

“I Can Definitely Find Ways to Entertain Myself. Like Listening to Music, I Listen to a Lot of Music”: Children’s Musical Assemblages During COVID-19

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Article abstract

This paper explores children’s engagements with music during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. We draw on repeated, qualitative, online interviews with children that explored their experiences during the pandemic. During these interviews, the topic of music came up many times and was present in the children’s lives in many ways. Inspired by Christopher Small’s concept of musicking to understand music as an action, and grounded in new-materialist emphasis on the interweaving of human and nonhuman entities, we examine children’s musical assemblages to discuss how they engaged with music to express themselves and connect to others early in the pandemic in ways that helped them through a difficult time.

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"I Can Definitely Find Ways to Entertain Myself. Like Listening to Music, I Listen to a Lot of Music": Children's Musical Assemblages During COVID-19

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This paper explores children's engagements with music during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. We draw on repeated, qualitative, online interviews with children that explored their experiences during the pandemic. During these interviews, the topic of music came up many times and was present in the children's lives in many ways. Inspired by Christopher Small's concept of musicking to understand music as an action, and grounded in new-materialist emphasis on the interweaving of human and nonhuman entities, we examine children's musical assemblages to discuss how they engaged with music to express themselves and connect to others early in the pandemic in ways that helped them through a difficult time.

Key words: music; children; COVID-19; experiences; connection; musicking; new materialism; assemblage

With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, many people experienced worry, fear, and isolation, with negative effects on their socio-emotional well-being, stress levels, and mental health (Fink et al., 2021). For many children, early pandemic restrictions meant staying home and having their schools closed (UNICEF, 2021). In Canada, online education was frequently introduced as an alternative (Frenette, 2020), but many children still had more unscheduled time than before the pandemic, especially given altered schedules and the suspension of most extracurricular activities (Oliveira et al., 2022) and because children were unable to gather together to play with their peers in person. Social isolation was very hard for many but also provided some children with the time to explore other interests (Branquinho et al., 2020) shaped by their immediate environments (Oliveira et al., 2022). In addition to significantly increasing their screen time (Seguin et al., 2021), children

frequently dedicated more time to hobbies or other activities at home that were important to them and/or explored creative activities that they may not have engaged with before the pandemic, such as drawing, painting, creating stories, crafting, baking, and cooking (Waboso et al., 2022).

Some people, including many children, looked to music as a particularly important activity for supporting their mental health during the pandemic (Mas-Herrero et al., 2023). In general, music can be of great importance for both children and adults. It can support connectedness and social bonding (Gabrielsson & Bradbury, 2011;

Papinczak et al., 2015); positive mental health, well-being, and mood regulation (Papinczak et al., 2015); self-expression; and creative ways of being (Hallam, 2010). Watts (2018) has argued that for children, encounters with music are also able to “serve as a vehicle for [them] to know themselves and others more deeply” (p. 1).

During the pandemic, children engaged with music in different ways, including “learning, listening, moving and creating with instruments, voices and one another [with their families]” (p. 212), and that these practices “served a variety of purposes relevant to communal music expression as a human need” (Dahm et al., 2022, p. 212). These diverse engagements with music emphasize the importance of music, including at difficult times when it can help people to cope, to meet socio-emotional needs (Fink et al., 2021; Mas-Herrero et al., 2023), and to foster social connection (Dahm et al., 2022). In our broader study exploring children’s experiences during COVID-19 (Waboso et al., 2022), music came up many times. Although our study was not originally designed to focus on children and music, music was a prominent theme when talking to most of our participants, and therefore in this paper we focus on how music was present in children’s daily lives. In this way our work differs from researchers who purposefully created projects to learn about music and childhood during the pandemic (e.g., Dahm et al., 2022; Levstek et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021).

