachers, many of whom were also caregivers, were navigating new platforms and scheduling one-on-one, small-group, and whole-class meetings. I needed to be responsive to and supportive of these stakeholders given the challenging conditions. As a result, I compiled a list of the suggestions from the children and shared them with school staff. I also met virtually with the principal to share findings and implications from the study. Unfortunately, the children and I did not have the opportunity to write together and the findings in this article are informed by my adult interpretations and understandings (Spyrou, 2011). I hope that the children and I might be able to come together in the future to represent these findings in new ways when pandemic restrictions are eased.

This research project draws on data sources that reflect the complex perspectives of the child coresearchers including audio recordings of research group sessions and child-generated multimodal artifacts (e.g., identity webs, Padlet posts) (Clark, 2004). I compiled field notes and kept a reflective journal throughout the study. In addition, I conducted semistructured interviews with classroom teachers and the building administrator (Seidman, 1991), which primarily focused on adult roles within child-led research but also addressed issues of remote learning early in the pandemic.

Analytic Approach

The analysis process was flexible and iterative, moving back and forth between data collection and evaluation, rather than being linear (Luttrell, 2010). Taking a participatory approach and engaging children as coresearchers required

recognition that methods may evolve and shift across the study (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). The process included several layers of analysis (see Table 2).
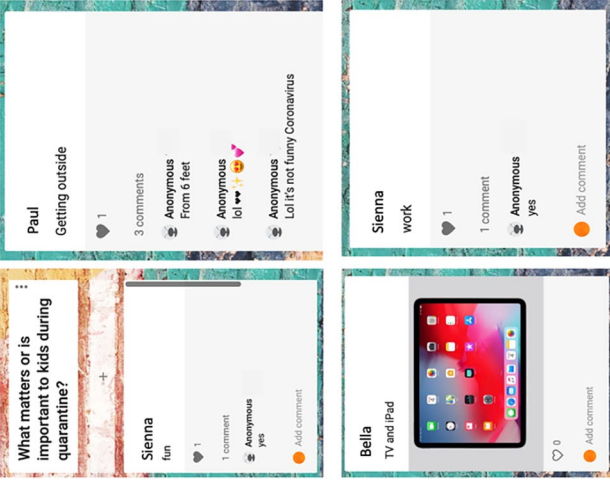
The first layer was what Cahill (2007) describes as "an organic form of participatory analysis" that involved the children and me engaging in a "collaborative and constructive process of reflection" (p. 183). Together as a group, we participated in ongoing reflection about children's sharing of experiences and needs during remote learning and mandated social distancing, noting similarities and differences, what questions were raised, and how our positionalities affected the research. In addition to this open discussion, children in the group also exchanged and examined ideas using our group Padlet (a digital platform similar to an interactive bulletin board) that we accessed sporadically throughout the virtual sessions. This format allowed children to exchange ideas directly and instantaneously, both agreeing and disagreeing without adult mediation. Children could share their thoughts multimodally in images, words, and emojis.

Another layer of analysis involved the children comparing their lived experiences with those represented in popular media texts (e.g., news articles, TV shows, and YouTube videos) focused on children's needs during the pandemic. I introduced critical tools to support the group as together we considered the roles of power and perspective when analyzing how texts were created, who they were created by, and their intended audience. This layer of analysis sought to "uncover the social interests at work" within texts including who benefits and who is disadvantaged (Janks, 2010, p. 13) and to reflect how they are similar and different from the children's lived experiences. Through reviewing multiple sources of data including these texts, child responses to the texts, and the children's own narratives of their needs during the pandemic, the group identified several themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). These themes were further explored through my own postgroup analytic memos which captured my observations and reflections, reexamined data and findings, and synthesized ideas. The interviews I conducted with classroom teachers and the building administrator provided insights into shifts in policies and instructional practices during emergency remote learning and adult perspectives on children's needs at the research site.

