Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 70.2, Summer 2024, 249-264

How Much Snot is Too Much Snot? Community-Making Amid Pandemic Times in Early Childhood Education

Nicole Land, Andrea Thomas, Sanja Todorovic, Angélique Sanders

Toronto Metropolitan University

This article details a pedagogical inquiry research project, Crafting Pedagogies with(in) Suspension: Viral Pedagogies in COVID times in Early Childhood Education*, where educator co-researchers collaborated with a pedagogist-researcher to explore how we might craft early childhood education pedagogies relevant to pandemic times. In particular, we trace how questions of community-making emerged as quotidian conceptions of community failed in the conditions of the pandemic. Thinking with the question "how much snot is too much snot?"—a question educators were asked to assess as a marker of community participation—we share three tensions of community-making: policing bodies, normalcy, and community-making as an ongoing process. Importantly, we work to share our pedagogical thinking with these tensions, asking how they create different possibilities for making community with children and families in educational contexts.*

Cet article décrit un projet de recherche sur l'enquête pédagogique, intitulé Crafting Pedagogies with(in) Suspension : Viral Pedagogies in COVID times in Early Childhood Education*, dans le cadre duquel des co-chercheurs éducateurs ont collaboré avec un chercheur-pédagogue pour explorer la manière dont nous pourrions concevoir des pédagogies d'éducation de la petite enfance adaptées aux périodes de pandémie. En particulier, nous montrons comment les questions relatives à la création de communautés ont émergé lorsque les conceptions quotidiennes de la communauté ont échoué dans les conditions de la pandémie. En réfléchissant à la question "quelle quantité de morve est trop importante ?" - une question que les éducateurs ont été invités à évaluer en tant que marqueur de la participation communautaire - nous partageons trois tensions liées à la création de la communauté : le maintien de l'ordre des corps, la normalité et la création de la communauté en tant que processus continu. Plus important encore, nous nous efforçons de partager notre réflexion pédagogique avec ces tensions, en nous demandant comment elles créent différentes possibilités de créer une communauté avec les enfants et les familles dans des contextes éducatifs.*

In July 2022, early childhood educator co-researchers[1] and a pedagogist-researcher inaugurated a pedagogical inquiry research collaboration that we titled *Crafting Pedagogies with(in) Suspension: Viral Pedagogies in COVID times in Early Childhood Education*. We wanted to think collectively about doing pedagogy in education spaces amid the lingering interruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 at an early childhood education program in Ontario,

Canada. How, we wondered, do we attend to what has emerged in the breaks of status-quo early childhood education practices in the face of pandemic times? What concepts, questions, or processes that we inherit and reproduce have become unintelligible or impossible—and why? We borrow here from Phelan and Hansen's (2021) invocation of "suspension" as a mode of engaging with pandemic times, where

> we might find in the pandemic an opportunity to reclaim (educational) spaces—that is, as zones of indistinction in which the suspension of normal rules and innovative leaps from the neoliberal utopian logic that ordinarily governs education—in which we not only focus on and discuss ethico-political questions related to socioeconomic inequality, human vulnerability, and public spirit but do so in ways that playfully embrace paradox and tension. (p. 20)

Put differently, our intention within *Viral Pedagogies* was to think collectively and affirmatively with the consequences and disjunctures made perceptible in pandemic times; we wanted to create practices of coming together to reconfigure what is possible in classrooms, rather than accepting dominant discourses of individual responsibility and isolation that have so come to animate popular conversations about pandemic life. It was, as Phelan and Hansen wrote, playfulness, paradox, and tension that marked our ethical commitment to one another. The possibilities of pedagogical invention and creation were, we worked to argue, not lost amid the increasing regulation of educational spaces in the name of health and virus mitigation. As we began to pay attention to the relations unfolding in classrooms, we became attuned to a shared question: what becomes of community-making in pandemic times?

This article details our pedagogical inquiry practices for thinking with community-making in pandemic times. We begin by explaining our approach to pedagogical inquiry work, before turning to how and who we thought with as we grappled with community-making. Then, we share three examples of taking community-making as an ongoing question: policing bodies, normalcy, and community, and doing community as a process, not an accomplishment. Our conclusion offers forward proposals for how we might take seriously the contradictory threads of doing community-making in pandemic times in early childhood education. We hope that this article will contribute to ongoing conversations about how we might do community-making as a pedagogical process in early childhood education. By situating community as a rich, messy, risky, and irresolvable educational concern to be collectively and continually worked with in all its ethical and political uncertainties and complexities, it is our intention to continue to be in dialogue with what might become possible for building a life with children when community is not an already-known, romanticized, technocratic, or easily-assessed achievement.