In this exploration of children’s musical engagements during COVID-19, we are inspired by Christopher Small’s (1998) concept of *musicking*, although we focus primarily on new-materialist thinking to pay close attention to the “complex set of relationships and actions/interactions” (Viig, 2020, p. 133) we noted in relation to how music was explored, created, and used as a form of self-expression for participants to connect to the world around them and to foster relationships. We thus explore the children’s musical assemblages—or the temporary, ongoing interconnection of things, or among “certain multiplicities” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 23)—during the pandemic and highlight the many ways music served to support and connect our participants (Bell, 2009; Dahm et al., 2022; Granot et al., 2021). We begin by addressing existing literature that explores young people’s engagement with music, especially research that was specifically conducted during the pandemic. Next, we introduce Small’s concept of *musicking* and outline new materialism. We then describe our study, including the data collection process, before highlighting four of the children’s musical assemblages. We conclude with a discussion of *musicking* and a relational analysis grounded in new materialism to understand more deeply the children’s musical engagements during the pandemic.

Literature review

Research has shown that music can be beneficial for children, including supporting different areas of development such as language and math skills (Foster & Jenkins, 2017). Music has also been shown to regulate mood and help control feelings (Hallam & Papageorgi, 2016). In early childhood especially, music has been used to express feelings and thoughts, tell stories, and create shared learning experiences that can include movement and learning in motion (Bell, 2009). Consequently, music is frequently used as a supportive and educational tool in early childhood contexts, including educational, community environments, and therapy programs (Oldfield & Flower, 2008). Studies have also “sought to explore the role of home and family life for musical and music-related activities” (Rimmer, 2017, p. 563), often focusing on the meanings and connections produced through musical engagements. During the pandemic, some researchers explored this side of musical engagements with a focus on the use of music during lockdowns (Cho & Ilari, 2021; Fink et al., 2021; Levstek et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the pandemic, many people turned to music (Mas-Herrero et al., 2023), a “widespread, accessible [...] lockdown-compatible coping behaviour” (Fink et al., 2021, p. 2). These connections to music attracted attention from researchers who explored how individuals were using music and why engagement with music was

popular. For instance, researchers found that some individuals used musical engagements as a coping strategy and to reduce stress (Cho & Ilari, 2021; Fink et al., 2021; Mas-Herrero et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2021), to maintain social connections and reduce loneliness (Levstek et al., 2021), and to enhance mood and induce positive emotions (Cho & Ilari, 2021; Levstek et al., 2021; Mas-Herrero et al., 2023). The benefits of music during COVID-19 are in line with existing research that suggests “a connection between musical engagement, psychological well-being and coping” (Levstek et al., 2021, p. 2).

Some studies specifically address children’s engagements with music during the pandemic (e.g., Cho & Ilari, 2021; Dahm et al., 2022; Levstek et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021). These have tended to be mixed-methods studies that focus on both caregivers’ and children’s perspectives. For many children in Canada and globally, the early days of the pandemic and consequent social distancing measures meant they lost various everyday social supports, including in-depth interactions with teachers and engagement with peers at school (Levstek et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Through music, many children were able to still feel connected to others, however. For instance, while many musical programs were suspended, some switched to virtual gatherings. Levstek et al. (2021) found that online, group-based musical gatherings were a “meaningful psychological resource for the participating children and young people” (p. 1) because they gave them something to look forward to, provided a sense of routine, and were a distraction from the pandemic.

Ribeiro et al.’s (2021) study of musical experiences among caregivers and young children in Brazil also found that music provided connection and alleviated loneliness during COVID-19. They found that music-related behaviours increased during this time, including “dancing, moving to music, listening to recorded music, engaging in music related activities with others, listening to music to calm down, singing by themselves and creating their own music” (Ribeiro et al., 2021, p. 5). In another study, based on parents using assigned recorded music with their young children during the pandemic, Cho and Ilari (2021) found that music improved children’s positive moods, both when listening passively while doing something else and when they more actively sang along and danced. Finally, Dahm et al. (2022) learned that music connected immediate and distant family members through online musical engagements, including sharing music with one another, listening to music together, and dancing.

Overall, these studies highlight how children’s musical engagements during COVID-19 could positively “[impact] the regulation of mood and the promotion of social cohesion in times of adversity” (Alvarez-Cueva, 2022, p. 8). In our own study, we not only noticed similar findings in relation to the positive impact of music on our participants, but we also experienced how music connected us with the participants during our interviews.