Findings

The children in this study experienced the impacts of social isolation resulting from the transition to a fully remote learning environment and local and federally mandated social distancing. They detailed the challenges of remote learning and of being apart from classmates, friends, and family members. Children in the study developed creative approaches to address their social isolation, (re)creating digital spaces to come together. This involved both repurposing digital technologies they were familiar with and

TABLE 2
Layers of Analysis

Layer	Description	Example
Reflective group discussion	The group engaged in ongoing reflection of children's experiences and needs during remote learning including similarities, differences, questions raised, impact of identities/positionalities, and recommendations for teachers and administrators.	We began our first remote session discussing the benefits and challenges of distance learning. Bella enjoyed being at home and Paul shared how he liked having "access to my parents' computer." Sienna enjoyed wearing her PJs all day and being able to "roll around and play my flute when I am muted and my camera is off." The children all agreed that not being able to see their friends was challenging. Paul wished the teacher would create time for friends to connect. Sienna shared her frustrations with technological issues and how remote learning felt like more work.
Peer-to-peer digital feedback and analysis	Using the group Padlet, children shared reflections multimodally through images, emojis, and text. This allowed for direct, simultaneous exchange of ideas including disagreement without adult mediation.	In Paul's post about getting outside, Bella and Sienna agree with him and discuss the restrictions put in place during mandated social distancing such as maintaining six feet. While one child notes how Coronavirus is not "funny," another child responds with love emojis and lol.

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

Layer	Description	Example
Examination of popular media sources	The research group examined popular media texts (e.g., news articles, TV shows, YouTube videos) about children's needs in the pandemic using critical tools to consider roles of power and privilege (Janks, 2010) and to compare with children's own experiences.	Adult Researcher: Who created that or what was their perspective? Paul: I don't know actually who created it because it said, "we asked teens," but it didn't actually say what the person who made it. Adult Researcher: Yeah, good catching there. So, I went and looked back, and it was actually a parenting-type website that went and asked teens. So, they're the ones who created it. . . What about the perspectives of the teenagers in the video, what did they have to say? Sienna: I think in one point they really like said, they really don't like having so much screen time. It is not healthy for them. Paul: Because they're, they're on screens all day because they have to do like work on their computers and stuff all day. Sienna: And one thing that they said is that they feel like there's more work and it should not be like that, that because they need more time to do all their work, but it feels like there's more work. And I think that is kind of true because I have always felt like there is more work. Paul: That is not for me because I finish my work in like 30 minutes. Adult Researcher: So, you guys have different opinions. Sienna, I remember you saying that before, or last week, that you feel like it was more. Sienna: I usually finish my work pretty quick, but it always feels like there is more work than I wished it would be.
Postgroup analytic memos	I further explored the themes identified by the group as well as data from teacher and administrator interviews through my research memos.	Is there equal or equitable time for sharing during remote learning? I wonder about the ability to present to all of us – how often do the children get to do this during remote learning? The virtual space of our research group and the time for sharing that the children advocated for allowed them to become the presenter and share writing, games, memes, etc. Within the Google Meet platform children were able to take control of the space, literally by sharing their screen and directing attention to what they wanted to share. This allowed Billie to showcase her art and how to make a pinch pot. Paul was able to demonstrate online games and then direct the group to a site where children could play together.

experimenting with new technologies. The spaces created supported the children both academically and socially. These approaches are described throughout this findings section and exemplify how the children innovated with the tools at hand to meet their needs, as the children themselves defined them.

Children's Evaluation of Their Needs: Lacking Opportunities to Socialize

The children in this study emphasized the significance of connecting socially and the lack of space for this during emergency remote education. Given the nature of the at-home learning plan, with the majority of work done asynchronously, discussions among children were very limited. As in all digital meeting platforms with many participants, children were asked to mute themselves to prevent background noise when the teacher or another classmate was talking. These practices, along with technology and Internet issues that caused time delays and glitches in audio and video, presented challenges to having spontaneous discussions. In most instances, talk was limited to exchanges between the teacher and one child with little space for open dialogue among children.

The child coresearchers shared their frustration with these limitations and their desire to have a space to talk openly with classmates. Sienna discussed how, "Sometimes I want to talk in class but then my computer freezes, or no one can hear me" (Research Group Transcript, May 8, 2020). Varied access to updated technology and uninterrupted Wi-Fi created an inequitable context in which some children could regularly participate, while others experienced issues accessing meetings, meetings being dropped, and lag times in sound. In addition, within these highly regulated online spaces, children were constantly surveilled, with all discussions being facilitated by teachers. Paul shared how he appreciated seeing his friends during remote class. He expressed his desire for his teacher to set a time when "we could talk to our friends and the teacher would leave" (Research Group Transcript, May 8, 2020). There was no space for children to talk alone in small groups or partnerships nor time for informal side conversations that children were used to having during break times and at lunch and recess. The constraints of the digital platform and the structure of asynchronous learning left children with few opportunities to socialize with each other.