Pedagogical Inquiry Research

Following Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015), we situate pedagogical inquiry work as a series of emergent and responsive practices that interrogate and invent conditions for thinking with pedagogy in early childhood education. Important to this work is a commitment to thinking pedagogy as a mobile body of thought committed to delving into creating educational processes whereby, as Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) articulated "pedagogy seeks new bases on which to think in diverse and unfolding ways in the midst of educational practice. Pedagogical thought is reinvigorated as it transforms educational practice" (p. 631). As Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw continued, this means that pedagogy "tries to unsettle practice to find (and sometimes

even liberate) its creative force. In other words, in a very basic understanding, pedagogy is interested in creating an experience" (p. 631). Following this, our understanding of pedagogical inquiry research takes seriously that our work must be pedagogical; it must be about invigorating experiences that reject—and perhaps even make impossible—what we have come to inhabit as the status-quo in early childhood education (for example: child development). In wanting to interrupt what has become taken-for-granted in early childhood education in Canada, we locate our pedagogical inquiry research at a complicated junction of the intersecting spaces of reconceptualist scholarship, postdevelopmental propositions, and thinking with pedagogical work. From scholars and activists who reconceptualize early childhood education, we borrow the imperative to resist the universalizing push of mainstream Eurocentric education to create, evaluate, and apply technocratic curriculum, practices, and policy (e.g. Bloch & Swadener, 2023). Alongside those thinking with postdevelopmental proposals, we lean into the untenable consequences (e.g., racial capitalist deficit discourses) of child development as a tool for producing a singular normative childhood and the skilled, governed, desirable neoliberal child subject (e.g., Nxumalo, 2019). With scholars who centre pedagogical work in early childhood education, we are concerned with how instrumental practice and child development have disciplined what becomes possible and irrelevant within early childhood education, and we want to re-invigorate early childhood education as an educational project—that is, a space that takes up the tensions of subjectivity, relationality, and life/living in complex contemporary worlds (e.g., Pollitt et al., 2021).

Accordingly and as we have described elsewhere (Land, 2022), our pedagogical inquiry research methods involve

> persist[ing] with the same questions for many weeks; craft[ing] pedagogical documentation that goes beyond capturing a moment to instead ask what revisiting a moment might ask of us and our pedagogical concerns; gather[ing] to think with what has unfolded; … and propos[ing] questions or pauses or absences or presences that felt most urgent to continue to attune to into the subsequent week. (p. 3)

We launch our pedagogical inquiry research by proposing a question rooted in non-innocent and situated ethics and politics that activates our pedagogical intentions as a pedagogist-research and educator co-researchers (Nxumalo et al., 2018). In *Viral Pedagogies* this became a question of community-making: how do we do community in pandemic times? Following this, we practice endurance with this question, spending months mulling over what it draws us to pay attention to and attune our pedagogical thinking to. We offer one another queries and propositions and connections to literature grounded in a commitment to deepening our engagement with community-making, and we then carry these propositions with us as we encounter community in everyday practices.

What was unique to *Viral Pedagogies* was that, due to Research Ethics Board requirements in pandemic conditions, the pedagogist-researcher was unable to visit the classrooms where our work unfolded. Instead, all dialogue among educator co-researchers and the pedagogist-researcher happened virtually, primarily using a Google Doc where we shared imperfectly crafted fragments of our emergent and unstable thinking (Land et al., submitted 2023). Our pedagogical documentation, in this case, was digital and took the form of an ever-growing collection of short snippets of writing that worried not about veracity or completeness, but oriented instead toward sharing thinking-in-motion and creating sites for our thinking to intersect and build a hybrid kind

of collectivity. Throughout our collective work, what remained critical is that "the work of pedagogical inquiry is focused and intentional and powerfully sustained and is always drawing us toward, and leaving our purposeful scuff marks upon, the multiple political forces that compose any context" (Land, 2022, p. 5). What this means is that "the child, the educator, knowledge, inheritances, relations, bodies: we steadily weave these through our pedagogical inquiry work, shapeshifting with them as the work takes form and makes noise with speculative, situated pedagogies" (p. 5). In the context of *Viral Pedagogies*, this means that we worked hard to centre questions of community-making because community felt like a bodied, meaningful touchstone to cohere our work, but we were intentionally disloyal to conceptions of community that already mark community as an entirely knowable entity. Instead, we wanted to take community-making during pandemic times as a proposal that demands inquiry and that takes form through co-labouring (Vintimilla & Berger, 2019) together to figure out what it means to live well with community-making in the times and places of COVID-19-influenced classrooms.

This almost relentless work of re-visiting that doing pedagogical inquiry research hinges upon is made visible in the following sections. As we share our thinking with what community making, as an ongoing question, might create, we weave together short pieces of writing created by the educators with more collective bits of thinking/writing. These collaborative sections stem from our conversations together and hold the ideas that emerged from dialogue so collective—responsive, tangled—that, as we began to write this manuscript, trying to connect them back to individual collaborators quite literally stopped making sense. Accordingly, this manuscript was created together through ongoing digital conversations, where we created small sections for individual (as impossible as that may be when thinking together) writing and shared writing (for concepts that would only "do something" when thought as a group), and then worked at different rhythms and in different bouts of time to trust one another to begin to tangle our thinking together towards meaningfully sharing our work with community making.

