Article

Las Voces de Mujercitas Empoderadas: Documenting Support for Youth with Youth Participatory Action Research

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Abstract: Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a critical approach that engages youth as collaborative partners in research. It acknowledges the unique expertise that youth have on the adversities and assets that are present in their familiar systems, such as schools and the community. These projects are often designed to identify and address community problems; however, our projects with local youth aimed to shed light on a pre-existing community asset, Salud y Cariño, an after-school community organization, and a particular moment in time, namely the pandemic shelter-in-place. The mission and epistemologies of the organization set forth by the co-founder and Executive Director informed our partnership and guided our approach to this work. Utilizing qualitative methodologies, the authors (a faculty member, two graduate students, co-founder and director of a local non-profit, and a high school senior) collaboratively designed and implemented an interview-style documentary and photovoice projects, which garnered testimonies on participants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding school and the community organization. By centering the perspectives of participating Latinx girls and non-binary youth, we demonstrate the effects of this local community organization on its participants during and after the COVID lockdown, and what it means to the youth they serve. The identified themes associated with program participation during this time include the following: (1) building community and a family, (2) creating a welcoming safe space, and (3) infusing love and happiness into everyday activities. We conclude by reflecting on the process of building these collaborative projects and their implementation. Our reflections and findings contribute new insights into utilizing YPAR approaches to research and showcase leading community assets and actors.

Keywords: youth participatory action research; youth empowerment; community engagement

1. Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the nation's young people. The compounding effects of the pandemic on youth mental and physical health, educational attainment, and social integration are still largely unknown, but recent studies have confirmed that social isolation during global lockdown procedures and stress related to schooling, including difficulty attending online courses, greatly influenced suicides among school-going teens in the early months of the pandemic (Manzar et al. 2021). There is strong evidence that the after-effects of the pandemic are ongoing stressors for young people; data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that 37% of high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and 44% felt persistently sad or hopeless (CDC 2022). The data also indicate an alarming level of emotional abuse (55%) and physical abuse (11%) reported by the same youth. Medical research has detected increases in eating disorders requiring hospital admissions among adolescents in the COVID period, in some cases doubling the number of admissions from prior years (Otto et al. 2021; Solmi et al. 2021).

With the extent and ubiquity of mental health challenges facing students emerging from social isolation, practitioners and scholars alike are seeking solutions to help youth manage their stressors in school and at home and overcome the traumas they faced during the pandemic and other social and environmental crises that occurred at the same time. Robust literature documents trauma-informed practices in school settings (e.g., Herrenkohl et al. 2019; Perry and Daniels 2016; Thomas et al. 2019). In contrast, relatively few studies document trauma-informed practices in out-of-school-time settings, particularly in the immediate post-COVID era. The trauma literature indicates that key strategies for overcoming trauma include intentional programming to support social and emotional learning (Fondren et al. 2020), relational pedagogies such as peer-to-peer, near-to-peer, and youth–adult connections (Morgan et al. 2015), and meaningful and youth-led programming aimed at supporting youth well-being (Bulanda and Johnson 2016).

Aligned with these principles, Salud y Cariño, a community non-profit organization in Live Oak, CA, worked to strategize ways to engage their youth during the pandemic lockdown. Through weekly remote programming and periodic care packages, program staff were able to keep a connection with youth, while also offering mutual aid and other forms of support during this challenging time for youth. Founded to help girls "take action and gain confidence through physical activity and healthy choices," Salud y Cariño is an after-school program that serves disproportionate numbers of Latina students within a county facing great income disparity along racial and ethnic lines (Salud y Cariño 2023). The organization operates in multiple schools within two different school districts as youth move from middle to high school, allowing for prolonged participant engagement across significant developmental stages. As the participants grow and change, the organizational offerings do as well, and the organizational team maintains a flexible curriculum to ensure that adjustments can be made to address issues as they arise. For example, although the organization originally adopted gender- and sex-specific language including "Latina," "girls," and "females," the identification of several participants as transgender and gender non-conforming inspired the team's adoption of gender inclusive language. Throughout the article, we use this inclusive language and collectively refer to program participants using genderless terms like youth, students, and Latinx. This recognition of its gender-diverse population also led Salud y Cariño to create an additional wellness curriculum addressing gender identity and gender affirmation within the context of diverse Latinx, immigrant, and religious communities.

The University of California, Santa Cruz researchers (Alycia Ellington, Theresa Hice-Fromille and Rebecca London) partnered with Salud y Cariño (Theresa Cariño, Executive Director and Lynda Otero, student participant). As a community asset within the Live Oak community in Santa Cruz County, CA, Salud y Cariño strives to work toward addressing significant social problems impacting their community such as advocating for racial and gender equality and improving participants quality of life. The partnership began when Salud y Cariño was moving from remote to in-person programming and wanted to document its approach to youth programming during the remote period as well as to learn from participants about how the pandemic affected them. University researchers worked to support Salud y Cariño's efforts in documenting the experiences of both staff and participants during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to better understand how remote programming sustained their community.

We worked together to conduct a project inspired by the principles of youth participatory action research (YPAR), a method in which adult allies engage in critical analysis to guide youth in identifying barriers to thriving and supporting their plans for social change via political interventions (Cammarota and Fine 2008). With roots in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, YPAR is oriented within the lineage of popular education that emphasizes public empowerment in the political process and creative resolution to social injustice (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Scholars have leveraged YPAR as an ethical method of community engagement that counteracts the extractive research model on which the social sciences were founded. These have resulted in investigations into diverse themes such

as sexual health (Akom et al. 2016; Branquinho et al. 2020; Dang et al. 2019), policing (Evans-Winters and Girls for Gender Equity 2017; Wright 2020), gentrification (Cahill 2007; Petteway and González 2022), immigration (Maker Castro et al. 2022; Tokunaga et al. 2022; Vaccarino-Ruiz et al. 2022), and curriculum (Hendrix-Soto 2021; Scorza et al. 2017), all while foregrounding youth voices. Although many YPAR projects utilize surveys and/or interviews, project also engage youth through visual methods such as photography and film. Because today's youth were born into a global environment ubiquitous with digital media and computing (Prensky 2001), they may be more interested in, more able to relate to, and have more immediate preparation for leading YPAR projects that address Internet-based social problems and/or incorporate digital media. Our aim in this project was to amplify youth perspectives and minimize the role of adult researchers, which was inspired by the epistemology of empowerment reflected in the mission of Salud y Cariño.

This article is a descriptive exploration of the partnership between UC Santa Cruz and Salud y Cariño in two youth-led projects. These projects included a documentary focusing on the role of Salud y Cariño for participants during their year of remote learning and a photo-based project where youth explored their feelings about themselves and their community at the end of their first year back in-person at school. We rely on field notes and photo artifacts from Salud y Cariño, as well as our projects to explore the ways that Salud y Cariño supported youth during the pandemic.