Curating Spaces of Connection

Children in the study thought critically and creatively with friends, family members, each other, and the tools at hand to find innovative ways to come together. The spaces they curated supported them academically during remote learning when access to peer and teacher support was limited. In addition, the digital spaces they (re)created provided opportunities to foster friendships and maintain connections with family members.

Support for Remote Learning
Forming study groups. Sienna discussed how she created a study group with a friend and her cousin, who were also in fourth grade.

> We do Google Meet, and we go on to our subjects and the stuff that we don't, like say one person doesn't understand a subject, if another person has already completed that and they know they got it right, then they help the other person get that. (Research Group Transcript, May 15, 2020)

I wondered if this was a suggestion from her teacher, but Sienna explained it was not, the three girls had come up with the idea themselves. She shared how she found it helpful for both navigating weekly assignments and connecting with friends. Sienna expressed several times how remote learning "feels like so much work" and the creation of the digital study group supported her with completing lessons. In both creating and curating this space together the girls supported each other academically and socially. This peer-to-peer support was critical for Sienna, for clarifying assignments and content at a time when teacher contact was very limited. The study group also allowed for learning with and alongside peers, exchanging ideas, asking each other questions and being together during mandated social distancing.

Presenting writing and receiving feedback. During our group sessions, children asked to present writing they had completed as part of their at-home learning plan. They created pieces for class and shared them digitally with their teacher but did not have an opportunity to share them with other children and receive feedback. Cristina shared a poem about her cousin with the group. Sienna described her story about aliens,

> Yeah, well there's this girl and her friends are very superstitious. Every time they go to hang out with her, she always says she has to leave. One day they decide to follow her back and then she goes into a UFO. (Research Group Transcript, June 5, 2020)

Sharing is an integral part of writer's workshop at their school, with discussion and critical feedback from peers encouraged. However, given the nature of emergency remote education early in the pandemic, with limited meeting time per week, this sharing was not possible. The child coresearchers asked for and appreciated time to read their work and receive input, both what other children liked and questions to further develop pieces.

Spaces for Play and Fostering Relationships
Online gaming. Several children talked about gaming with friends on multiplayer platforms. For example, Sienna came together with friends in Roblox, a suite of multiplayer

games. She shared how she and her friends would Facetime while they played together. Paul also gamed with friends and family using online gaming sites. They shared screens in video conferencing platforms while playing together.

Within the research group, the children and I negotiated how to create space for play during our virtual meetings. Drawing on successful strategies from connecting with friends, children suggested playing online games. They shared new games they enjoyed and tricks for playing. In one of the sessions, Paul asked Sienna and Billie if they knew the game Subway Surfers and excitedly suggested that we could play the game to end the session.

> Paul: You hear it? Everyone mute. I'm gonna present.
> Adult Researcher: Ok, we'll watch you. You can teach people the tricks.
> Paul: So, he chases you. Oh, it's glitching . . .
> Sienna: How do you jump?
> Paul: You use the arrow keys. Sometimes you can hop on a hoverboard. Sometimes you can use power ups to-
> Billie: Oh, I just wiped out.
> Sienna: Why does it want to know if I need a hoverboard?
> Adult Researcher: Paul, what does a hoverboard do?
> Paul: It makes you invincible. (Research Group Transcript, June 5, 2020)

Children gave each other tips and cheered each other on, excited to see who got the farthest. The session extended beyond the one hour allocated as children requested even more time to play together.

Repurposing the school's Google Suite. Paul and Billie both discussed how they repurposed the school Google platform to connect with friends. When children enter fourth grade, they gain access to Gmail in addition to Google classroom and Google docs, which they use in previous grades. While children had e-mailed friends prior to remote learning, they talked in detail of how they began to create chats to connect with classmates and children across classes. Billie pulled up the "boys and girls chat" one session to show the group some memes she found funny and had shared with others. This was part of a thread of meme sharing among children, some of which included commentary on the pandemic and others linked to pop culture. As she shared them with the group, other children chimed in that they had seen a particular meme or knew what it referenced. This sharing of memes through group chats illustrates one way children fostered friendships.

Most children did not have access to social media spaces where they could meet up virtually with friends, share and react to photos, videos, and so on. They creatively repurposed the Google Suite to be able to do this. Paul who was used to taking the bus to school described how he was missing his "bus friends" and decided to create a chat where he invited them to share what they were up to, jokes, and even political commentary.

