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Re-Storying Ourselves as Early Childhood Teachers Amidst COVID: Toward Needed Transformations

Julie Orelie-Hernandez, Patricia (Patty) Pión, and Rafaella (Rafa) Soares-Bailey

COVID-19 has shattered the walls of the school buildings. It has stripped its walls bare, reminding us of the shortcomings of a broken system. It has disrupted and altered taken-for-granted meanings of teaching, inviting us to reimagine education. More importantly, it has invited us to reimagine who we were—and are—as teachers and human beings.

We, three New York City early childhood teachers, Patricia (Patty) Pión, Julie Orelie-Hernandez, and Rafaella (Rafa) Soares-Bailey, will share what the pandemic meant for us as experienced teachers and the irony of learning anew how to teach children. From these shared experiences, we have begun to form new ideas of collegiality, friendship, self-care, and humanity.

COMING TOGETHER

One could say that we met by happenstance; others might say that the stars aligned. Whether by chance or fate, we three found ourselves taking a class together in Fall 2020. While we were introduced by way of a group assignment, we quickly realized we were all experienced early childhood teachers of Color working in New York City classrooms amidst COVID-19. Try as we might, we could not separate the demands and strains of teaching in a time of COVID-19 from our class assignment meetings.

We met via Zoom, texted, and talked (Figure 1). And we continue to do so. After all, we were (and still are) all navigating unprecedented times and—in our own settings—experiencing eerily similar consequences of these extraordinary times. Initially, we found ourselves having side discussions about what teaching looked like in the time of COVID-19. Soon, these experiences were centered as we became a community of teachers making sense of teaching in the middle of a pandemic.

While the preschools and schools where we work were attending to shifts in schedule, communication with families, and other material consequences of COVID-19, we found ourselves needing social and emotional support as we were making sense of our own lives, emotions, and shifting demands. We yearned for community and support as we each sought to teach in equity-oriented ways but were confronted with the inequitable impact of COVID-19.

The virus hit communities of Color in New York City particularly hard, and we found support and understanding in each other. We talked about our at-times unique and at-times shared experiences of teaching in the early childhood classroom during the COVID-19 crisis, working with toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners.



Figure 1. A Zoom meeting

Although one might construct working in different schools and preschools as an obstacle, it was a key aspect of our community. It allowed us to understand some of the larger consequences of COVID-19 as resulting from a broken system and an inequitable society, rather than situating our experiences as unique to us individually.

(RE)MEMBERING IN COMMUNITY

Starting in September, we met twice a week via Zoom. Collectively we began to make sense of the ways in which each of our preschools and schools reacted to the crisis. We communicated with our respective staff throughout and made meaning of our jobs as early childhood educators. We each found ourselves unsupported by administrators—or at least unaccounted for—in dealing with changes of schedule, expectations, and teaching modes. We felt at times less-than-human, or at least that we had been constructed as such.

Talking about our experiences allowed us to dive into our feelings through several stages of the pandemic. Together, we worked to re-story (Freire, 2001) not just our practices, but our identities and roles as teachers, recentering our humanity. We realized that as early childhood teachers we rarely make the time and space to attend to our humanity, as we tend to center and prioritize the needs of the children we teach.

Yet in community, we came to understand that our own needs do not have to come at the expense of the children's needs—and they should not.

In this article, we share a collective memory of our experiences. Our memories were also what Dillard (2012) called (re)memberings; they provided an important site for us to (re)member ourselves and (re)

claim our humanity. (Re)membering allowed us to put back together “notions of time that honor and lift up the relationships that linger there” allowing us to “truly honor the complexities of memories” (p. 10).

Our collective memories serve as a guide for where we began the journey and where we see ourselves as peers and friends. In a way, they address Dillard’s (2012) call for us to attend to the meaning of memories for the teacher or scholar of Color. She asks us to “more explicitly and systematically engage them, (re)member what we have forgotten as a way toward healing not just ourselves but those with whom we teach” (p. 11).

MEMORIES OF THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC

“Teachers are building the plane while they fly it.” Just a little reminder to all my teacher friends, parents and children out there. We are all in this together. #bekind

Figure 2. Facebook post

At the beginning of the pandemic, we were worried about the health and needs of our families and community members, especially the elders. We were overwhelmed with the mounting obligations, fearful that we could lose our jobs. We each found ourselves navigating teaching in a way we had never imagined.

As the rug was pulled out from under all of us, schools, administrators, and teachers were forced to scramble. In the name of rigor and normalcy, we were expected to recreate our classrooms into a computer screen. As teachers, we usually forget our own needs to make sure children are having their needs met. COVID-19 offered no focus on teachers’ needs. They became insignificant; we became insignificant.

There was pressure from administrators to produce online learning experiences mirroring those that had previously taken place in the classroom. We had limited resources in our homes. While we were learning to teach online, administrators and school districts never took into consideration the time needed to create these cyber classrooms. In many cases, there was an expectation that we should make elaborate use of videos, slides, and various applications (such as Seesaw, Google Classroom, RazKids, Padlet, DreamBox, Scholastic LiteracyPro, GetEpic, and Remini), since “other teachers were able” to use them—without considering the unpaid hours these teachers spent.

Administrators saw the end products of a Google Classroom, without fully comprehending the time it took to create the items posted. Word study videos that were two to three minutes long required hours of preparation. Read-alouds that would have taken 10 to 15 minutes in person now required teachers to find, buy, and/or create digital texts. Time was spent attempting to offer learning experiences that paid little attention to the disruptions taking place all around us.

The mounting work pressures were compounded by personal, physical, and mental issues. In our homes, our respective spouses recognized that we were burning the candles at both ends and even in the middle. They often reminded us to eat or go for a walk. Our diets and physical activity were replaced with endless meetings in front of computer screens. The longer we sat, the more lethargic we felt. Our bodies were not equipped for the hours spent sitting down—affecting our shoulders, necks, backs, and tailbones. The parts of our body responsible for holding our heads up were overburdened.

In addition to holding our heads up physically, we felt the toll of the mental fatigue we experienced. The transition to being home all the time, stationary, without a real grasp of what our students were experiencing, compounded by the never-ending ambulance sirens and nightly illegal fireworks that were popping off in our respective neighborhoods, added to the mental fatigue.

As teachers, we were expected to carry on as normally as possible for the sake of our students. The system failed to recognize that as human beings we were not functioning within a “normal” setting. Our homes became our classrooms and our classrooms became our home.

One of our schools did not hold its first team meeting until after a whole week of online learning. Our experiences ranged from having little guidance from our directors to being micromanaged during multiple daily meetings, with no regards to our mental health and screen fatigue. Stress levels were through the roof. It was the first time we had been through a pandemic, but teachers were expected to lead the way, mostly without support, and still act professionally. Administrators, being pressured by parents, became increasingly prescriptive and demanding, requiring that we enforce “normal” classroom structures and expectations even while children had no structures for remote learning in place at home.

In addition, before the school closures, we had each experienced interpersonal struggles associated with trying to teach in ways that were different from “the way we’ve always done.” We wanted to teach in ways that prioritized justice. We had challenged—or at least questioned—notions that languages (Spanish and English) could not be mixed and that children were too young to understand societal injustices. We did so because we knew these were myths that served to maintain injustices and inequities in early childhood classrooms (Souto-Manning, 2013, 2020).

Online spaces magnified these struggles for each one of us. We found ourselves, in the midst of a pandemic, working with people who either were not supportive and/or did not believe in our capabilities as teachers. As a result, we found ourselves struggling and fighting with a pandemic, co-teachers, and ourselves. We worked with other teachers who dominated the space while devaluing us until we had mental breakdowns, experiencing fits of crying, bouts of sleeplessness and irritability. We were constantly working and somehow not getting anything done, leading to fights with our partners. We were expected to suppress these difficulties in order to continue our roles as teachers. We sought support, wanting to work with people who were mindful of our needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

LIVING, SURVIVING, AND THRIVING IN A STILL-PANDEMIC WORLD

After months of constant Zooming and pressure from all directions, we hoped we would get back to some sort of normalcy—teaching in a classroom full time with a full roster of students. Normalcy became an illusion. What we got was more clarity on how much teachers needed support. Two of us left our homes to teach in person and the third stayed within their four walls, counting on an unpredictable

system to tell them when they would be able to get back to the classroom. None of us could depend on the system. We had to depend on ourselves and other teachers.

We found each other when we had almost lost ourselves. The three of us ended up in a space where trust was thriving. We had respect for each other's teacher expertise while attending to each other's needs. We honored each other's humanity. We understood the words, "I need space," "I got this," "This is my strength," "I need a nap," and "We can't give a one hundred percent at this moment." We found a learning community that was not necessarily "professional" but was centered on honoring our humanity. We had a commitment to one another. We were bound by trust, identity, and experience—values which are central to a learning community.

Together we (re)membered our humanity. We opened up about our study, work, and love lives. And as happens in times of trouble, the openness of our vulnerability created a bond between us. We found in each other commonalities, differences, and most importantly, community. In and with each other, in relationships that blurred the categories of "personal" and "professional," we found the strength to continue doing our work.

We know that we can make it—and at times fake it, if needed—but as we discussed in our meetings, if the conditions of the worksite make us feel devalued, unsupported, and unhappy, our teaching suffers. The well-being and mental health of teachers needs attention, especially in light of the lack of access to mental health support in the United States. The lack of attention to our mental health has made our jobs and lives much harder. For us, it was important to find ways to provide support in this delicate area. We found that being there for and with each other, elevating ourselves as human beings and educators, was a necessity for teaching during a pandemic.

As we continue teaching during a pandemic and beyond, as we reflect on our memories and (re)membering in community, we ask administrators to take note: A strong teaching community nurtures strong teacher friendships. We have all been in professional learning communities that were not communities, that did not attend to our needs as human beings. If there is one lesson we hope others will glean from our memories, it is that early childhood teachers' mental health matters; our humanity matters and cannot be separated from our roles as early childhood teachers.

REFLECTIONS AND CALLS FOR ACTION

As teachers, we had to reexamine and shift our notions of what professional looks and sounds like. The pandemic has reminded us of the centrality of humanity, the essentiality of humility, and the role of relationships in teaching and learning. Perhaps before the pandemic, the focus was on covering the curriculum; the pandemic made us realize how such "covering" was stretching teachers thin. As a result, we believe that we have the responsibility to upend processes of erasure that harm, dehumanize, and exclude young children. And we realized we needed to have the same responsibility to ourselves. How does this change our future thinking and practice as educators? How do we move forward?

We were guided by Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* as we re-storied our teaching as a human act, keenly attending to how we might "cultivate knowledge that concerns the specifically human nature of the art of teaching" (p. 127). As we collectively reflected on our own teaching, we became aware that we might have been too easily discouraged. Together, we recommitted to uphold each and every child's right to dream and to be free. At the same time, we talked with each other about our faltering sense of self-confidence marked by our own questionings of our professional competence in this new space (Freire, 2001).

COVID-19 has shifted the way teachers teach. With COVID-19 infections and deaths higher in communities of Color, the pandemic has not only clearly demonstrated racialized societal injustices, but it has revealed the many flaws in the education system. It has forced us educators to rethink education and the professionalism of teachers. This pandemic gave us a chance to shine a light on everyday injustices— such as lack of housing and hunger—that are normalized by society but make our students, and their performance in school, suffer. By acknowledging these perils, we can begin a process of humanization of our students and their families, therefore better attending to our students’ intellectual and emotional needs.

As Freire (2001) wrote:

I am dealing with people and not with things. And, because I am dealing with people, I cannot refuse my wholehearted and loving attention, even in personal matters, where I see that a student is in need of such attention. (p. 128)

We found that even in the middle of a pandemic, encountering and witnessing “that very humanity is in itself therapeutic” (p. 128).

SUSTAINING THE SHARED HUMANITY OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

As early childhood educators, as we re-storied ourselves and our teaching in the midst of a pandemic, we recognized the need to truly see and acknowledge ourselves as fully human. We found ourselves humanizing teachers and teaching. This involved holding space to make sense of what we were and still are going through—not only as learners, but as human beings who are individuals and members of communities that have been affected in multiple ways.

As we move toward needed transformations, we commit to cultivating true communities, where teachers uphold and sustain our shared humanity. This requires the understanding that knowledge is relational and therefore gained through emotional ties. In the “new normal,” teachers should be open to such partnerships and strive for the education of the whole child and the whole teacher. Through partnerships with families, we seek to re-story our practices and ourselves.

We have each been transformed by this pandemic, not only by the children we teach (and their questions, interests, and families), but by one another. As human beings, we each have been able to find commonalities and emotional connection through Zoom meetings. As we talked, learned, and laughed together, we realized we shared immigrant stories and navigated the world multilingually. We also vented to each other our frustrations that teaching has changed so much in such a short time.

Through the process of these meetings, we have re-storied our own learning, co-creating a powerful space of collective self-care and well-being. Through sharing our experience of community, we hope to offer the needed push for early childhood teachers’ needs, priorities, and development to be re-storied. We hope our memories and process of (re)membering can illuminate the necessity and urgency of re-storying the learning and development of early childhood teachers, prioritizing early childhood teachers’ community, collective self-care, well-being, and very humanity.

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