Our approach to this research follows the model of critical participatory action research (Fine and Torre 2019) in which we aimed to "curate difficult dialogues within and across power lines" (p. 411) and further attend to the ways in which participants' intersectional identities were entangled with their pandemic experiences. Salud y Cariño's approach to interacting with its participants also lends itself to critical community-engaged scholarship via its youth empowerment orientation. Gordon da Cruz (2017) highlights the importance of going beyond the public good in community-engaged scholarship and focusing on justice—such as asset-based understandings of community—as a way of overcoming deficit narratives that permeate minoritized communities and the lives of their members. Although broadly conceived community-engaged research methods may implicitly focus on the roles and articulations of adult community members, we leveraged tools from the YPAR design to collaboratively implement research projects with youth and the main intention to amplify young people's experiences. This article focuses on critical community engagement in unique ways by highlighting the essential services provided by Salud y Cariño to youth of color during the pandemic, and by engaging the youth themselves in weaving their own narratives through digital storytelling.

1.1. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused catastrophic social and ecological problems. For youth, the pandemic disrupted their social systems from families to school and after-school programs, causing interruptions in their daily routines and familiarities (Vest Ettekal and Agans 2020). Youth faced school closures and were left to self-acclimate to a new reality of virtual learning that negatively affected their mental health, particularly for older youth and youth of color (Hawrilenko et al. 2021). During this time of isolation, young people needed opportunities to socialize and engage with their peers, and after-school programs that utilized virtual meetings over Zoom and other ways to promote engagement—such as through team-building activities, e.g., baking or making art—were an important part of the youth development landscape (Vest Ettekal and Agans 2020). Prior studies found that engaging youth in YPAR during the COVID-19 pandemic was beneficial as it helped them to cope with the trauma of lockdown and face their feelings of isolation (Augsberger et al. 2022; Cuevas-Parra 2020).

YPAR is a critical approach to research that engages youth in collaborative research that works to aid their communities. Deemed as a tool of "empowerment," YPAR challenges the notion of who can be considered a knowledge holder and producer (Nolan et al. 2021). It also addresses procedural injustice, or the exclusion of marginalized populations from key

decision-making processes (Schlosberg 2004), by giving these often-forgotten groups equitable access and involvement in research processes that work towards transforming community conditions (Augsberger et al. 2022; Kirshner et al. 2011). In YPAR, researchers partner with community actors and local youth to collaboratively develop and implement research from research design to data analysis and dissemination (Mitra and McCormick 2017). Traditional YPAR studies focus on addressing social injustices; however, this methodological approach can also be used to document and highlight community assets (Ginwright 2008), particularly in the aftermath of a change process or period of upheaval. Methods that employ digital media, such as photovoice and documentaries, have become leading tools to engage youth in YPAR research (Augsberger et al. 2022; Vélez-Torres 2013).

In the current research, YPAR methods were beneficial to not only establish a sense of belonging and connection for youth but also garner critical data and experiences of the impacts of COVID-19 from their perspectives. Our study adds to this literature by documenting the work of Salud y Cariño, which established a sense of community and support for the youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. And through a documentary and photovoice project, once the youth were participating in the program in person, we aimed to cumulate the perspectives of the youth on what Salud y Cariño meant to them during these pressing times.

Originally called "photo novella", photovoice is a critical method that allows both participants and co-researchers to document aspects of their lives in response to a broad prompt or guiding question and to share their images and perspectives with the public (Augsberger et al. 2022; Wang and Burris 1994). Mitra and McCormick (2017) identified that adults facilitating YPAR should create a "friendly environment" for youth (p. 249), one that removes barriers to participation and engages youth based on their interests, such as photography. Beyond just taking photos, which youth frequently do, photovoice incorporates critical thinking and analysis of the photos. In particular, it relies on the SHOWed method, which asks participants to reflect deeply through a series of questions: (1) What do you see here? (2) What is really happening here? (3) How does this relate to our lives? (4) Why does this problem, concern, or strength exist? (5) What can we do about it? (Augsberger et al. 2022; Wang and Burris 1994). This approach to reflection not only promotes engagement and empowerment but also helps youth expand the needs and assets of their communities (Madrigal et al. 2014), as well as bolster their communication and critical thinking skills (Peréa et al. 2019).

Tools and procedures that help to establish a sense of belonging and community are essential, especially during pressing times like the COVID-19 pandemic. A sense of belonging has been defined by scholars as the degree to which an "individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a particular group" (Strayhorn 2019, p. 87; Vaccaro and Newman 2017). Photovoice allows students to document their community through their eyes and has been used in many different types of projects, such as air pollution or park access (Chao 2021; Johnston et al. 2019), youth representation (Cervantes-Soon 2017; Holtby et al. 2015; Johansen and Le 2014), school food (Harper et al. 2017; Spencer et al. 2019), and youth well-being (Lofton et al. 2020; Rose et al. 2016). Vélez-Torres (2013) found that filmmaking for YPAR is "a tool that helped unify and activate their reflexivity, sense of belonging and social responsibility towards the community" (p. 304). Furthermore, with the rise in popularity of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, visual storytelling has become a popular form of self-expression and communication among youth, and this research modality speaks to their interests and expertise.

1.2. Background: Introduction to a Local Coastal Community Organization

The study involves a collaboration between UC Santa Cruz and Salud y Cariño, which began in the summer of 2021. Our collaborative goal was to explore the experiences of youth, those who participated in Salud y Cariño's remote activities during remote learning and gain a sense of their perceived transition back to in-person activities. These projects aimed to help Salud y Cariño document its pandemic strategies, both successes and challenges,

through the experiences and eyes of the youth. Salud y Cariño serves youth in grades 5th–12th, utilizing physical activity and a research-based social-emotional curriculum to promote overall health and wellness for youth at a critical time in their development (Salud y Cariño 2023). Sisters co-founded the organization in 2013 with the desire to promote health and wellness in their community. The premise of the organization came from their personal experiences as multiracial women, being teen moms and a childhood accident that led to isolation and bullying. They believe that through connection, one can learn, try new things, and gain the resources needed to avoid risky behaviors (such as unprotected sex, drug/alcohol use, self-harm, etc.), which leads to overall better health and life outcomes.

Weekly after-school meetings grouped by age offer opportunities for the youth to connect, learn, play, and develop leadership skills. The co-founders admit that it is more than just an after-school group for the participants and themselves. Over (organization's) eight years of operation, they have found that it has become a family, a place to come home to and be yourself. Often, girls start the program in the 5th grade and continue each year into high school and even into college (as interns and leaders). Sisters, friends, and cousins of participants learn about the program and join. It has become its own community within the community of (redacted city) and has sustained many young women as they move through the challenging years associated with transitions into middle and high school. While the program was originally designed for young women, the co-founder has welcomed all the youth. As they opened up more about their gender identification, the program adapted and grew to be inclusive of a range of gender identities, including non-binary and transgender youth.