Engaging with musicking and new materialism

We have been inspired by Small’s (1998) concept of musicking to think about children’s musical engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight that music is a relationship-oriented process. Musicking captures the relationality and fluidity of music making. Engaging with Small’s question “What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?” (p. 10), we explore musicking as a process and dive deeper into the complex actions at work. To Small, music is not an object and musicking is more than just the music; rather, music is about relationships, including people, places, and interactions that surround and are a part of the music itself. This approach brings to light the interactive details, big and small, that are “contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance” (Small, 1998, p. 9).

Some scholars have engaged with Small (1998) to better understand relationships within children’s musical activities. For instance, Laurence (2010) emphasized “agency, voice and ownership” (p. 246) as she explored children’s music making during a school concert in which children performed songs they had written. Laurence noted how music

in the classroom creates opportunities for learning, elevates children's voices, and facilitates their agency in a way that challenges hierarchies in school structures, while also highlighting the relationships between the children and others in the school. We follow Small to shift away from thinking about engagements with music as a one-way dynamic to exploring the relationality that emerges through children's engagement with music.

Musicking resonates with new materialism in some ways because it recognizes all parts of an experience as working together and thus moves away from independence or separateness. As Small (1998) reminded us when he wrote about a specific example of musicking, "whatever it is we are doing, we are all doing it together—performers, listeners (should there be any apart from the performers), composer (should there be one apart from the performers), dancers, ticket collectors, piano movers, roadies, cleaners and all" (p. 10). Small also stated that "the fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do" (p. 8). Yet through a new materialist lens, we see all of these components, including the works, the objects, the performance, the interaction, and the time and space as integral, interrelated parts of the music-making assemblage. We thus see this complexity as not just about human actions and encounters but involving nonhuman aspects as well. To draw on the language of physicist and new materialist Karen Barad, we must recognize the intra-actions that exist among multiple forces which all produce agency and contribute to what matters. By intra-action, Barad (2007) is pointing to how there is no complete separation between components that are producing a moment together.

As we explore our participants' musical engagements in this paper, we thus understand agency to be relational and produced through the intra-action of human and nonhuman elements as "human and more than human relations become central for understanding how the world takes shape" (Huf & Kluge, 2021, p. 251). Inspired by Barad (2007), Spyrou (2018) and Fox and Alldred (2017), we recognize in our work that children are a part of assemblages and that the children's emergence in them is an ongoing and constantly changing process (Huf & Kluge, 2021). We are particularly drawn to Spyros Spyrou's (2018) interpretation of assemblages as "complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of function" (p. 137).

Creative assemblages, a term used by Nick Fox and Pam Alldred (2017), focuses specifically on creativity which is "an open-ended flow of affect that produces innovative capacities to act, feel and desire in assembled human and non-human relations" (p. 89). Their conceptualization highlights both how creative actions are not inherently grounded in human bodies and an unpredictability in relations that emerges through creative actions (Fox & Alldred, 2017). In this paper, our focus on creativity in musical experiences emphasizes the multiple materialities (children, instruments, technology, space, etc.) at work and the relationality among them in their production of creative but specifically musical assemblages to bring new insights to each experience. The children's encounters with music included an interplay of factors coming together (Gabrielsson & Bradbury, 2011), including themselves, others, sounds, their spaces, the time of the pandemic, and other nonhuman elements. In this way, "agency [was] distributed widely beyond humans" (Spyrou, 2018, p. 132).

Using both Small's musicking theory and new materialism, Osgood et al. (2019) write about children's experiences and engagements with music at a museum. They explore music-making assemblages to share the ways "objects and subjects are entangled, emergent and contingent" (Osgood et al., 2019), focusing on a young child's experience with an installment in the museum. While attending to the relational dynamics that play out in museum spaces, they reveal what emerges through children's musicking. We similarly use both musicking and new materialism theory to attend to relational dynamics that played out during our participants' musical experiences and identify what was unfolding in specific musicking moments that emerged as we worked with our data. These approaches

encourage us to recognize that “children’s lives are situated in specific times and places” (Young, 2018, p. 4), which are entangled within their musical assemblages. In our research, the pandemic was an integral part of these assemblages. The spaces the children were in, including the boundaries around them, their living spaces, and their virtual connections, were a part of these unique experiences, which may have, in turn, spilled into ongoing impacts of the pandemic in children’s current lives. However, the specific examples we share are from when the pandemic-related changes to people’s lives were just beginning.