Community-Making

The idea that community-making is a meaningful thread in thinking early childhood education is far from a novel proposition. We see community touted often in the documents that surround early childhood education, where community is intrinsically linked to belonging and to identity, inclusion, and acceptance. There is, in these invocations of community, a sort of comfort in knowing what community entails: it is a welcoming and accepting commons, a space where people invested in living together figure out how to live well together. Community is formulated as something that, although the situated specifics of community change based on the subjects who compose that community, we know the rough contours of already; we know what we seek when we position community as a curricular goal. This is evident, for example, in *How Does Learning Happen* (Ontario Public Service, 2014), the document that supports practice in Ontario, the province where *Viral Pedagogies* took place. *How Does Learning Happen* posited that community "fosters a sense of belonging to the local community, the natural environment, and the larger universe of living things" (p. 19). Here, we see community as a concept considered intact: we know to whom and to what community refers, as it invokes a sense of the societal relations that surround childhood. Offering three questions for fostering community, *How Does Learning Happen* reiterated its understanding of community as an already common experience, asking "what opportunities are available in our community to build connections?; how can we facilitate stronger relationships within our local community?; what contributions can we make in

caring for the natural environment around us?" (p. 19). Experiences like connection, relationship, locality, contribution, and care are taken to unequivocally mark the experience of being in community, while community itself is never placed at risk. To hold community at risk is not to refute that community exists, nor that it is irrelevant to childhood experiences. Rather, it demands we ask questions of community: is community always about connection—how do communities do connection? How is community created as a relational space and what relations are made possible and impossible by different communities? What modes of contribution nurture community? This raises the possibility that community is not inherently a romanticized commons, but also holds the potential to be a messy, lived space of negotiating life together.

In our *Viral Pedagogies* pedagogical inquiry collaboration, we thought alongside Vintimilla's (2020) question "what precisely are the myths that sustain notions of community [in early childhood education]?" (p. 188). Most tangible to us was to refigure this question in the context of the suspensions (Phelan & Hansen, 2021) of pandemic times to ask "how do the myths that sustain notions of community in [early childhood education] fail, falter, or become thin in the face of pandemic reconfigurations of community?". Or put differently, "what myths of community break in pandemic times?". We carried these questions alongside Vintimilla's (2020) contention that to think with community is to wonder "what does it mean to create a life with others within educational contexts?" (p. 179). This proposition is where we began to shift our language from community as a noun (i.e., an already knowable entity) to community-making as a verb, because we saw the work of creating a life in pandemic times in education as an ever-mobile practice, one that takes neither the possibility of community nor collective life as a fact. Vintimilla offered two incitations for thinking about community in early childhood education: we might

> (1) provoke education to think further and more critically about the role of nostalgia when thinking about creating commons; (p. 188) and
> (2) be aware that imaginaries of community will always fail, are indeed rooted in failure, and that it is precisely that failure which creates the condition of possibility for community, which instantiates the aporia of nothing-in-common, of an empty space of common signification. (p. 188).

For us, this requires that we think community-making outside of a sentimentality for what community was in pre-COVID-19 life; to think community-making in situated ways, we have to abandon a longing for what we thought we knew community readily meant and initiated in early childhood education spaces before we met with the interruptions brought by a global pandemic. There are two reasons for this that matter to our pedagogical inquiry work. First, that yesterday is over. COVID-19 is not an event with easy temporal borders where we may one day "return" to pre-COVID-19 life. It has trickled through our relations and infiltrated our educational practices. Its consequences are here to stay, though morph they might. Second, we want to avoid nostalgia because it allows for a deferral: if we hold the possibility open to return to pre-COVID-19 educational milieus, we do not have to do the work of figuring out how to live together in COVID-19-contaminated spaces. When we cling to nostalgia for what community once was, we absolve ourselves of the difficult work of figuring out how to make community now. It is this work that we wanted to orient toward together. On Vintimilla's second contention, that our imaginaries of community will always fail, it is in the very real potential of pandemic-grounded community collapse that we come to community-making. We know that our imaginaries of community fail; we have lived and are living in the ongoing suspension of quotidian formulations of community. Some of the touchstones of what our imagined community relied upon—such as, for example,

proximity or touch—have crumbled into impossibility. We need a much grittier, muddled, responsive practice of making community together than dominant early childhood education imaginaries permit. Finally, Vintimilla

> point[s] out how the recognition of the impossibility of community as a project to be built and worked, or as something to be always filled with a meaning or substance, might give to early childhood contexts the necessary distantiation and leave the void of meaning open so that relationality and the creation of a commons that is open to thinking and relating and to thinking and relating otherwise can happen. (2020, p. 191)

What it means to activate this proposition in the context of *Viral Pedagogies* requires that we take community-making seriously as an act of relational invention—as something to be "built and worked", as Vintimilla offered. We do not already know what community-making will ask of us in pandemic times. What we do know is that it will request of us different, otherwise relational formations than the easy, romanticized touchstones that so often pervade early childhood education's interpretations of community. We have to figure out how to live together with pandemic times. We have to figure out how to do community-making with children with pandemic times. We cannot stress enough: we do not already know how to grapple with such a task.