> Paul: See, like people are talking to me right now.
> Adult Researcher: They're typing you?
> Paul: And yeah, they're . . . like Carter on the bus, apparently he has a YouTube channel. So, he sent me. . . . It's a very successful chat actually.
> Adult Researcher: Yeah. You just, you just invited people to your chat, and you guys just go back and forth?
> Paul: Yeah, we just talk. There's not really anything to talk about, except there's like an issue going on, not exactly issue but like something that's going on. We've had talks about some bad government leaders. One in particular, the President of the United States right now. Um. . .yeah, we would have, and we called them, uh, "Trump talks." . . . So, yeah, but we were like, oh, we would like name other people that could be President . . .
> Adult Researcher: What, why do you say it's a successful chat there's a lot of people on it, or . . . ?
> Paul: No, a lot of people talk on it. Sometimes I used to make chats and like somebody says hi and then they stop talking and then like nobody else talks, but then some of the chats I have everybody like talks on it and yeah. (Research Group Transcript, May 15, 2020)

This excerpt illustrates both the ways Paul was connecting with his bus friends in real time, with Carter sharing a link as we were meeting, and the sophisticated topics children discussed in the chat. In this election year, children were assessing the performance of the current leader and discussing possible candidates. In addition, Paul's evaluation of the chat as "highly successful" demonstrates both his knowledge about this social platform and his appreciation of this particular chat, with his bus friends continuously participating and keeping connections among them strong. Both Paul and Billie proactively used the platform available through school to create spaces to connect with peers.

Utilizing online platforms. As the use of digital conferencing platforms, in particular Zoom, increased exponentially during the pandemic, the children likewise discussed how they utilized these technologies. Cristina shared how she talked with friends on Zoom, when she had time and a device was available. Sienna expressed the importance of keeping in touch with family around the world. Her family used Zoom to host a birthday party for her grandmother who lived thousands of miles away. Children shared how much they missed seeing friends and family in person. They utilized digital technologies alongside others to create spaces of connection.

Paul discussed how one of his friends had created a Padlet and invited her friends to join.

> So, Kristin, she created it . . . and then my best friend is on it. . . . Yeah, there's like there's kind of a lot of people, even Kristin's brother is on it . . . we kind of just like post random things. And then there's some inside jokes that me and Kristin have to talk about that. We like, share random things like you can look up gifs. (Research Group Transcript, May 22, 2020)

This interactive space allowed children to create and comment on posts including uploading images. Paul was

excited to use this platform to share photos of his new dog with his friends and to keep them updated on his life.

Advocating for sharing time. Children in the group advocated for space to connect during our virtual research together. Children joined the group from their homes, which provided natural opportunities to share about family members, pets, and belongings. During one session, Cristina joined us from her living room with her little brother and dog on the couch. Paul was excited to see her dog, asking questions, and Cristina shared with us about him. Paul then talked about his new rescue dog and asked to share her with the group. His mom brought her over and he shared the story of picking her up.

In a later session, Billie joined us from her bedroom, which was filled with art supplies. She showed us several of her paintings and discussed different techniques she experiments with. Billie also walked us through how to create a pinch pot out of clay,

> So, take that lump of clay. . . Then roll into a ball and then you take it and you like put your thumb in the middle where you want the hole to be. Like this *(showing the camera)*. And then I just put how big I want the hole. I use like a thin-like thing to do the outside to make it look like there's sticks. (Research Group Transcript, June 12, 2020)

These small exchanges may seem inconsequential, yet they are natural parts of sharing time during an in-person school day. While teachers emphasized community building during their once-a-week whole-class online meetings, given the time constraints, children had limited opportunities to share. The child coresearchers advocated for space to discuss these important happenings in their lives. Their stories helped to maintain relationships among children at a time when they were physically isolated.

Discussion

The child coresearchers detailed their experiences early in the COVID-19 pandemic during fully remote education and mandated social distancing. These discussions add children's perspectives on their needs and their approaches for meeting them to conversations around education in pandemic times. This is significant given how recommendations regarding education during the pandemic have centered adult voices, focusing on children's needs as measured though standards and curriculum (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020). The findings of this study demonstrate the ingenuity of these children during unfamiliar and uncertain times. The children turned to each other for support, prioritizing relationships and producing social lives in new ways through digital technologies and spaces.