We will take a deeper look at four participants’ experiences to explore the “interplay between human and non-human entities” (Fox & Alldred, 2017, p. 14) in the production of musical moments that were meaningful to the participants. The new materialist approach opens space to understand the human and nonhuman relationalities within these particular moments in our data and how children’s entanglements with music produced certain agentic effects, including connecting children to others and the wider world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data collection

Our qualitative, inductive study involved conducting interviews with children in southern Ontario, Canada, between April and October 2020. Through social media, listservs, word of mouth, and a radio segment, we enlisted 30 participants. Most participants were between 8 and 15, although the youngest was 5 and the oldest was 16. Our group of participants was diverse, especially in terms of race, class, and ability, which we determined through an initial intake survey and our ongoing discussions with participants. They also lived in a range of locations, from rented apartments in busy urban centres to owned rural properties.

Given that in-person contact was not possible at this time, we conducted repeated online interviews with most of the participants biweekly for two months. These were semistructured interviews about their views and experiences of the pandemic. Parental consent and participant assent was obtained for all participants before beginning any interviews, and we also affirmed assent before each interview. We conducted the interviews through social media platforms of the participants’ choosing and they usually lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each. Partway through the project we also invited the participants to share drawings or other images such as photos. Nine participants shared pictures with us. We followed up again about six months later, in part because schools had opened up again and we were curious about who was going back to school and how it felt to be in school with all sorts of new pandemic-related rules. The same member of our research team always interviewed the same participant, for continuity and so that relationships could develop over time. We found that the online interview environment facilitated certain kinds of sharing and connection that fostered relationships with the participants, including relationships around music. Participants were provided with a small honorarium, and at the end of the project we created and shared with them a whiteboard video outlining our findings. In this paper, we refer to our participants with pseudonyms that they chose. Prior to conducting any research, all procedures were cleared through our university’s research ethics board.

As we met with participants, we recorded our interviews, transcribed them, and began analysis of them during our weekly online team meetings to discuss what was happening in the interviews, patterns we were noticing, and issues we were facing. Later, we more formally coded and analyzed the data through Quirkos, a qualitative analysis software program.

In our interviews, many children shared experiences with music, including listening, music exploration, playing instruments, and creation of songs. Many spoke about what they did with music, and in a few interviews, participants even performed live for the interviewers. They performed songs they had created through both singing and playing instruments together. The interviewers felt that these moments when music was discussed

and shared contributed to the connection between the interviewers and participants. The sounds, the instruments, the devices, participants, and interviewers became a part of the musical assemblages that created connections and contributed to building relationships. In this paper we focus in on engagements we had with four of the participants: The Glitch, Sigma, McMuffin, and Chicken Cheerleader. Although musical experiences were shared by many other participants outside of these four, we chose to specifically focus on these participants because their engagements with music were shared in particular depth within the interviews. This sharing provided us with a wider, deeper understanding of their experiences through their musical assemblages.

The children's musicking

Drawing on perspectives in child studies which raise concerns about developmental approaches which suggest that children are only worthy of focus in terms of what they are becoming (James & Prout, 1990), we see these assemblages as illustrating ways of becoming in terms of constant fluidity and “emerging positions” in the moment (Daelman et al., 2020, p. 486). In this way, each of the following participant musical assemblages can be seen to resonate with Small's (1998) view that music is a form of action, or musicking, that occurs through listening, performing, composing, and/or moving and that this form of action is about meaningful relationships between participants and music. Through this focus on music, we illustrate how relations with others, both human and nonhuman, are always present and forming, even when people are limited in their social interactions because of a pandemic. Musicians, music, instruments, sounds, lyrics, and/or movement, for some of the children we talked with, were an important part of their experience and feelings in the moment, including helping some feel less alone. This observation is in line with Levstek et al. (2021), who note that “the collective dimension of music-making has an additional, and sometimes amplifying impact on one's well-being” (p. 2). In this way we can see how music wove into their connections with other individuals and their environments.