Salud y Cariño serves youth at a pivotal age when their self-esteem is strongly influenced by external factors like social media and their peers. In particular, Katty and Shipman (2014) found that girls' confidence levels drop by 30% between the ages of eight and fourteen years old. This drop in confidence indicates that girls' beliefs in their own abilities and in themselves move toward self-doubt, where they shy away from putting effort into trying new things that take them out of their comfort zones. Protective factors, such as good relationships, staying connected to school and adult mentors, and cultivating high self-esteem, are critical in the development of healthy, successful adults. The organization's programs create an environment wherein youth connect to self and others (peers and trusted adults) and gain new skills and confidence by trying new activities in a safe setting. An important aspect of building participants' confidence includes exposing them to leadership opportunities, where they can develop their leadership skills while participating in the program and then incorporating those skills into the community. In 2020, Salud y Cariño published their program evaluation, "A Snapshot of the First Five Years", which outlined the program's history and accomplishments over the years (Kyle 2020). A total of 22 participants and 7 parents participated in the mixed methods study. The outcomes (based on pre/post surveys) include (1) a 62.5% increase in positive body image, (2) a 75% increase in self-efficacy, and (3) a decrease in self-harming behaviors, where 100% of the respondents reported not engaging in self-harm (citation redacted). Additionally, when asked about the changes that participants experienced during focus groups, the youth expressed that they learned (1) to love themselves and their bodies, (2) to become more independent, (3) to become a leader, and (4) about the respect they deserve and how to stand up for themselves in various settings (Kyle 2020). For example, all participants in the focus group expressed wanting to be a Junior Leader, as they "liked sharing experiences with the younger girls and liked being looked up to" (Kyle 2020).

The co-founders live and work in the unincorporated neighborhood of Live Oak where most of the schools the program serves (three elementary schools and a middle school) are located. The fifth school the program serves is Harbor High School, located just outside of the neighborhood. Live Oak School District is nearly 57% Hispanic/Latinx (California Department of Education 2023). While the organization was not exclusively designed for Latinx students, the participant demographics reflect the characteristics of the Live Oak community. In addition, the program opens the opportunity to showcase one's own culture

and encourages adult program facilitators to do the same. Salud y Cariño co-founders are bi-racial and of mixed ancestry and have learned to embrace the rich diversity of their mixed heritage. They created an organization whose culture and identity are grounded in accepting and celebrating diversity on all accords, thus creating an organization whose culture and identity is grounded in accepting and celebrating diversity. They promote a community connection for the youth to develop not only self-love but also love and pride for their communal roots. Addressing the potential cultural alienation that can be present in schools, the program has become an on-site safe space where youth can share and teach about culturally relevant foods, traditions, and even hobbies amongst their Salud y Cariño family.

Through programming, Salud y Cariño youth learn their Live Oak community is small and interconnected. They learn that while there are perhaps others who were once elementary school rivals, they have now matured and formed a more unified collective view on bigger issues within their schools and the greater community. If there was a previous interpersonal problem, they learned to amplify their voices together to identify it and strategize addressing it. Salud y Cariño provides the critical organizing space, guidance, and tools to work collaboratively towards demanding changes from school and community leaders in power.

In Santa Cruz County, schools shut down in late March 2020 and did not return for in-person instruction until the spring of 2021. Most of the 2020–2021 school year was conducted remotely via Zoom, where the local high schools started adopting a hybrid model in 2021. Many of the school-related clubs and sports that students relied on for support and socialization also either shut down or were moved to online platforms. After-school programs were similarly affected and Salud y Cariño leaders, like many others, were unsure about the future of their programming. After surveying youth and parents and researching access to technology (both for Salud y Cariño and the youth they served), they decided to pilot their program virtually on Zoom. The first few sessions were a little awkward but also ended up being fun. The team of Salud y Cariño facilitators worked hard to form connections in the virtual space and came up with the idea to send "care packages" to each participant (see Figure 1 for examples of these care packages). The packages contained a variety of supplies aligned with the program sessions, as well as some items just for fun: self-care items, craft supplies, journals, colored pencils, snacks, and *Loteria* cards to name a few.

Figure 1. Sample care package craft sent to Salud y Cariño youth during COVID-19.

For over a year, 70+ middle and high school girls continued to participate, showing up both for themselves and for each other each week. Through Zoom fatigue, illness,

caring for younger siblings, and more, the love and support the youth showed for each other connected them and gave them hope to persevere. Participants further reflected with the organizational staff through programming and during the research projects with the researchers present, which are later outlined in our findings.

2. Study Design and Methods

2.1. Research Team

The collaboration came together in response to a solicitation from a local community foundation with a call for research at UC Santa Cruz to support community organizations in the region. London approached Cariño with a request to partner. Although they had not previously worked together, they were both in partnership with other overlapping local organizations and knew of each other from this work. Together, they conceived of the idea to use documentary film and photovoice to help the youth participants tell their pandemic story and the organization's role in it. When the project was funded, as a team we shared the funds to support two graduate students, Salud y Cariño staff, and an end-of-year celebration for the participants and their families. We supplemented these with university funding to hire two undergraduate interns, who were both first-generation Latinx students, and provided them with an experiential learning and mentoring opportunity. The five authors (Ellington, Hice-Fromille, London, Cariño, and Otero) come from varying backgrounds and communities, but together, our prior knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences reinforced the approach and execution of this important project. The authors have varying relationships with immigration, educational attainment (e.g., first-generation status), and gender and sexual identity. Together, we all identify as/at the intersection of a plethora of cultural heritages and racial and ethnic identities, such as Jewish, White European (Irish, Scottish, Italian, etc.), Salvadoran, Mexican, Yaqui, and Black. Although Cariño and Otero are long-term members of the Live Oak community and London is a long-time resident of the greater county, London, Ellington, and Hice-Fromille hold no communal roots in the study location.

2.2. Procedure Planning and Salud y Cariño Youth

We relied on field methods—including field notes and artifacts—as data for this study. In January 2022, the university researchers and Cariño mapped out the focus of the desired collaboration, including both the documentary and photovoice projects. Cariño shared more insight about the youth, such as topics that have arisen in discussions, such as self-esteem and self-care, as a starting point that would be later used to initiate the brainstorming session. London, Ellington, and Hice-Fromille disclosed the steps and sessions needed to execute each project, such as for the photovoice project, introducing the photovoice concept, and photography skills breakdown. For the photovoice project, we then outlined the sessions chronologically, including sessions, active learning activities, a delegation of the lead facilitator role (amongst the researcher team), and homework for the youth to stay engaged with the project due to bi-weekly sessions. The documentary project had an initial agreement among the authors on setting up an initial brainstorming session with the youth to land on a focal topic for the film, followed by protocol development and tentative filming approaches. During this process, we also compared the calendar schedules of UC Santa Cruz and Salud y Cariño and developed a tentative schedule to execute the projects. After our collective plan was mapped out, our projects were registered and approved by the UC Santa Cruz institutional review board.

Approximately 25 youth participated in various parts of the overall research project, with the documentary being open to all grade levels and the photovoice project only being carried out with the 8th graders. The photovoice project began with 15 youth and was completed with 10 youth. Not all enrolled youth participated in each given project because of conflicting schedules like after-school sports or overall decline. All the youth involved in the projects were students of color, with the majority being Latinx and a few holding other cultural or ethnic ties and/or identifying as non-binary. Events culminated in late

May 2022, with a family and community celebration to highlight the organization and its participants' accomplishments for the year, along with a film screening and photovoice exhibit. All interactions throughout the research projects were documented and archived in field notes and artifacts, including the photos taken by the participants and program staff. In the next sections, we outline the specific procedures for the documentary and photovoice projects.