Questions and Tensions of Community-Making in Pandemic Times

Policing Bodies

Andrea

When we welcomed children back to the Centre following our extended COVID-19 closure, public health had a robust set of policies and procedures to be followed. Parents and families were not permitted to cross the threshold into the Centre, and had to say their goodbyes to their children at the exterior door. The educator who greeted the children needed to confirm that parents had completed the daily screening form, which initially included taking the child's temperature and a thorough check for symptoms. Any slight indication of illness meant exclusion from care, and as educators we were called upon to enforce public health policies and send a child home if they became ill while at the Centre. In this climate, we wondered how to build trust and create community with the children and their families.

As public health guidelines became more relaxed over time, it was the responsibility of the educators to relay the changes to families, and to serve as the sounding board for parents' thoughts and concerns. It was such a relief for everyone when we could finally welcome families back into our classroom spaces once again—even though this was initially only for vaccinated and masked family members, which presented yet another policy for educators to "police" and enforce.

I was very concerned at first about how families would perceive us as educators as public health guidelines relaxed even further. When masks became optional, but still "strongly recommended," it seemed like a big decision as to whether to continue to mask or not. Would families think I was reckless if I went unmasked around their mostly unvaccinated children? Or would they welcome the opportunity for the children to see my face and expressions, and interact "normally" with me again? Which choice would best build trust and create community with

families?

I also worried how educators would be perceived when children became sick (as is inevitable in group care settings). Would families think it was our "fault" for not masking or cleaning enough to prevent the spread of illness? Although most families welcomed the easing of public health requirements to allow children to attend with "improving symptoms," others were concerned. This sometimes led to awkward moments as we attempted to quantify illness. What do we do when the "improving" runny nose is runnier or greener than the child who has this as a new symptom? How could we build community when rules seem somewhat arbitrary and possibly unfair?

Sanja

We struggled with many aspects of the Ontario Ministry of Health and local public health unit's screening guidelines, and especially with the ones that we thought had a negative impact on our community building. Deciding, by those guidelines, how sick is sick enough for any one of us to not be at the Centre was one of the most challenging decisions. If the idea of sending one home is to protect the rest of the community, what message are we sending to the members of the community we are asking to stay home? Do they belong to our community, and are we sending a message that they are not welcome into our community? What are we saying to them about their needs?

Further on, following the Public Health's rule of returning to the Centre 24 hours after one's symptoms have been improving was even more challenging at times. We have noticed that one child's improving symptoms were much worse than another's whose symptoms were milder to start with. Having to follow such rules and to make a decision who can attend our child care centre and who cannot, weighed on us and, at times, felt unjust to individual families and children who might not be able to attend due to these rules and decisions. The inconsistencies in children's and educators' attendance were now more prevalent due to COVID-19 screening requirements, and they further tested our inherited thinking about what community is and our work of community-making.

Tension—Regulating Bodies in the Name of Communal Relations

As is evident in Andrea and Sanja's writing, there is a contradiction that complexifies community-making in pandemic times: how do we keep the collective "safe" (healthy, germ-free, COVID-19-protected) when the acts that we have inherited to produce this "safety" are grounded in the regulation and exclusion or expulsion of bodies that do not meet the benchmarks safety requires? Taken further, this tension also questions how an educator can contribute to community-making when they are positioned as the arbiter and constabulary of safety and health—put differently, can an educator do community-making when their role is made to be that of COVID-19 police? That children's bodies are heavily managed in early childhood education settings is not a novel insight. At the intersection of racial capitalism and childism, Giorza (2023) argued children take on "a positionality of 'otherness' in relation to entrenched practices of rational colonial mastery and they undergo … treatments of surveillance, coercion, and humiliation via the institutional practices that manage every aspect of their lives" (p. 82). This means that the regulation and policing of children's bodies is neither accidental nor innocent; it is a tool of neoliberal governance designed to regulate who and how children should be. We want to argue too, that the policing of

children's bodies in the name of community also delimits how community can take shape. That is, community-making is policed and regulated in dialogue with the policing and regulation of bodies. When "how much snot is too much snot?" is used to include and exclude children, community becomes a transaction predicated on surveillance and rooted in the logic of performance: one must present as healthy to be part of community, where community allows entrance only to those who advance its romanticized intentions as an easy, protected space. In our experience, such logic is complexified on multiple fronts. First, community-making during pandemic times is profoundly grounded in childhood non-innocence (Garlen, 2021). Community-making is not easy in pandemic worlds; it is not the beautiful, charming ethos of welcoming that narrates early childhood education myths. Rather, it is difficult. It means making decisions about which bodies can and cannot enter a space. It means being accountable as the decision maker who makes decisions about which bodies can and cannot enter a space. Second, community-making during COVID-19 is an engagement with what Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2014) know as "neoliberal and neocolonial assemblages" (p. 39)—the

> everyday early childhood practices (and policies that inform these practices) [that] come to matter as instances of neoliberal acts that merge with other discursive and material forces to create particular, situated neoliberal assemblages that have colonizing effects on the capacities of certain bodies in certain spaces. (p. 39)