These musicking assemblages highlight the relationality and entanglements children still had, even while confined at home, and also illustrate emerging positions that were different from their usual ways of being before the pandemic began. Their connections to others were entangled with various forces within their homes, including technology that was used to help explore, produce, and share music. For some, the instruments they worked with to create certain sounds and express feelings became an important part of their collaboration with others, including friends and family. Time and space were also always a part of the assemblages, especially in relation to the circumstances and pandemic protocols that were shaping the children's lives, including the time they had away from school. The children's home space was also important and entangled with their family dynamics, socio-economic status, their neighbourhood and surrounding context (e.g., rural or urban), and their online environments with others, such as the researchers or friends whom they connected with. Taking a closer look at the interconnections of all these details, as outlined through new materialism, helps us better understand and “explore the meanings that [an] event as a whole is generating” (Small, 1998, p. 10).

The Glitch was a 10-year-old Black male participant from a middle-upper-class family. He was living with a younger brother and sister, his mom and dad, and his grandma in a large house. He enjoyed drawing cartoons, creating comics, and writing stories. Early in the interviews, The Glitch said the hardest part of social distancing was that “I can't go anywhere. I can't see my friends.” The interviewer, Laurel, then asked whether he had done any extracurricular activities before the pandemic. The Glitch responded, “Well, yes I did [...] Monday I had swimming, Tuesday I had choir at six, oh ya, I had ball hockey on Wednesdays.” Laurel said, “Wow, you have a lot of things.” The Glitch then added, “Thursday piano, oh and also on Wednesdays I also have piano lessons with my uhh other music teacher that comes to my house. On Thursday I go to piano lessons.” These feelings of missing interactions and activities were emphasized through the emergence of the musical assemblage in the interviews.

For instance, when Laurel asked him what his favourite activity was, he said music lessons, so music was already important in The Glitch's life before the pandemic, but it also became clear that music was very important to his time during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, The Glitch listened to music in his spare time and explored different types of music on his own and with others. In his interviews The Glitch even shared different songs that he was interested in and played them for Laurel, asking if she had heard the songs before. Laurel felt that these moments connected her and The Glitch together while also providing her with insight into The Glitch's world. These interactions illustrate how music can serve multiple functions, including self-expression and social bonding (Rentfrow, 2012). In these moments it also fostered rapport and supported new relationship building in the online space. The sharing of music and The Glitch and Laurel's engagements with the song were a part of a network that produced a flow where connections were made while this event was happening.

Further, when discussing music, The Glitch often spoke about his relationships with other people and how these people related to particular songs. For instance, during one interview he shared a song, "Hold the Line" that his music teacher had introduced to him and that he enjoyed. At the time of his interview, The Glitch talked about how this song evoked memories of his music teacher, whom he was missing due to the pandemic lockdown measures. As he listened to this song with Laurel, he also spoke about playing instruments with his brother and dreaming about being a part of a band in the future. In this way, music—the tunes he listened to in the moment, the instruments he talked about, and the collaboration with his brother—reflected and created connections, both close by and distant, and to his past and future selves, in a way that broke through pandemic containments. Music helped The Glitch to share his interests and also some of his past experiences that no longer existed because of the pandemic.

The Glitch also discussed exploring music using his dad's phone. In one interview, when Laurel asked The Glitch what he'd been doing, he replied, "I listen to a lot, I listen to a lot of music. Now I watch some YouTube." He was particularly into Marshmello's "Alone" and Alex Lahey's "Let's Go Out." When taking a deeper look into "Alone" we began to think about how The Glitch may have related to the lyrics of this song because of his feeling of being alone during the pandemic. The song lyrics include: "I'm so alone, nothing feels like home. I'm so alone, I'm trying to find my way back home." The other song, "Let's Go Out," includes "Let's go out and have fun tonight." This song's more upbeat vibe may have given The Glitch hope at a time when lots of activities were shut down and most people were not able to leave their homes, and may have allowed him to imagine what it would be like to go out. We wonder if these songs provided space for The Glitch to connect to the wider world during this particular time and possibly reassure him that others could relate to the feelings he was having. Indeed, The Glitch shared concerns about being alone more than once. For example, in one interview he explained that he thought that children were missing each other and also said that he was concerned about single people who would not be able to find other people, therefore they would have to stay alone, saying, "It's going to be almost impossible to find someone who doesn't have the virus." The artists, their music (including the interplay of the lyrics and sound), the music videos, the devices he used to listen to the music, and his discussion with Laurel were all included in The Glitch's musical assemblages and became a web of relations contributing to his feelings and his connections with others.

The second participant we discuss is Sigma. He was a white 10-year-old male and an only child living with his mom and dad in a large house on a farm. He also came from a middle-upper-class family. Sigma's mom participated in most of his interviews. He struggled with anxiety, especially around sleep, so there were things he enjoyed about not going to school, like sleeping in, having more quiet time, and avoiding interactions with some difficult boys at school. He was missing his friends and extended family, however. He had many arts-based hobbies, including

creating comics, writing stories, and engaging with music. In an early interview, for example, Sigma spoke about how music played a significant role in some moments during the pandemic when he was experiencing big, sometimes difficult feelings. He explained, “I usually listen to some music on my swings instead of just swinging, because then I feel less lonely out there.”

One of the new ways Sigma was musicking during the pandemic was by rewriting songs and playing them on the piano, which led to a nice moment of connection with his interviewer, Evan:

S: I've been kind of rewriting certain pieces. On piano, do you want to hear me play?

E: I'd love that, that'd be great.

S: Oh thanks!

Sigma then played a piece and Evan cheered. Earlier, Sigma had noted that he was particularly inspired by an artist named Grande, who remixes music in Minecraft video games, which Sigma found “really cool.” In this example, Sigma illustrates how, through music, he is connected to others, a feeling that also seemed to extend towards Evan as he shared his music. The piano, his music, the artist who inspired him to write the song, the online connection with Evan, his mom who was also there, and the context of the pandemic were all parts of the musical assemblage that intra-acted together to produce this musicking moment that was especially memorable for Evan as it created a collective sense of connection. The concept of assemblage allows us to see how Sigma, like The Glitch, was in a network of connection to others even during the pandemic lockdowns. It also illustrates how creative experiences are produced through entanglements with both human and nonhuman forces, including music, instruments, technology, and various materials.

Sigma shared with Evan that music was important to other members in his family as well. When discussing what he enjoyed doing and how his schedule had changed, he explained, “I like hanging out with my family. Sometimes they jam down in the basement and I always like to be a part of it by either coming down with my keyboards or just coming down.” He did find the noise level challenging, however, so he would wear his headphones. Sigma then spoke to Evan about all the people in his immediate and extended family who have various musical talents. He thus shared the importance of music within his family and how music would bring his family together. This kind of jamming was not new with the pandemic but something that became more meaningful with the pandemic. Within this assemblage there are multiple nonhuman forces coming together, including instruments (Sigma's keyboard, his dad's guitar, his mom's microphone) and the basement space, which participate in creating a sense of belonging for Sigma. Looking closer at the relational nature of this example, we can see how music is not only important for Sigma but also for others in his family, musicking together. This finding is similar to that of Dahm et al.'s (2022) observation of “regular instances of multigenerational musical interactions” (p. 22) in their study. Ribeiro et al. (2021) also found that factors such as caregivers' own interest and engagement with music influenced children's musical engagements and the parents' musical caregiving during COVID-19. In Sigma's case, his parents were playing music with him but also paying for him to continue his music lessons online, illustrating their commitment to music education and their ability to financially support that education.

McMuffin is the third participant we talk about in this paper. He was a Black 9-year-old boy with two brothers and two sisters living in a working-class house with his dad and stepmom during the pandemic. Before the pandemic he was at school and living with his mom, but at the beginning of the pandemic he moved in with his dad and stepmom, who were both musicians. At the time we were interviewing McMuffin, he had started collaboratively creating music with his dad and one of his brothers. This activity became possible during the pandemic and became a significant way for him to deal with the pandemic. He shared some of this music with Laurel during one

of his interviews, including a rap song about the Canadian provinces. McMuffin and his brother used this song to explore and engage with geography as they rapped about different places in Canada.

Later in our interviews, McMuffin explained that he was going to create a music video based on this song with his dad and brother. When Laurel asked him “What are you doing?” he said, “We’re gonna shoot our music video, we’re gonna be riding our bikes. We were supposed to be riding our bikes to the park.” Later, once the music video was done, he shared it with Laurel. It was clear that this was an opportunity for McMuffin, his dad, and his brother to spend purposeful time together. The video shows McMuffin and his brother in a park riding their bikes, in their back yard in a pool, and then in other parks. The relational aspect of the engagements he had with them as they were writing the song, preparing to make the video, and exploring different spaces to shoot the video in their neighbourhood brought to life the ways that music and performing produced space for connectedness. This connectedness was extended to others in the world when they uploaded the video to YouTube to share it publicly. Within the lyrics they mention that the video is for others and no matter what is going on, they are still “Canada strong.” In this way the lyrics are in relation to others who are experiencing the pandemic, and they provide a means for a reciprocal connection as others listen, reflect, and relate to the music and the performers and the performers connect to others in the world, again affirming Dahm et al.’s (2022) assertion that music provided opportunities to build community with family members but also extending this community building into the wider world.

For McMuffin, music was something that he and the family members he was living with spent a significant amount of their time engaging with. McMuffin also shared that in his spare time he would listen to music his dad created during the pandemic. For example, at the beginning of the interviews a common question the interviewer would ask is “What have you been doing this week? Anything new?” McMuffin replied “No. But we heard some of daddy’s music.” McMuffin was often with his dad in the homemade studio as his dad created the music. Their home space contributed to this activity as his dad had created a space for recording music in the basement before the pandemic began, which then made it possible for McMuffin and his family members to create, record, and engineer music during the pandemic. As with Sigma, McMuffin’s musical experiences at home were shaped by the resources available to him, such as the technology within the studio, the people in his family, and the spare time he had since he was not at school. Rimmer (2017) found in his study that music became important to children largely through interacting with other musically oriented people in their families, but we also contend that the participants themselves were initiating musical engagements in their own way, within an intra-active context where music was welcome: The young people were pursuing and sharing musical interests without their parents’ immediate involvement, facilitated by their own musical knowledge, access to instruments or devices for playing music, space in their homes or yards to explore their own pursuit of music, and time due to school moving online.

Musicking was also evident through connections to body movement. Chicken Cheerleader was an upper-middle-class white 12-year-old female living on a farm with a large amount of land with her mom, dad, and brother. She had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Chicken Cheerleader was on the cheerleading team with her school, which continued online after the pandemic began until the cheerleading season ended. At the beginning of the pandemic, Chicken Cheerleader’s mom finally allowed her to download TikTok and make her own TikTok videos, which her mom had previously said was inappropriate. This access to TikTok was, according to Chicken Cheerleader, a benefit of COVID-19, and she later said that she was “addicted to TikTok.” She went on TikTok frequently to interact with her friends, watch videos, and make videos of dances, skits, and her chickens. When Evan asked her to explain the videos she likes and makes, Chicken Cheerleader said: “Well, it’s just like, most of them are dances and some of them are tie-dye and crafts, and the longest you can make one is one minute so they’re just short videos, but [pause] it’s cool to see like everyone else and what they do.”

Chicken Cheerleader was one of various participants who were engaged with music and dance using Tik Tok as it was popular at the time among a number of participants within this project, especially the ones who were interested in dance, gymnastics, or sports that included movement and music. In her conversations about Tik Tok, it became clear that Chicken Cheerleader used this space to connect with others, especially because she could not connect with them in person. Within this social media assemblage we can see how, for Chicken Cheerleader, technology (the device she used to watch and record her videos and the Tik Tok platform), dance (the movement of her body in relation to music) and others, including friends, collectively interacted with one another. As with the other participants, Chicken Cheerleader was producing relational musical moments. Interdependence became visible through the reciprocal actions afforded by this platform as Chicken Cheerleader, as well as other participants, produced videos and watched, commented on, or liked other people's videos. The video makers and videos were thus connecting together, from across young people's personal spaces, through social media. Furthermore, young people's bodies and the music came together to create the videos with the devices that were recording their dancing, all in a constant process of becoming.

Discussion

Music was in many ways a part of our participants' becoming in their emergent assemblages during the pandemic. The sound of the music, the devices used to access the music or the instruments that made the sounds, and the other individuals that were included in relation to the musical engagement were all a part of these musicking moments. Although each child's experience was unique, they all included human and nonhuman forces, technology, space, place, and emotion, which were a part of the processes and interactions of their assemblages, all affecting each other and creating affects beyond the assemblage, including with the interviewers themselves. These musicking experiences contributed to children's interconnections with others during a time when many in the world were quite isolated. Music was thus a way for some children to express themselves and connect to others during COVID-19. It also contributed to their sense of belonging and well-being. The importance of engaging with music was evident within many of the children's conversations and the researchers' observations. As participant Elle stated, "Music has helped me a lot [at this time], like listening to it, playing it, like just spending like that time to reflect and relax." Another participant, Watson, said, "I think like listening to music has really been the thing this week has been you know keeping me sane."

Through the above examples we have highlighted how relations among people, their environment, and nonhuman elements are always in process, even when we seem to be separated from each other, for example, through social distancing. We see how Small's (1998) understanding of musicking resonates with these examples, with musical engagements, including listening to music while sitting on a swing, being in action with numerous interacting aspects that contribute to our understanding of music in our lives (Small, 1998). Using a relational analysis grounded in new materialism opens space to understand more deeply the ways children's pandemic musical engagements were interactional and not individual or isolated experiences by allowing us to see how all of the components of the assemblage intra-act together to produce an agentic and affective moment. This analysis thus extends the idea of musicking into an equal inclusion of all the components of a creative assemblage and helps us to see every musical engagement as a performance of relational agency that extends beyond human relationships to also include nonhuman elements. These findings suggest that music is a part of relational, dynamic assemblages that played an important role during hard times during the pandemic.

On a final note, the interviewers felt that the musical engagements that emerged during the online interviews helped support their relationship building with the participants, contributing to rapport within the research project itself. Therefore, we suggest that music could be used in future qualitative studies with children to build connections,

especially in online environments, to illustrate a “situational and collective achievement” (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 99). This study can also encourage us to think more deeply about the voice of the child, because in the interviews, music became entangled with, or even became, voice. The music provided an alternative form of expression and is an example of how we need to consider “voice in many forms—as dynamically flowing rather than separate, authentic or stable; and as pluralised” (Daelman et al., 2020, p. 485).

We realize that each of the children’s engagements with music included access to certain materials such as technology (e.g., devices to access music, record, create music/videos and share music through social media), instruments, space, and others around them with musical interests. This access was facilitated by resources such as money, parents’ own education with music, and children’s education or knowledge. The significant relevance of such resources points to one of the limitations of this paper as it shines light on a particular group of children with access to certain materials within a Western context. This focus excludes children who do not have access to these materials or who do not have parents who support and foster music in the home. It would be valuable to explore the musical engagements of children without such resources.

Overall, the information in this paper can inform children or adults working with children about how children can seek solace in musical engagements. It supports previous findings that emphasize music and its positive impact on well-being and mental health. It also reinforces the value of music education, given that some of our most musically engaged participants had already been involved in music learning through family or lessons. Ensuring music education through school can democratize such opportunities. The unique circumstances of this study during COVID-19 can be valuable for future challenging times, because through the children’s engagements we can see how music can play an important role in young people’s lives, especially considering space and time, which are a part of musical entanglements. Our exploration of the children’s musicking shows the potential of using musicking and new materialism to dive deeper into the entangled relations that may be invisible, missed, or overlooked when using different approaches. As Young (2018) suggests, these “different views can provoke experimentation and result in conceptual creativity and theoretical vitality” (p. 2).

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