2.3. Brainstorming, Documentary Procedure, and Sessions

Documentary sessions started in February 2022 under the facilitation of the research team (London, Ellington, Hice-Fromille, and two undergraduate interns). Sessions were biweekly and lasted from 30 min to one hour during regular programming time. The initial brainstorming meeting with the youth was a time to hold a group introduction between the program participants and researchers. We went around in a circle and introduced ourselves with names, pronouns, affiliations, and fun facts about ourselves. After the research team gave an overview of the projects we would be working on with the youth, we went into more depth about the concept of documentation and what a documentary project involves. This led to the conclusion of, our first session with the initial youth-led brainstorming around topics for the projects.

Brainstorming sessions were conducted in several sessions, each being separate for each grade group for three sessions (7th, 8th, and high school). Researchers facilitated an open discussion and started the dialogue with generalized questions, such as "What was your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?", "What were some challenges and positives during your quarantine experience?", "What do you want your parents to know about Salud y Cariño?", and "What would you tell your teachers about schooling during COVID if you had the chance?" In addition to the shared experience of COVID-19 and participation in Salud y Cariño, the youth also shared general reflections on mental and physical health, such as social pressures and self-care. During the brainstorming session, the youth also disclosed their ideal audience for the documentary, which included family, friends, and family abroad. Shared themes and topics were documented in front of the class on a large piece of butcher paper and later in three digital lists (compiled in Table 1), which the researchers used to generate an interview protocol.

From the generated potential topics shared by the youth, we, the research team, generated themes from groupings of common topics, such as mental and physical health, COVID-19, and school. As we did this initial coding and organizing, we noticed that two major themes stood out in all three brainstorming sessions: (1) COVID-19 experiences and (2) varying support from Salud y Cariño. Researchers then took these two themes and developed an interview protocol, allowing the youth to freely express their reflections, struggle, joy, and stories with their chosen audience. We created two protocols given the large age range between 7th graders and high schoolers (see Table 2). Both were the same, but the protocol for high schoolers included questions about their experience over several years as they were more likely to be long-term participants of Salud y Cariño. The 7th through 12th grade students in 2022 had been in 5th through 10th grade in 2020. This age range provided a breadth of perspectives, as some students entered junior and senior high during the pandemic. Once the researchers drafted the initial protocols, they were shared with Cariño and all the program youth to give feedback and edits. After everyone, including the youth, reviewed and approved the interview protocols, we began the project's next phase: filming.

Table 1. Brainstormed topics for the documentary.

Brainstormed Topic	7th Grade	8th Grade	High School
Racism	✔		
Mental and physical health	✔	✔	✔
Lost transition to new grade and from middle to high school	✔	✔	✔
Social Anxiety	✔		
Missed school opportunities	✔		
Being stuck at home	✔		
Unmotivated during COVID-19 pandemic		✔	
Hard keeping friendships		✔	
Difference coming back in-person to school		✔	
Reconnecting and rebuilding relationships			✔
No teaching or learning (virtual learning hardships)	✔	✔	✔
No school resources			✔
College			✔
Jobs/sports (multitasking)			✔
After pandemic glow up pressure (self-image)		✔	
Food security	✔		
Outside and self-care	✔		
Support from Salud y Cariño during COVID-19 shelter-in-place	✔	✔	✔
Fear for Salud y Cariño being over		✔	
Fear for family in other countries	✔		
Family relations			✔

Table 2. Interview protocol for the documentary.

Final Interview Questions for the Documentary

1. To start, what is your name, your grade, and your pronouns?
2. What were your thoughts when the pandemic first started, and you had to shelter in place?
3. How did it feel to be in school remotely?
4. How did it feel when you came back to in-person classes?
5. Now that you're back in person, how does it feel to be a part of Salud y Cariño? What motivates you to participate?
6. Thinking about the time when Salud y Cariño was on Zoom, did you participate? (8th–12th grade question)

    a. If no, what did you miss most about Salud y Cariño?
    b. If yes, what were your favorite activities you did with Salud y Cariño?
    c. If yes, what did you like about being part of Salud y Cariño during that time?

7. Have you noticed changes in mental health issues for people you know since the pandemic? How so?
8. How have you stayed connected with friends and peers during the pandemic?
9. Do you feel like sheltering place changed your family relationships at home? How is it different today than it was then?
10. How did you use social media during the pandemic?

Filming for the documentary was conducted by the research team, primarily by the two undergraduate student interns, with assistance from the graduate students. Interview filming took place over five days (throughout three weeks) and was conducted outside the classroom space and separate from peers and organizational staff. This filming was voluntary, and not all the youth were elected to participate. To account for varying levels of comfortability, the youth were given the opportunity to conduct individual or partner interviews. In addition to gaining youth perspectives, program staff were also filmed using the same protocol as the high school students. During the filming, the remainder of the research team participated in group activities with the youth. While Ellington and Cariño worked to gather visual examples to include in the documentary, including artwork, poetry, care boxes, and other materials. After filming, the undergraduate student interns edited, cut, and produced the documentary from the interviews. In addition, they manually transcribed and translated each interview from English to Spanish to create Spanish subtitles, given that the target audience, the community, is a mix of English and Spanish-speaking members.

2.4. Photovoice Procedure and Sessions

As the documentary moved into the editing phase, we began the photovoice project with the 8th grade group. This project was co-created and co-facilitated by Ellington and Hice-Fromille, alongside Cariño. The session themes included the following: (1) project introduction and conceptualizing the terms photovoice and brainstorming, (2) photography skills lab, and (3) photo narrative workshop. Session themes were designed by the researchers and Cariño. Given the time constraints, we opted to stem the topic of the photovoice project from the brainstorming session that took place during the documentary phase. After guiding students through the fundamentals of photovoice and photography, we prompted students to elaborate on their experience as participants in the programming using the question, "What does Salud y Cariño mean to you?". This prompt emerged from conversations with youth during the documentary and photovoice sessions and satisfied the project goal of highlighting the organization as a community asset.

Although the sessions were organized to provide guidance, we forefronted youth knowledge of digital media by prompting students to share their smartphone gallery images and Instagram photos. At the start of the first session, where we introduced the project using the SHOWed formatting, Ellington asked, "Who has ever posted a photo on Instagram with a caption?" After each student raised their hand to confirm, they responded, "Great! You all have completed photovoice before!" Prefacing would-be directives in this way helped establish that these sessions were not intended to teach students something they did not know, but to support them in doing something they already knew. Additionally, in this session, Hice-Fromille introduced the students to the SHOWed method. She shared images from an environmentally focused photovoice project and prompted students to explain what they could identify visually in the photo and challenged them to connect any personal experiences with the depicted theme of environmental toxicity. In the second workshop, one of the undergraduate students responsible for filming presented a photographic perspective and demonstrated how to arrange items in a photo for visual appeal and balance. Students then used their smartphones to practice these different visual techniques and storytelling at the after-school site. In the third session, Ellington and Hice-Fromille focused on teaching the youth about narrative writing through an active learning activity. Students were split into two groups with two different images. Using the SHOWed worksheet, students collaboratively described their picture to the other group. Most youth focused on surface-level issues, and Hice-Fromille posed further questions that kick-started their deep critical analysis. For example, one image was that of a Black Lives Matter protest, where students stated that the image showed a collective gathering for a common cause. Hice-Fromille asked, "How does this relate to our lives?" to which the youth responded by establishing connections to systematic racism and providing examples of how racism influenced their daily lives. After the students submitted their photos to be

printed for display at the end-of-year community gathering (Figures 2 and 3), the graduate researchers facilitated a narrative writing session. The subjects of the photos varied, but eight themes emerged in response to the photovoice prompt of what Salud y Cariño means to them: trust, joy, social, open and non-judgmental environment, love, support, honesty, and welcoming. After the end-of-year gathering, all five authors came together to reflect on their time together and began the analysis for the overall research project.