This means that community-making is not about an abstracted vision of community, but rather that it happens in a context, in a fraught, political time and place. When, for example, we invoke health as the criteria for inclusion in a classroom community, we plug into the history and ongoing consequences of health as a neoliberal discourse used on a wider scale to dictate which bodies are worthy of care, of humanity, of life. Community-making then, as a practice that unfolds alongside the policing of bodies and the question of "how much snot is too much snot" is about inheriting and intervening in these neocolonial assemblages in the name of doing community otherwise. Nxumalo (2019) proposed practices toward disrupting normalizing colonial and capitalist formations (formations that normative health and "too much snot" are examples of): "gathering collective potentials" (p. 164), "subverting deficit discourses" (p. 166), and "shifting to a pedagogical discourse" (p. 169). We want to take these seriously as questions of doing community-making differently in pandemic times. How might we make community that subverts discourses that place children who do not perfectly fit the vision of health laid out by policy documents as children in need of correction before they can participate in community? How do we create communities that refigure what it is to participate? How do we do community deeply collectively, where a collective is always imperfect, always messy, always grappling with emplaced inequities? How might we think community-making as a practice of enlivening pedagogy, where pedagogy asks us to envision more livable worlds together (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020)?

"Normalcy" and Community-Making

Andrea

During the months when families were not permitted to enter the Centre, it felt like the most normal time of the day was when parents dropped off or picked up their children from the outdoor

playground. We could chat with parents through the fence (while masking and social distancing, of course), and these moments allowed us to see each other's eyes and enjoy lingering conversations about their child's day. Social connections and relationships were made and began to flourish in these moments, not only between the educator and the child's family, but also between different families. Parents seemed relieved when they saw their toddler developing friendships with children their own age, and delighted when their child said a friend's name or engaged in a shared activity.

Shortly after all the restrictions for social gatherings had been lifted, we tried unsuccessfully for many weeks to plan a social time for our families to come together in community. As it happened though, each time we set a date for a gathering, we would need to cancel it in the midst of many continuing absences due to illness for both staff and children. It seemed impossible to return to the normal pre-COVID-19 practices to bring our community together, and the situation demanded re-thinking of ways to build community. We began to realize that important community making could happen (was happening!) in small spontaneous moments, and we needed to spend time noticing and celebrating these occasions and not miss them. Families seemed to long for connection with each other, which was evident in the friendly conversations that were struck up when families happened to cross paths at drop off or pick up times. Brief conversations lead families to see that they shared much in common, including their experiences in raising very young children during pandemic times.

Angélique

The word *normalcy* stands out for me. We were so quick in the beginning of the pandemic to talk about "when do we return to normal again" which I now feel was a hindrance in moving forward. We kept hoping that COVID-19 and the pandemic would be over soon and we could get back to what we knew as being normal. Then as time went on, we thought together about what was normal anyway. Would we really want to go back to the way it was before the pandemic as it has brought to light many inadequacies of how we have lived in our society as well as in our communities together?

I have come to realize that I do not like the word normal as I question if it exists and if it does—one's normal is not maybe the same as another's normal. I feel the word got us stuck in moving forward. I have realized I do not want to use the word any more in how I describe what is happening around me. I have come to realize that I need to be more in the moment and make decisions based on what is happening now. I have to listen to what is happening now and then decide how I want to approach a situation, such as to mask or not to mask. To follow the norm and what was usual or expected has shifted for me. I do feel that we still have rules and expectations that govern us to strive to a normality that have been decided by either our Ontario Ministry of Health and Toronto Public Health, our child care policies, and our university policies, but yet I feel there is not the same normality in place as I felt we used to have. It has become more individualized as people had to come to terms with how they wanted to act and be during the pandemic—to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, to mask or not to mask and to stay home when sick or come in when "symptoms are improving". The concept of normal does not exist any longer as it was before COVID-19 and the pandemic arrived on our doorstep, and I think that is a good thing. We need to be more open to having different ways of approaching a situation versus there only being one way of handling it, the past normal way.

Our community-making had to shift away from past practices as we had to consider the

pandemic factors initially in order to find ways that could still support a sense of belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression for the community that came together once we reopened. We had to be responsive to ask questions in dialogue with our families and ourselves about what their children's experiences were before coming into care to better understand how we could support them now in care. We also checked in about the questions, concerns, and fears everyone had regarding the pandemic in order to figure out how we could support individual children in our community-making during pandemic times.

Initially that meant we were comparing what we used to do to what we had to do now during pandemic times. That led to conversations about what was normal, as what we did in the past, we considered normal. For instance, for some families that meant they wanted their child to wear a mask in care even if Public Health did not require children under 2 to wear one. We also constantly asked ourselves questions as the pandemic progressed in order to figure out how we could live together with the restrictions that were enforced upon us as citizens. It became quickly clear that the normal before pandemic would need to be revised as we moved forward. The idea of normalcy became a crutch as to hold on to the past practices which needed reevaluating. The way we were doing things before the pandemic was not necessarily helping us but rather hindering us. Yet the pandemic protocols were also a hindrance for how we engaged with each other. I am thinking that we will continue to reevaluate what it means to live together well. It will be ongoing and collective as we weave our ideas, experiences, and expertise together as a community that will be ever changing as our children and families move forward as well. We need to stay responsive and co-labouring (Vintimilla & Berger, 2019) and "become with community making" in order to stay responsive and not fall back into normalcy as we have known. Our standards are shifting and becoming more fluid as we continue to live together. We have learned how to create connections and relationships through the COVID-19 times that have shown me that we are capable of adapting and striving through challenging times.