During this time early in the pandemic, conversations focused on keeping children safe, busy, and learning. Limitations were placed on children through social distancing mandates, varied access to technology and internet, and technology restrictions set by educators (e.g., turning on/off cameras and microphones). Within this shifting and regulated context, the children in this study innovated. They curated spaces to come together, (re)creating and remixing digital spaces and content (Dezuanni & Zagami, 2017; Potter, 2012). They experimented with familiar and unfamiliar technologies to meet their needs. For example, children developed new and multiple chats within the Google Suite to stay connected with classmates, bus friends, and peers. They used conferencing tools, such as Zoom, to hold study groups, talk and play with friends, and celebrate birthdays with family members across the globe. While conversations around education in pandemic times continue to focus on learning loss, these innovations and the learning that took place both in the curating of these spaces and within the spaces themselves needs to be recognized and valued. The children were learning and growing, perhaps not in ways documented by standardized measures.

The children in the study turned to each other and their peers for support, both academic and social. Study groups supported children with understanding and completing their at-home learning plans. Online gaming sites opened spaces for play. The children communicated with other young people both locally and internationally using diverse modes including texting, video chats, and creating and responding to posts with text, images, and emojis. They provided informal mentoring (Jenkins et al., 2009) to each other in the use of technologies such as Padlet. All of this was made possible through the digitally networked nature of their home and school spaces that blurred the boundaries between these contexts (Flewitt & Clark, 2020). With the children's emphasis on the lack of and need for social interaction, it is significant to note how children looked to one another, not adults, to meet these needs. These findings suggest the need to further explore the nature and kinds of supports children provided to each other during the pandemic that benefitted their educational and social lives.

While schools and districts emphasized skill retention and progress toward standards (Reich et al., 2020), the children repeatedly expressed how they missed seeing, talking, and playing with peers. These spaces of sharing and playing that were prioritized by the children speak to the centrality of socializing to their lives in general and to school specifically. The experiences of these children and their actions demonstrate the integral role socializing plays in learning (Bang et al., 2021). As Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) suggest,

> We have to keep in mind that students will remember not the educational content delivered, but how they felt during these hard times. With an empathetic approach, the story will not center on how to successfully deliver educational content, but it will be on how learners narrate these times. (p. iv)

The children in this study were producing social lives with digital technologies within the new context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They selected digital resources to construct social spaces that responded to and helped them make sense of this unprecedented social context (Danby et al., 2018). The bus chat Paul and his friends created gave them a platform to exchange opinions and ideas concerning political and social issues. This was significant given the volatile time within the United States with continued racial injustices, a heated presidential race, and the pandemic. When mandated changes disrupted their social lives as they knew them, the children in this study produced new social lives together. They creatively utilized the digital technologies available to share life happenings, to discuss the uncertain sociopolitical context, to play together, and to simply be with each other.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings presented in this article reflect the perspectives of the five child coresearchers at a time early in the pandemic during emergency remote education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). The perspectives of these children exemplify specific and contextualized experiences and are not representative of the multiple and diverse viewpoints of children during the pandemic. I was not able to connect with the three other child coresearchers, nor their families. This may have been due to the challenging and sometimes severe impacts of COVID-19 on families. The lived experiences of these children and the issues salient to them during emergency remote education are missing from the study. The findings of this study also focus on emergency remote education and do not reflect the experiences of children during further developed remote learning nor the hybrid learning that the district implemented the following school year.

Studies are needed alongside children in a variety of contexts and with diverse identities to expand what is known about children's experiences of education in pandemic times. Further research with children is necessary to explore and advocate for opportunities to socialize during remote and hybrid learning. This includes understanding in more depth the nature of connections that children are looking for, the ways children support each other academically and socially, and the learning taking place during the curation of and participation within child-initiated digital spaces. This type of research continues to be relevant and necessary as districts make plans to incorporate remote learning even once the spread of COVID-19 has been contained (e.g., during inclement weather and natural disasters). In addition, results from these studies, including strategies for connecting virtually with friends and peers, have implications for promoting connection among all children, during school breaks and summer vacation, for children who may be new to school, and for those with chronic illness requiring frequent absences.

Conclusion

In these pandemic times with schooling in flux and fear of student learning loss prevalent, researchers have the opportunity to stand in solidarity with children as they advocate for their needs. The children in this study were innovators, finding novel ways forward during a time of crisis. Children need to be included in discussions and decisions about their learning, with educators and researchers taking seriously their ideas and creative solutions.

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Open Practices

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Notes

1. While both the terms children and youth are used in the research to denote a variety of ages, in this article children are defined as 10 years of age and younger (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) and youth as older than 10 years. Young people is employed as an overarching term for both children and youth.

2. The names of all children in this paper are pseudonyms.

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