Figure 2. Photovoice exhibit titled, "What Does Salud y Cariño Mean to You?", displayed during the Salud y Cariño 2022 end of year open house.

Figure 3. Photovoice project display during Salud y Cariño's 2022 end of year open house.

2.5. Analysis

The research team cleaned and consolidated the field notes and undertook an open coding process in which they identified themes together, and then one researcher coded the data using NVivo. We, therefore, did not employ inter-rater reliability procedures. We treated the analysis as an extended case method (Tavory and Timmermans 2009) in which we applied theories related to youth participatory action research methods and youth voice, as well as community engagement in research, to the thematic coding process using a more deductive approach. Still, we left open the possibility that existing theoretical frameworks would not adequately describe the case, and therefore also relied on inductive or grounded theory coding. This hybrid approach, described by Deterding and Waters (2021), includes first "getting a handle on the big picture(s) in the data" (722), followed by employing analytical codes and then testing and refining the themes and theoretical interventions. This was achieved as Ellington conducted two rounds of initial manual coding before bringing the data over to NVivo for a more fine-tuned analysis. The entire set of five authors engaged in finalizing findings and themes through a series of three meetings. This approach was intended to elevate the knowledge held by the organization's co-founder (Cariño) and a founding member of the youth advisory board and a high school participant (Otero) who both have lived experience with the programming and community before and during COVID.

3. Findings

3.1. How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected the Youth

The research team approached both projects, the documentary and the photovoice, with the intent to center them around a shared topic of interest, which was determined in conversation with the youth. Via brainstorming sessions, the youth expressed a variety of topics they were interested in exploring (documented in Table 1), many of which stemmed from the COVID-19 pandemic and the ramifications it created during the shelter-in-place order. Both the photovoice and documentary projects worked as safe spaces that gave the youth the opportunity to reflect on their lived COVID-19 experiences. Students in different grades expressed some common and some unique perspectives on the pandemic's impacts on their lives, their families, their learning environment, and how they felt about themselves.

Most students were not shy to express their thoughts and feelings about their COVID-related frustrations, especially when it came to both online learning and coming back to school in person, as seen in some of their art depicting their lives during the pandemic (shown in Figures 4 and 5). One student, with the agreement of others, expressed her feeling of being stuck in time as they moved up a grade, as they did not have the full in-person experience of the prior grade. For instance, having left school as 6th graders and returning as 8th graders, students felt they missed a crucial year in which they would have learned more about how to be a middle schooler before being expected to make decisions about high school. A second theme involved frustration with the lack of support from students and parents during online learning. While students affirmed that they could access diverse channels of support during in-person instruction, these were foreclosed on them during distance learning when the lines of communication between students and the school staff were severely impacted. One student elaborated this in an interview for the documentary: "My parents tried their best to support me with my schoolwork, but I feel like I sort of passed them in the subjects that I am taking right now, and so I was really on my own, and teachers were hard to contact." Similarly, students in a research team-led brainstorming session expressed their frustration with being expected to learn when no one was checking in on them. The consensus of the group was that students wanted and needed greater assistance, but they did not have a way of accessing supportive services.
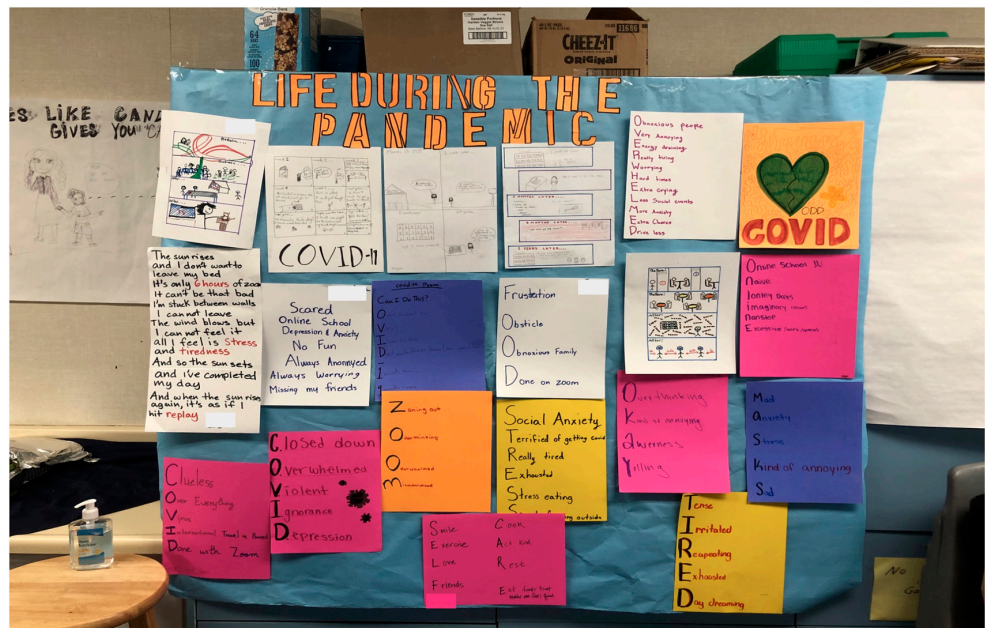
Figure 4. Student art exhibit at Salud y Cariño's 2022 end of year open house titled, "Life During the Pandemic."
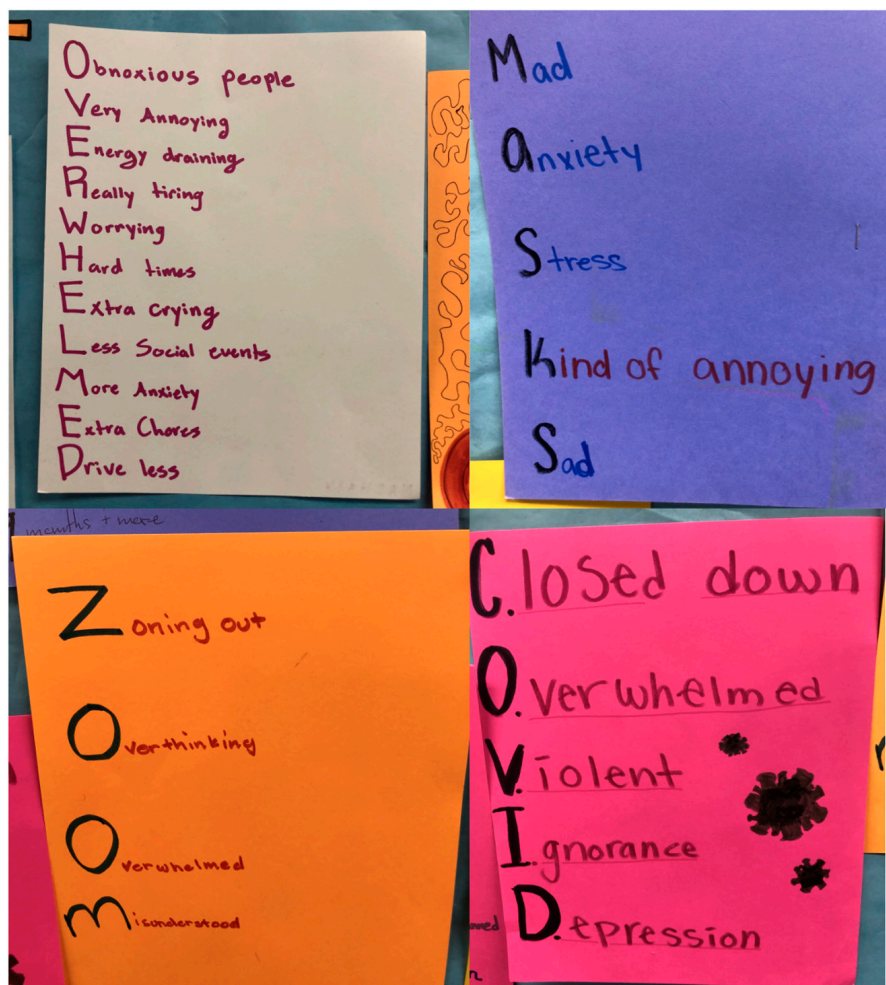

Figure 5. Close-up of student art sharing their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students shared deep emotions when they spoke about returning to in-person academic activities. One student mentioned not being recognized by her teachers because she had grown and matured, while another shared that she felt disconnected from classmates and teachers when she returned. "It felt different, like before the pandemic I got to know my classmates and teachers the first day of school and it was different coming back to school not knowing my teachers and classmates." Students felt frustrated and unsure as it seemed that their teachers were absent, and everyone was slowly giving up.

Participants also reflected on the challenges of being home and isolated from friends, and their exposure to social media, which made them feel they needed to "glow up"—or present their best selves with makeup and hairstyling—when on video. They described the anxiety this produced and, as reported in the medical literature, several youth revealed patterns of disordered eating that developed during the lockdown. Family connections were, in some cases, a buffer that supported youth through these very challenging times, and, in other cases, were less supportive or even a source of conflict. Several participants noted that their families would comment about their fluctuating weights. Others brought up the pressures of having a perfect body that stemmed from social media. From their shared frustrations about the pandemic and the impact it had on their mental and physical health, we found that Salud y Cariño was a source of security, light, and support that helped many of the students cope with some of the darkest points of their lives.

Through these conversations, Salud y Cariño emerged as a source of support and connection that students were missing from remote schools. Our analysis identified three overarching themes related to the organization's role in supporting youth participants in the shelter-in-place and remote learning period: (1) building community and a family, (2) creating a welcoming and safe space, and (3) infusing love and happiness into everyday activities. Each of these is discussed below.

3.2. Building Community and a Family

Participants identified that a key reason they engaged with Salud y Cariño was the sense of belonging it provided to them. Most participants shared how Salud y Cariño was not just an after-school program, but rather like a second family and a community with which they could connect. Field notes by four researchers during one documentary brainstorming session captured the emotional story shared by one of the youth and how she missed her Salud y Cariño community. Through tears, she expressed her struggles in making new friends when her family uprooted and moved her to another state during the pandemic. She missed her friends and the organization, but Zoom allowed her to keep that strong lifeline connection to the place she felt was home. Similarly, another participant expressed that the program was something that they looked forward to every week. Others expressed that they were appreciative that Salud y Cariño brought them all together to form a small family. "Salud y Cariño is like a family. I would even argue that it saved my life a couple of times. It was really nice to have like Theresa, Margaret (Salud y Cariño co-founder), and the girls there because we were all going through the same thing, and we were able to support each other". Additionally, two students in the documentary spoke of how Salud y Cariño helped them as young aspiring scholars and individuals, especially those who participated in the program for several years. "I have been with Salud y Cariño since 5th grade so a good seven years, and they have helped me a lot, immensely, not only as just support but they have also helped me with career type of things and how to get into college, because I am first-gen, and helping to apply skills to my everyday living".

3.3. Creating a Welcoming Safe Space

By creating a sense of belonging and community, the youth expressed how Salud y Cariño was also a welcoming and safe space. Salud y Cariño allowed students to show up and participate as their true authentic selves, including respect for pronouns, sexuality, and gender expression. Several students participating in our projects identified as non-binary or transgender. The youth spoke about how Salud y Cariño was a sense of support that

helped them to see their potential without any limitations, as expressed by one student in the documentary, "they don't limit our inspirations. They let us be ourselves." Additionally, the youth shared that the physical space in which the program was held was safe. This was seen in one of the photovoice submissions, which was a photo of the physical classroom location of Salud y Cariño on a local school campus, in which a student wrote,

> The picture shows a safe place. This relates to Salud y Cariño because Salud y Cariño helps many girls express their feelings while feeling safe. Before Salud y Cariño I didn't express myself outside of the home [...].

Another student, writing about the same building, similarly noted that Salud y Cariño is a space where they can be themselves, which accompanied the building where the after-school program was held (Figure 6). "Finally, school is over. I get to go to Salud y Cariño where my anxiety, worries, and stress go away. Salud y Cariño is a place where I can be myself." Other youth shared about how Salud y Cariño was a place where they could escape the stress of school and home, and all the expectations and pressures that were placed on them, and they were encouraged to take a break and just be themselves.
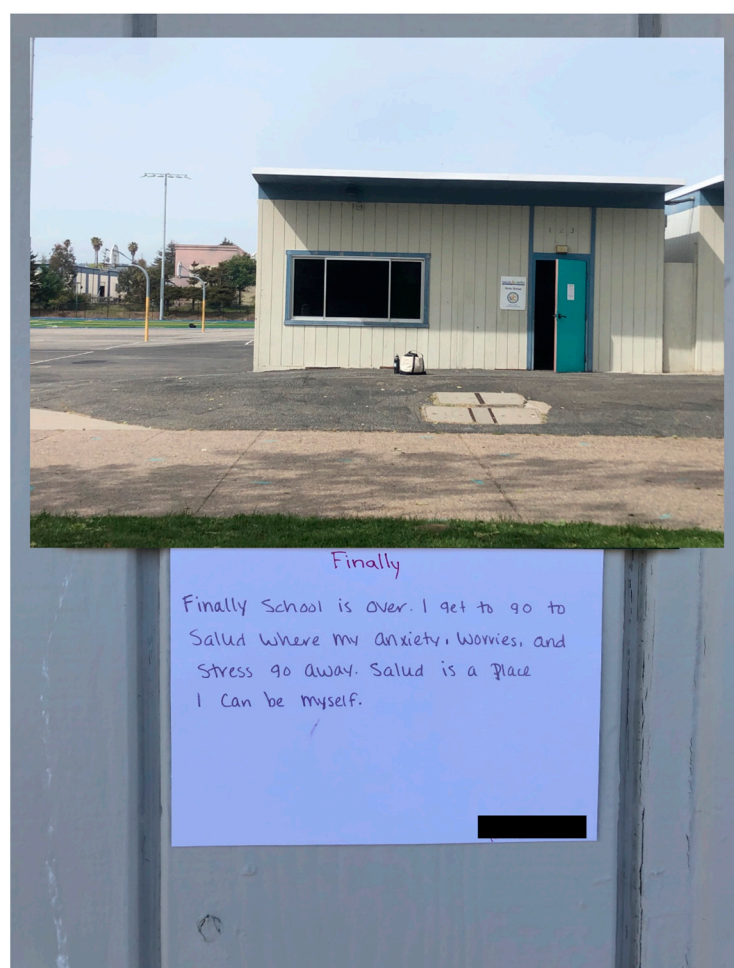
Figure 6. Photovoice project of Salud y Cariño entitled, "Finally.".

3.4. Infusing Love and Happiness into Everyday Activities

During a time that all students expressed was dark for them, the participating youth expressed how Salud y Cariño continued to give them a sense of hope and purpose, which they saw as a lifeline. Even with a shelter-in-place order that shut down their in-person programming for some time, Salud y Cariño co-founders and program staff maintained normalcy through virtual programming, including live painting classes and hand-crafted care packages. One student in the documentary reflected on how this brought happiness to

her life, "It was something I looked forward to every time we, every week we had it. And it was nice because they would also send self-care packages. You will also be waiting for that in the mail. And be like, oh it's coming." Similarly, one student's photo in the photovoice project captured an image of a dandelion growing from the cracks in the street. She chose happiness for her narrative theme and wrote, "During the pandemic, I was like this flower, in an awkward place with nowhere to go. But even though I felt trapped, there was always sunlight, there was happiness. That is what Salud y Cariño is and has always been for me, my source of sunshine."

In their reflections through both the documentary and photovoice project, the youth expressed sheer gratitude and admiration for Salud y Cariño helping them to cope through the pandemic. And this was reciprocal because the leadership and staff of Salud y Cariño felt the same about the participants. Through their shared experiences, we found that just like Salud y Cariño gave the youth a sense of hope, the youth gave Salud y Cariño a sense of purpose during the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, the organizational staff were unsure about the potential impacts. But after months of shelter-in-place, they were worried that the pandemic would cause a forcible closure of the program. Through its various adaptations, the program continued throughout the pandemic and is still open, greeting students back to in-person programming. Cariño began reflecting on the process by saying, "I wasn't sure if Salud y Cariño would survive." She went on to reflect,

> I want to say thank you to all of the girls because as much as some of you have said that we helped you through the pandemic, you really helped us through the pandemic. You gave us a purpose, you gave us light, and I don't know what I would have done. Salud y Cariño is not me, it's not Margaret [her sister and other co-founder], it's all of you, it's all of us together. And that's what makes it so special. ¡Muchisimas Grasis!

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Drawing from a critical YPAR approach, our projects worked to create a space to capture the lived experiences of Salud y Cariño youth, staff, and co-founders as they navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic. By collaborating on the development of the project and topics to discuss in both projects, the youth were more engaged and willing to openly share their honest and authentic experiences. Salud y Cariño is a community, or even more so a family, where everyone feels seen, heard, and appreciated. The documentary and photovoice project continued that safe space by providing what Theresa Cariño would note as an opportunity to express and share feelings they kept bottled up inside and, in a way, find closure.

Community-engaged research must not always work to create something new or try to reconfigure what is already working. Rather, when centered on community assets, these projects make an effort to highlight the work that is already being conducted and capture the ways that participants experience and make sense of their engagements. It is important that these types of community-engaged research projects do not solely focus on deficits, disaster narratives, or inequalities within communities (Tuck 2009). The existing community's assets, designed intentionally to reflect and respect the community's culture and history, are important to uplift. Community organizations have been shown to be very important to youth development (Vest Ettekal and Agans 2020; Committee on the Neurobiological and Socio-behavioral Science of Adolescent Development and Its Applications et al. 2019). With this in mind, London, Ellington, and Hice-Fromille, turned to the epistemology of Salud y Cariño and its strong focus on Latinx empowerment to build these projects to demonstrate this existing community asset. Further, we incorporated the tenets of YPAR into the project design and engaged methods useful for uplifting youth voices to highlight young people as important and articulate members of the community.

The findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic took a heavy toll on youth participants, both during the 15 months of lockdown in which all activities were remote and once school and other activities returned to in-person mode. Youth expressed deep mental

health challenges with isolation and frustration due to the lack of resources needed for them to be successful in remote schooling. However, Salud y Cariño remained a bright spot in their experience, offering an opportunity to connect with friends and caring adults, providing social and emotional support for helping them cope with the challenges they were facing, and creating moments of joy during an otherwise desolate time. Salud y Cariño's approach to supporting Latinx youth aligns with the framework laid out by Erbstein and Fabionar (2019) about the ways that out-of-school time programs can support Latinx students specifically, including supporting youth cultural identity and acting upon the diversity of local Latinx youth experiences.

We acknowledge that this study has several limitations. First, UC Santa Cruz researchers (London, Ellington, and Hice-Fromille) worked with just one after-school program in one local community, resulting in findings not necessarily generalizable beyond these. Second, we ran the potential risk of limited and altered experiences shared by the youth. We recognize the potential risk of youth feeling pressured to respond in a certain light, and this risk was managed by having only the research team conduct interviews during the documentary phase and provide students with independent time to create their narratives for the photovoice portion. The research team did not disclose sources of funding for this research to the youth to further mitigate pressures to provide positive responses to inquiries about the organization. The youth had full creative freedom to disclose as much or as little of their experiences during the pandemic and participate in the organization. Even though we did not explicitly inquire about negative program experiences, we were prepared to welcome and account for any critiques of the program in our analysis. Throughout the entire research process—from brainstorming to project completion—the youth spoke highly of Salud y Cariño, both in and away from the presence of program staff. Third, our project lasted over six months, during which sessions were constrained in terms of timing and duration. We recognize, in hindsight, that with more time devoted specifically to the documentary and photovoice projects, all involved would have found the process less rushed and more fulfilling. Finally, participation in Salud y Cariño is voluntary, and those who participated chose to be there, potentially indicating bias in the sample of youth represented. We feel that an entire school year would be better for projects like the ones we selected, which would allow more opportunities for critical discussions, deeper validity, and more opportunities to build rapport among collaborators. Still, findings regarding the empowering potential of elevating youth voices to express their experiences in their own words and the deep effects of the pandemic on many aspects of students' lives, including their mental health and relationships, resonate with other research (Augsberger et al. 2022; Cuevas-Parra 2020).

Both the documentary and photovoice projects were on full display at the Salud y Cariño 2022 end of year community celebration, which allowed over 120 students, parents, teachers, and community members to view what this organization means to its youth participants. Each of the authors of the study reflected on what this project meant to us as one of the program co-founders, and program participants, as well as UC Santa Cruz graduate students and the principal investigator.

4.1. Theresa Cariño

As the three-year anniversary of the shelter-in-place just passed, I find that I still get extremely emotional thinking about that moment in time. As the co-founder and director of Salud y Cariño, I felt responsible for the future of the organization and our mission to support youth. I am extremely grateful that we were able to pivot to online programming during such a critical and difficult time. Looking back, the time we were online seemed surreal, and we were in it day-to-day, learning as we went, while also navigating a global pandemic and what that meant in our personal lives. The projects helped crystallize my thoughts, emotions, and experiences by helping me gain some perspective (out of the day-to-day) and really begin to heal. My sense of purpose and my own mental health were greatly affected by the shutdown, but Salud y Cariño and our youth were an anchor for

me. Hearing the reflections of our beautiful and resilient youth has been bittersweet, they endured so much and have come out on the other side. One day, they'll look back at that time in history, and the documentary will be a time capsule of sorts that can be shared with future generations. My hope is that they see their strengths and the importance of finding a community, connection, and joy, even in the most challenging times.

4.2. Lynda Otero

As a Salud y Cariño participant, there was no doubt that Salud y Cariño would be there to guide me through the most terrifying event of my youth, just like they were there for the transition from elementary to middle, and middle to high school. Even without the formal groups and meeting times, the bonds and habits created in the program saved me from giving into the urge to recoil into myself, isolating myself completely. While the whole world may have forgotten about us dealing with the pandemic themselves, Salud y Cariño never did. The documentary solidified that this support system is special and helped me realize that. Adults would always tell me that they wish they had Salud y Cariño when they were my age, but it wasn't until I sat and reflected, recorded, and watched myself confess my deep love for the program that it hit me. I finally realized how great of an impact this program has on me. And I will carry this with me forever.

4.3. Rebecca London

From an autoethnographic perspective, the research team gained valuable experience, insights, and connections from working with Salud y Cariño through these projects. First and foremost, the ability to work directly with young people impacted by the pandemic, to learn from their experiences, and to engage in space with them was incredibly meaningful. For example, the research team was routinely invited to be part of Salud y Cariño's closing circle activity, to share food, and to offer personal reflections about how we also experienced the pandemic. We were vulnerable and authentic during these times, which both supported our relationship-building and offered an important outlet for processing our own feelings about the pandemic. For example, my daughter was a high school senior in March 2020, and I could relate as a parent to many of the feelings of disappointment and disbelief that students expressed. Hice-Fromille routinely brought her elementary-aged daughter with her to activities and the youth participants and staff at Salud y Cariño appreciated her energy and outgoing personality, which in some cases reminded them of their own younger family members.

In addition, this project provided an excellent opportunity for student training and mentorship on multiple levels. As a research team, we worked closely for six months and created new and lasting relationships. The two undergraduate students were recruited for their skill sets and interests, which included photography and filmmaking (one), a focus on physical health and athletics (both), and being a first-gen Latinx college student (both). They brought their talents to the project, which we could not have completed without them, were mentored by me and the two graduate students, and offered their own mentoring to the Salud y Cariño participants. Beyond just supporting the project, the undergraduate students and I spent quite a bit of time together, joining Salud y Cariño at a roller-skating party, driving to events together, and even attending the graduation of one of the students together to meet her family.

Ellington and Hice-Fromille similarly brought their talents to the project, which would not have been completed without them. They had the opportunity to mentor the undergraduates and be mentored by myself and Cariño and the Executive Director on how to create and sustain mutually beneficial and reciprocal research partnerships. They created the structure for the photovoice project and organized the final showcase. The senior graduate student offered support and mentoring for the junior graduate student, Ellington, who is the first author of this article.

4.4. Alycia Ellington

Since the first time I stepped into that classroom, I could sense the strong family bond that the Salud y Cariño staff, co-founders, and youth had. Coming in as an outsider to the community, I wasn't sure how the youth would engage with us through the projects, let alone how they would be receptive to our presence in their safe space. In the first session, you could sense the apprehension as most students were shy to participate in brainstorming sessions with us, UC Santa Cruz researchers, present. But as time progressed, both researchers and youth got the opportunity to learn about each other and grow their trust. It meant a great deal to be invited to join in on activities and the closing circle they did after every session. I cherished those moments when I would arrive in the classroom and see some of the youth excited to see me, as it made me feel seen and accepted myself.

From a researcher's standpoint, it was amazing to see the youth grow through the short amount of time we had with them as they went from surface-level photoanalysis to critical thinkers who dove below the surface when it came to their own narratives. It was especially heartwarming when I saw how proud they were of their projects, especially for photovoice. At the end of the 2022 open house year, some youth were eager to show their families their images and even asked if they could take them home.

4.5. Theresa Hice-Fromille

Upon my first observations of the Salud y Cariño community, I was struck by the acute sense of support and protection that emanated throughout the space. Like Alycia Ellington, I was conscious of the potential disruption that my presence caused in the safe environment that the Salud y Cariño team and students had created. Yet, whereas some communities are closed off, in understandable defense, the Salud y Cariño team was generous, and the students were warm. Although I had experienced the pandemic as a graduate student, parent, and UC Santa Cruz instructor, sharing space and being in community with Salud y Cariño students provided me with snapshots of the painful experiences of navigating the pandemic as an adolescent. At the same time, I bore witness to the ways that Salud y Cariño leaders and participants uplifted one another, empowering one another to persist and resist the difficult circumstances that worked to undermine their joy. Using a combination of humor, songs, and gentle words of affirmation, the group ensured one another's stability despite the uncertain social and public health situation through which they were living.

In some ways, our presence indicated a weakening of pandemic restrictions. After all, the students had still been fully enrolled online a year before we began meeting with them. But looser social distancing guidelines did not equate with the end of the pandemic. The students' reliance on their community to help them navigate the persistent struggles of life during/after COVID reminded me that the effects of the pandemic are present and require multiple layers of attention and commitment. It was beautiful to see the students light up as they hugged each other in welcome and at the closing circle, but it also reminded me that for months they had been unable to do so. Educators, parents, and mentors like me must remember the organizations like Salud y Cariño in the years to come, whether in the wake of COVID or as another crisis ensues, which provides us with clear examples of how to ensure youth thriving—through the good times and the bad.

4.6. Closing

In this article, we have paired community-engaged research with a community youth-serving organization and its youth participants to document: (1) the ways that organizational participation benefitted Latinx youth during the pandemic, and (2) the power of engaged research in providing epistemically rich depictions of COVID experiences and the healing role of grassroots organizations.

This research project supported a healing process that set an intentional space that allowed for the co-production of knowledge among youth, community partners, and UC Santa Cruz researchers. We all shared more than a year of isolation in our work and social environments due to COVID-19 and the building of this partnership between Salud

y Cariño and UC Santa Cruz to document these experiences for the youth in Live Oak, CA. It also helped us to build new relationships that supported our growth and provided opportunities for relationship-building among all involved. Youth documented the many challenges that COVID restrictions posed in their family, social, and school lives. They also reflected on the ways that Salud y Cariño provided a buffer and antidote to this isolation, which they found to be a lifeline during the lockdown.

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