For example, this makes me recall how the mask became a pedagogical object, and foregrounds that we needed to reevaluate how we saw the use of masks. I recall stating that I needed to be more inclusive in how I saw the mask, as they were around before the pandemic, yet I feel that there were negative connotations to seeing people wearing a mask. We were concerned about how children and families were able to communicate with us when they could not see our face and see our emotions. Masks have been used for a long time in different ways such as protection in the medical world as well as they have been used in dramatic representations for folklore to express emotions. I have come to realize that masks have a purpose and masking is not an inherently negative thing. As we continue to move forward, I see masks being part of our community-making as individuals now decide when they want/feel like wearing a mask, whether it is for protecting themselves or protecting others or both. The daily wearing of the masks made it become part of our landscape of community-making and I see that it will continue to do so as it is more accepted in our community.

Tension—Abandoning "Normal" Practices of Community

Andrea and Angélique made clear that one break engendered by the pandemic was a fracture of the connection between community and normal; community-making could no longer unfold as was the status-quo. Community was not normal. What was normal—inherited, quotidian, unquestioned—about community literally became impossible. This is animated in Angélique's discussion of masking, where expressing emotions using one's face as a mode of connecting

became literally unthinkable in pandemic times. This raises questions of how to do community-making in the absence of normality: what becomes of community-making in absurd, unfamiliar, unprecedented times? We think first with the inheritance of the concept of normality in early childhood studies. We know well that normal is a consequence of child development, which is a science rooted in producing inequities and ordering childhoods in line with a Euro-centric, able-bodied, neurotypical, heterosexual, cis-gendered image of the "ideal" or healthy or normal child (Burman, 2016). Disciplining child bodies in the service of producing normality is a well-documented practice toward crafting docile neoliberal citizens (Diaz-Diaz, 2022; Garlen, 2019; Murris & Kohan, 2021). Normality functions along racial lines, unevenly (but never unintentionally) designating some children as more normal than others (and those others thus in need of control, intervention, or mitigation; Nxumalo, 2021; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). What, then, are we giving up or refusing when we think community-making against normality? How do we make community without normal conceptions of what community looks like or manifests in early childhood, and, at the same time, how do we make community without a reliance on normality as inclusion criteria for participation? Can we do community-making without reifying a normal or is normality a contingency of community—and what does this mean in times when the pandemic means that nothing is status-quo? This is a question, we propose, of doing community-making as a rejection of normality on multiple scales. How do we do community-making without the glossary of normal? When we ask "how much snot is too much snot", how do we respond without nostalgia for an invocation of community that did not need to grapple with such a question?

Community-Making as a Process

Sanja

At the news of reopening our Centre for the first time after COVID-19 started, I felt uneasy, and, like my colleagues, I had many questions. With the Ontario Ministry of Health and local public health unit's regulations in mind, I asked myself: how are we going to form relationships and build communities with families, when they cannot even come into the Centre and meet us? How are children going to become comfortable with us when they cannot even see our faces, our smiles? How are we going to comfort a crying child when we are supposed to keep two feet apart?, And—how are we going to build community, as we know it, with all these new, unknown obstacles and restrictions?.

It was clear that all these questions came from our inheritances of the pre COVID-19 world and our beliefs of what community is and how it comes to be. Luckily, like in many other spheres of human life, COVID-19 meant a reset from the way we used to think and do things in the field of early childhood education. The pandemic offered an opportunity to question our inheritances, and redefine and begin constructing new values. Like Phelan and Hansen (2021) argued, it is our responsibility to re-evaluate what we do, how we do it, and rethink what and how we want to be doing going forward.

We have inherited definitions that describe a community as a group of people that are brought together by having particular characteristics, interests, or goals in common. However, the pandemic showed that many of us felt different degrees of acceptance or comfort with the whole idea of the origin of the virus, vaccines, mandates and restrictions, and mask wearing. With all the differences of opinions that each one of us and the families brought with us to our community, we were starting off with so many things we did not have in common. We agreed that we wanted

to question the traditional definition of a community in early childhood education, which presumes that a community is an easily achievable product arrived at if you follow the path of acceptance and niceness. Pandemic time, along with its interruptions and the challenges it brought to the daily work of early childhood educators, inspired us to rethink our inheritances pertaining to the meaning of community. It disrupted the belief that we thought we knew the definition of what a community is and what was needed to have a community. Instead, not having what we believed was needed to build a community reshaped our thinking from thinking of community as a noun with a definition, to seeing community as a making process that is not defined, never the same, and finite. In the process of our thinking with community and all the tensions that emerged I started thinking of community as a journey, one that matters for how we as a group live together.

Community-making is a response in a moment in time to others around you. Community is fluid, unique to the individuals and times when a group of individuals is coming and being together. It is a "dance"—unchoreographed, spontaneous and organic; a dance that is based on being present in the moment, on respect for each other, and caring to listen and observe. Community-making asks of us to see and hear, not only verbally expressed attitudes and opinions of other community crafting members, but also their silent messages expressed through body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and movement/no movement in space. All these direct and covert messages communicate to us how the community-crafting feels to each one of the present members in our commons. These messages are not always positive. One thing that pandemic taught all of us is that we do not always agree on big and small issues, and that the process of community-making needs to take all this into account. In this communal process, reflecting and dancing accordingly, acknowledging and then holding on to tensions that arise, becomes the community.

In looking back at our thinking with community making during pandemic times I learned that the angle we take when looking at a societal or political context changes the outcomes of our own experience of them. If I think of COVID-19 as a restrictor, then my community-making experiences have not held up to COVID-19. Our group continues to define what it means for us to be together. Yes, I still at times think of the distance between any one of us in the room, especially during those physically close community making experiences. On the other hand, if I think COVID-19 as a promoter of change, then community-making experiences have meant that we as a community are resisting the politics of COVID-19 related to living well together, and are making our own comfort around community-making. I believe that moving away from thinking community as a product but rather a process makes our community-making challenge what COVID-19 has brought to education, as in the process we are being open to the unknown, to changing. Communities can be adaptable—if they choose to. Pre-COVID-19, we held a perception that community has consensus and we now question this imperative. Perhaps the one consensus that our communities do have is to enter and be a part of the process of community-making. In thinking how we come together now, we need to contend with what is uncertain; the process of community-making involves paying attention, and living with the unknown while learning to be patient, present, respectful, and attentive.

Angélique

The process of community-making at the beginning of the pandemic felt challenging and against our belief of how we wanted to live together as children, families, educators and student educators

in our community. I return to an important question: how and why community happens. Community-making is the relationships that you build with the people that are around you. Together you find ways of communicating, whether it is through touch as we initially did when the children could not see our expressions behind a mask. That sense of touch—holding someone's hand or having a child's body pressed against your leg was a way of communicating and it helped to build our community during COVID-19.

Over time, we have made our community through the many challenges and obstacles that the pandemic initially put in our path. We continued to persevere together as we valued our roles as early childhood educators and the importance of being there for the children and families. We discussed ways that we could build our community and we also talked with the children and their families about what their needs and interests were. We realized that our curriculum helped to guide us and that the plans we prepared happened no matter how many children were in attendance on a given day. Some could argue that our desire to continue building community brought back some normalcy into our daily lives. However, I argue that it was not the same as before and that this was a good thing as we needed to shift with the times. We can create an inclusive community where we listen and discuss on a daily basis to support the needs of the children, families, student educators, and educators in our process of community-making. Community-making is not set in stone. It is not perfect and it is not a repetition of the communities we knew in the past. It encompasses the collective to live in the moment. It just is now.

Tension—Ongoing Community-Making

In many early childhood education curriculum documents, we meet with the contention that community is an achievement; that we make community and then maintain this bundle of relations that designates a commons as a community. Sanja and Angélique made clear that this logic dissolves in the face of the pandemic. Community-making can no longer be teleological. It can no longer anchor itself in the logic of accomplishment. We do not have a classroom community. We work at it. Hard. Messily. Daily. And importantly, the process of community-making is one of uncertainty. We return here to Vintimilla's (2020) proposition of community as something to be "built and worked" (p. 191) and community-making as a relational engagement that risks failure. To think of community-making as a process is to contend with the reality that our community-making will be imperfect. Our community might collapse. But this would not be catastrophic. COVID-19 made our community collapse. And as Angélique wrote, this was a generative break in the quotidian conceptualizations of community that populate the field. Rather, risking the failure of community-making is to take seriously that community-making is truly a situated, collective process. It is not universal and thus is it not assured the veneer of success attributed to the evidence-based romanticisms of what we know to be scalable community curricula. We think here of Moss' (2015) invocation of "cautious hope" (p. 236), in which we "change tack, from critique of a powerful discourse of control to the disruptive potential of a discourse of hope" (p. 228). For Moss, we need to move through the work of critique (in our context, arguing that taken-for-granted conceptions of community fail in the face of pandemic times for specific reasons) and turn toward cautious hope as a mode of re-inventing the grounds with which we build community, imagining, as Moss argued, a process of community-making that "foregrounds democracy, emancipation and potentiality" (p. 228). This means that thinking community-making with *Viral Pedagogies* demands that we share with children and families a

commitment toward building a commons without necessarily knowing the contours of that commons. This is not an anything goes proposition. We are not arguing for the relativism of community-making. Rather, we are offering forward an invitation to think community-making as a situated process nourished by relations and risk, not romanticism and triumph. Here, our question of "how much snot is too much snot" is one of not knowing the answer and of having to negotiate, together, what counts as livable relations in a particular collective.

"How Much Snot is Too Much Snot" as a Necessary *Viral Pedagogies* Question

We return, in our conclusion, to Vintimilla's (2020) question "how do the ways we imagine the commons affect our relation to knowledge and thinking in early childhood educational contexts" (p. 192). Re-articulated in the context of *Viral Pedagogies*, we propose this as a question of how we do community-making as an engagement with how we get to know collectivity, relations, and life together in pandemic times. We have foregrounded three tensions that have nourished our thinking with community-making: regulating and policing bodies, grappling with normalcy, and sticking with community-making as a process mired in risk, uncertainty, and negotiation. Through these tensions, we have worked at the contention that community-making is difficult and refuses the romanticized conceptions of community that we often meet in early childhood education discourses. The irresolvable question "how much snot is too much snot" is the contribution that this article makes to thinking with contemporary ethics, politics, and relations in early childhood education. In our work, this question has been a query we have returned to, not as a mantra to quantify pandemic times, but as a real lived question with real lived consequences: how much snot is too much snot is a question that very literally matters to building a life together in pandemic times. Moreover, we want to think—and invite others to think alongside us—this question as a pedagogical and not simply a managerial one: how do our responses to "how much snot is too much snot?" open and foreclose possibilities for living together in educational contexts? We propose, therefore, that this question is a necessary thinking companion that we must resist resolving. This is a question we want, alongside the collective that composes early childhood education in Canada, to keep alive, maintain in motion, as a commitment to community-making in pandemic times.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a Toronto Metropolitan University Faculty of Community Services Seed Grant.

References

Bloch, M. N., & Swadener, B. B. (2023). Introduction to the Special Issue: Critical reflections and provocations from reconceptualist "elders". *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal, 10*(1), 1–7. https://journals.sfu.ca/iccps/index.php/childhoods/index

Burman, E. (2016). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315727127

Diaz-Diaz, C. (2022). Against the self-regulated child: Early childhood pedagogies in neoliberal times. *Global Studies of Childhood, 13*(4), 311–321. https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106221117563

Garlen, J. C. (2019). Interrogating innocence: "Childhood" as exclusionary social practice. *Childhood, 26*(1), 54–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218811484

Garlen, J. C. (2021). The end of innocence: Childhood and schooling for a post-pandemic world. *Journal of Teaching and Learning, 15*(2), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v15i2.6724

Giorza, T. M. (2023). Chapter red ochre: Marking time, marking bodies. In K. Murris & V. Bozalek (Eds.), *In conversation with Karen Barad: Doings of agential realism* (pp. 75–91). Routledge.

Land, N. (2022). On hard work in early childhood education pedagogical inquiry research—Or, how do we do hard work while researching together?. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 20*(3), 228–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2022.2025958

Land, N., Sanders, A., Thomas, A., & Todorovic, S. (submitted 2023). Experimenting with digital pedagogical inquiry research: Running conversations with viral pedagogies.

Moss, P. (2015). There are alternatives! Contestation and hope in early childhood education. *Global Studies of Childhood, 5*(3), 226–238. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597130

Murris, K., & Kohan, W. (2021). Troubling troubled school time: Posthuman multiple temporalities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 34*(7), 581–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1771461

Nxumalo, F. (2019). Disrupting racial capitalist formations in early childhood education. In F. Nxumalo & C. P. Brown (Eds.), *Disrupting and countering deficits in early childhood education* (pp. 164–178). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315102696

Nxumalo, F. (2021). Disrupting anti-Blackness in early childhood qualitative inquiry: Thinking with Black refusal and Black futurity. *Qualitative Inquiry, 27*(10), 1191–1199. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004211021810

Nxumalo, F., & Adair, J. K. (2019). Social justice and equity in early childhood education. In C. P. Brown, M. B. McMullen, & N. File (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of early childhood care and education* (pp. 661–682). Wiley.

Nxumalo, F., Vintimilla, C. D., & Nelson, N. (2018). Pedagogical gatherings in early childhood education: Mapping interferences in emergent curriculum. *Curriculum Inquiry, 48*(4), 433–453. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1522930

Ontario Public Service. (2014). *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years*. https://files.ontario.ca/edu-how-does-learning-happen-en-2021-03-23.pdf

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Nxumalo, F., Kocher, L., Elliot, E., & Sanchez, A. (2015). *Journeys: Reconceptualizing early childhood practices through pedagogical narration*. University of Toronto Press.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Nxumalo, F., & Rowan, M. C. (2014). Researching neoliberal and neocolonial assemblages in early childhood education. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 7*(1), 39–57. https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2014.7.1.39

Phelan, A. M., & Hansen, D. R. (2021). Toward a "thoughtful lightness": Education in viral times. *Prospects, 51*(1-3), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09536-4

Pollitt, J., Kind, S., Delgado Vintimilla, C., & Blue, L. (2021). Choreographing collaboratories: Studios of situated improvisations. *Children's Geographies*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.2006144

Vintimilla, C. D. (2020). Relational openings for the otherwise: Thinking community as what is not … . In W. O. Kohan & B. Weber (Eds.), *Thinking, childhood, and time: Contemporary perspectives on the politics of education* (pp. chapter 11). Lexington Books.

Vintimilla, C. D., & