Teaching a Pandemic Learning Pod with Friendship, Fantasy and Fairness

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to overshadow our lives, educators have taken up the challenge of teaching through these difficult times, sometimes with little to no support. Early childhood education in particular is seen as an essential service to support the functioning of families during the pandemic and beyond. Pandemic learning pods consisting of small groups of children, facilitated by a parent or a teacher, have become popular and can be found in various configurations to suit the needs of the families.

In this paper I delineate my experiences with teaching a small group of eight children aged three and a half to seven years old in a pandemic learning pod. I explain how this pod was formed by including the voices of the parents as well as highlight the voices of the children and how they adapted to the new way of *coming to school*. In doing so, I will follow the lead of Vivian Paley's (2007; 2009) 3 Fs in early childhood: friendship, fantasy, and fairness as a conceptual framework.

I use my reflective notes, interviews with parents, email correspondence with families, and fieldnotes from classroom observations as data sources to provide a multifaceted picture of teaching a pandemic learning pod. Finally, I argue that using learning pods as an example, early childhood education can benefit from rethinking and reimagining educational spaces and configurations to be more equitable and just for all children.

Keywords*:* Pandemic Learning Pod, COVID-19 Pandemic, Early Childhood Education, Emergent Curriculum.

Teaching a Pandemic Learning Pod with Friendship, Fantasy, and Fairness

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to overshadow our lives, educators have taken up the challenge of teaching through these difficult times, sometimes with little to no support. Early childhood education in particular is, currently, seen by many as an essential service to support the functioning of families during the pandemic and beyond. Educators, families, and administrators were challenged when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to reimagine and rethink how to continue and sustain the educational needs of the children, especially the youngest children in formal and informal early childhood settings.

Bartlett and Schugurensky (2020) delineate "four educational models occurring beyond school buildings: remote learning, homeschooling, microschooling (pandemic pods), and unschooling." They ask a critical question: "Can schools still make a contribution to freedom, equality, and participation?" Remote or virtual learning was one solution which did work for some children initially but as the pandemic showed no signs of ending by June 2020, families, teachers and administrators were trying to find ways to look for better alternatives to online learning which included homeschooling and microschooling (learning pods). With the spread of COVID-19, families came together to form learning pods which *The Wall Street Journal* called "at-home schools" (Chaker, 2020) Their rationale for doing so was to supplement or replace online or in-person school learning. These pandemic learning pods have become a point of contention in the debate around race and privilege (Koh, 2020). It was amidst school closures and the uncertainties of the

educational climate when parents and families began voicing their concerns that the needs of the privileged were being met while the rest were being left out (Koh, 2020).

It is within this context that I began looking on social media to teach a small group of children in Toronto, Canada. As the pandemic had put my job search as an academic on hold, I was looking for alternate job opportunities while limiting my exposure to too many people. I have been an early childhood educator for almost 20 years in various informal and formal settings in Mumbai, India, New York, USA, and now in Toronto, Canada. In my years of learning from and with children, I take a strong stance towards equity and justice in education, and I am inspired by child-led, play-based, emergent approaches to teaching and learning. Aligned with these commitments and approaches, I was fortunate to find a group of families with 8 children who were interested in forming a learning pod with me as their teacher and facilitator. The families agreed to work with me towards a child-centered, play-based curriculum as they wanted to create a safe space for their children in an intolerably dangerous world. And so, we began our pod in September 2020 at a rented room in a church nearby. The families joined together to gather and buy the necessary supplies as we began this adventure together.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I use Paley's (2007, 2009) description of the 3 F's: friendship, fantasy, and fairness as a conceptual framework to make sense of my own experiences in teaching this learning pod, as well as to understand and analyze the experiences of the children and parents in our pod. This conceptual framework will be used to show how we formed a community based on friendship, how the children brought in what was happening with the pandemic into their pretend (fantasy) play, and how we, the children and I as well as the parents and I, discussed the issues of what was fair and what was not with each other in the context of the pandemic.

Methodology

Following a crystallization methodology (Kuby, 2014), which makes space for multiple truths and realities, I employed field notes, reflective notes, email correspondence with families and interviews with the parents as data sources. To make sense of and analyze the data sources to make the data *tell a story*, I used my conceptual framework to focus on instances where friendship, fantasy, and fairness were most pronounced and visible. Thus, by using crystallization as methodology, which makes space for multiple truths and realities, I was able to reflect on my own practice, bring to the foreground the experiences of the children and families, and unpack the emotions that were evident given the context of the pandemic. Kuby (2014) explains:

Crystallization thus disrupts typical ways of doing qualitative research. Crystallization acknowledges that decisions in the research process are never neutral and thus a researcher's ideologies influence analysis and (re)presenting research. This disrupts the idea of objective research. Who we are as people shapes the research questions we ask, the way we go about collecting data, how we interact with the participants, which theories we draw upon to make sense of the data, the methods we employ for analysis, and how we decide to disseminate insights (p. 133).

Teacher Experiences

At the beginning of the learning pod, I focused on creating an environment with invitations for the children to play using the resources I had. We had a Lego area, an area with cars, trains, dinosaurs and figurines, an arts and crafts area, an area to explore picture books and puzzles etc. The children took ownership of the classroom and could move between spaces as they pleased and use any of the materials based on their interests and

imaginations. From the beginning, most of them began with pretend play with the cars and other manipulatives. A couple of the younger children were still playing on their own and observing what the older ones were doing. It was a "typical" mixed-age classroom where the children were forming new friendships and alliances everyday as they engaged in complex and sophisticated storylines and created their own worlds of imagination and fantasy. In my field notes, I recorded how the children usually played with the dinosaurs in the morning as they ran about the room roaring at each other, and by the afternoon, they usually got into play involving dogs and cats where they assigned gender normative roles of being a mommy cat, a daddy cat, a baby cat etc. Sometimes one of the girls, Edwina (4.5 years old), interjected and said she could be a daddy cat if she wanted because they were allowed to be anything they wanted. The others objected at first but later decided it was okay. As an educator with experience, I had noticed these themes play out in various classrooms and I noticed how each group of children take on these themes in similar yet unique ways. Many themes emerged in the children's play including caregiving, looking after babies, pets etc., rescuing which included Paw Patrol (popular children's TV show) and various superheroes, play around airplanes and how we use money etc.

To develop a routine, I conducted a short circle time activity with the children each day before we went outside to the playground. We began with a hello song, followed by some silly songs to dance, and move around to and then a discussion about our feelings and emotions for the day. We read children's picture books which the children and I took turns selecting. We practiced mindfulness, breathing exercises, and yoga every day. I also wanted to understand what the children were thinking and feeling about the pandemic as they had stayed home for many months before they began the learning pod in September. The following is a part of my reflective notes which I recorded in the first week of October:

I asked the children what they knew about the virus because they were playing with the dinosaurs this morning and Angela (3.5 years old) said that the dinosaur was sick, to which Edwina replied: Does the dinosaur have Covid? Angela nodded. They put the dinosaur away in a corner and played with the other dinosaurs.

I asked the children about this instance, and they told me that the virus was not safe. That they needed to stay home and wash their hands all the time. One of the younger children, Noah (3 years old) made a big circle with his arms and said it was the BIG Germ. Another child, Hiro (5 years old) who always wore a mask, pointed to his mask and said that masks keep them safe and when you meet people from outside your home you need to wear a mask to keep the germs away. The children continued the discussion and they seemed to know quite a lot about the pandemic and had listened to what their parents had explained to them about keeping safe etc. However, I wanted to know more about the sick dinosaur, so I asked again, and the three girls, Angela, Edwina, and Shana (4 years old) explained how the dinosaur had Covid and had to stay away from the others until he got better.

This excerpt from my notes made me reflect upon the early experiences with the children and how they were making sense of the pandemic by listening to everything around them and trying to process it in their own interactions and play. "Possibilities for connecting play and outside events are fleeting. But the teacher who listens carefully has many opportunities to apply the glue (Paley, 2007, p. 159)."

Children's Experiences

As we became better acquainted with each other in the classroom and formed trusting relationships, the conversations were more about the virus as a part of the children's lives. According to a field note I recorded in late October; Edwina brought in a new water bottle

(Figure 1). As she showed it off to her friends at the snack table, one of the children Alex (4.5-year-old) mentioned how the circles looked like toe Coronavirus. She smiled and agreed, and the children pointed to the circles and showed it to each other. I watched as they found something to smile about even in these circumstances. The realities of the outside world and the realities of our pod world were inextricably entangled yet they were so different because of the children and the way they chose to see the world. In many instances after this, I noted how the children brought in things that looked like the virus.

Figure 1: The Coronavirus bottle

Sometimes they were constructed out of Lego or balls or other materials in the classroom, and at others they were found objects like dandelions in the playground and compared it to the images of the virus.

One day in early November, as the children were drawing on their whiteboards, Alex drew many lines across the board and announced, "Look I drew the virus!" (Figure 2). Followed by this, Angela (Figure 3) and Shana (Figure 4) also used various markers and drew the virus on their whiteboards. Then Alex promptly took a paper towel and wiped out his whiteboard announcing: "And now I got rid of the virus! I'm a scientist!" To which I replied, "Someone should, I am so glad you did, Alex!" He smiled back at me and nodded. The others followed and repeated this multiple times. These acts of imagination, curiosity, and play made me think about how young children were making sense of the bizarre phenomenon of the Coronavirus and how they were trying to cope with its reality and find solutions to 'erase' it from their lives.

Figure 2: Alex's Drawing of the Coronavirus
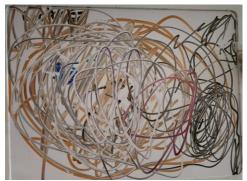
Figure 3: Angela's drawing of the Coronavirus

Figure 4: Shana's Drawing of the Coronavirus

As time passed, the children's friendships strengthened, and they waited for each of their friends every morning to begin their play. Socio-emotional learning was one of my main objectives for our pod which was also what the parents were looking for when they decided to come together to form the pod. One of my emails to the families in November stated:

> This week the kids Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) really stood out to me. I observed how the children look forward to seeing each other every morning, how they remember each other's schedule and know which days which friends will play with them. They have also taken charge of the routines and sometimes remind me when it's clean up time or snack time. They are also aware of each other's likes and dislikes and moods. The children are so kind and compassionate with each other and have learned to be patient. I am so proud of all my kids! Kindness and compassion are so important, if only more adults would learn from children!

Lumanlan (2020) offers a critical perspective on socialization in her podcast:

> On the first day people were talking about Pandemic Pods there was a huge rush to form them. And then the very next day, it seemed like people realized the social justice considerations of what are essentially networks of affluent parents, who are often but not always white, either withdrawing their child from school or providing this extra tutoring to ensure their child stays on track with the school-provided learning objectives.

These tensions were always on my mind as I continued teaching the learning pod. As an educator, I learned about the children's culture, their family background and spoke to

them about my own experiences teaching in various contexts. I made sure to discuss how other children go to school before and during the pandemic by telling them about my own nephew in India, and my students in New York.

Parent Experiences

Based on these experiences with the learning pod, I reflected on how fortunate we were to have the access, opportunity, resources, and the privilege to form and run a pandemic learning pod at a time when so many people in the world were struggling to stay alive, to stay safe, and to look after their families. I spoke to the families about this often and found that the families and I formed deeper relationships because of the shared trauma of the pandemic. We came together as a community to share our cultural celebrations like Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, Hannukah, the Jewish festival of light, Christmas, the Christian festival, as well as Halloween and the children's birthday celebrations. We had multiple pajama parties, movie days etc. and made the learning pod a space of celebration and positivity for the children and also for ourselves. Because of these relationships, as a classroom community, we became a close-knit group even though lockdowns were enforced at various times, and we had many interruptions throughout the year. Because of this strong sense of community, I decided to interview family members to include their voices and experiences.

Three of the mothers in the group: Kara, Teresa, and Adele agreed to be interviewed online. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interview (See Appendix A for Interview Protocol). I discussed Paley's (2007; 2009) 3 Fs of friendship, fantasy, and fairness in relation to the pod to understand how they were processing this new educational setting for their children.

Forming the Pod

Kara, who first started the pod decided to do so because she wanted her daughter Angela, who was three and a half years old to have as normal a school experience as she could. She took the initiative of joining a group on Facebook about learning pods in Toronto and looked for other like-minded parents in the neighborhood who were also looking for alternative solutions to formal schooling environments. She discussed how microschools and small group learning had been happening everywhere and that it was not a new practice, however in the context of the pandemic there were new challenges to consider regarding safety, socializing with others, how many people we could all include in our bubble, and how much exposure each family had with others outside the pod. This cautious approach resonated with Teresa, who is three-year-old Noah's mother. She spoke about how she wanted everything to be official and that she wanted her son to be in a school environment where he felt safe and could be around other children to play and learn from and with them. Adele, 4-and-a-half-year-old Edwina's mother just wanted a smaller group to limit exposure as she stated that her local school had 28 children in each classroom which she and her spouse were not comfortable with. Adele expressed concerns about her daughter's regression as she described how Edwina was becoming more anxious staying at home and that she needed to be around other children. The three mothers discussed the uncertainties that they had to deal with, and Adele also discussed how the cost of attending a pod was something she had to consider as at the time they were a single income household.

The participants also described how online learning was not appropriate for their children and for that age group in general and that even though they had to make very difficult decisions, they decided to go ahead with the learning pod because they felt it was the best option for their child and their family. Soon they found other families with similar goals for their children and so they decided to rent out a room in a nearby church with a playground outside to run the pod.

The parents agreed that they all joined and formed the pod for the same reason: to provide a safe, protected learning environment during a very uncertain and dangerous time.

Choosing a Teacher

After these decisions were made, they interviewed teacher candidates. When I asked them why they decided to hire me, they described how they were looking for an educator who would love and understand the children and not only teach them. They were looking for someone who valued relationships and believed in play-based, and child-centered approaches and who was calm. This conversation stood out to me because, in this context, the parents had the power to choose which teacher would best suit the educational and emotional needs of their children. This is a something that does not happen in other early childhood settings, and it is important to think about the pros and cons of this privilege of choice which is not afforded to many.

Safe Haven for Families

The participants also spoke about how they felt that the learning pod was a safe haven not only for their children, but also for them. They appreciated being a part of a classroom community that was positive at a time when the world was coping with the realities of the pandemic. They found that they had all gained meaningful friendships with other families in the pod and that was a very fortunate outcome for everyone involved.

When speaking of fairness, Kara, Teresa, and Adele discussed how they were cognizant of the inequities that not everyone can have the privilege of being a part of the learning pod experience. They also discussed the inequities that were present in public schools for children, especially children of color and marginalized groups. They discussed how they would like to lobby for funding so that more families could be included and benefit from learning pods. Throughout the year, I had these critical conversations with the families, especially these three mothers who shared my concerns about equity and justice during the pandemic. As a group, we hope this paper will encourage the field of early childhood to move forward and think about how government funded podding and small groups could be beneficial for the children, their families, and the teachers.

Some Findings and Reflections

Qualitative research deems research to be a generative process; as such, it cannot be objective. It is subject to many things, including, but not limited to, context, researcher background, theoretical assumptions, and ideology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In employing qualitative research with crystallization as methodology, I was able to reflect on my own experiences as a teacher practitioner, learn from the children and how they perceive the pandemic, and have a meaningful discussion with the parents about our shared experience in creating and facilitating a pandemic learning pod.

When I began teaching the learning pod, I did not think that I would conduct a study about my experiences. However, as a reflective practitioner, I am in the habit of keeping notes and documenting what occurs in my classroom so that I can learn from my time with the children. These reflective notes, field notes from the classroom, as well as the weekly email correspondence with the families made me think about sharing my experiences in this unique situation during the pandemic. I understand that this study would have been more powerful had I recorded the children's voices and showcased them verbatim. This is one of the limitations I faced as a teacher-researcher as my field notes were brief and in my own words. It is important to note that these were experiences limited to this particular context and other iterations of learning pods might have had very different experiences, as it the case in any small-scale qualitative study.

Through this study, my belief in building meaningful, respectful relationships with the children and their families was reinforced. Being a transnational teacher of color, I am always in-between worlds. My identity is my strength as I traverse geographical boundaries with various contexts and the children I teach. In this particular context and setting, I felt supported, and it was easy for me to share my racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences with the children and families in the learning pod.

Understanding the importance of play and its centrality to early childhood education was vital to the success of this experience. Paley's 3 Fs helped me think about teaching a pandemic learning pod with friendship, fantasy, and fairness in a deeper way. Also, it helped me identify "key ideas across disciplines to deepen our understandings of how early childhood teaching […] has changed historically and can change in response to shifting demographics across time in coordinated and responsive ways" (Souto-Manning, Falk, Lopez, Barros Cruz, Bradt, Cardwell, McGowan, Perez, Rabadi-Raol, & Rollins, 2019, p. 250).

Conclusion

It is imperative to note that pandemic learning pods, like many private learning settings, exacerbate inequities already exposed by distance learning necessitated by the pandemic. Meanwhile, public policy experts have observed that "podding" is reinforcing the saying that the market always finds a way to meet the demands of the public. These inequities are not new and continue to be a reality for historically marginalized children and communities. If we are to use this pandemic as a learning experience, and see the pandemic as a portal (Roy, 2020), "in the midst of this terrible despair" we have the chance to "imagine the world anew" to reconceptualize and reimagine what could be, and how we could change the landscape of early childhood education. Teaching during a pandemic was extremely challenging; conducting research was not my intention or priority at the time. I hope this article serves the field as a reflective recounting of early childhood experiences during this difficult time.

This pandemic has forced us to look for more innovative ways to continue and sustain the educational needs of young children. My hope is that we do not go back to our old ways and our "normal" without considering new possibilities for early childhood settings and curriculum rooted in equity and justice for all.

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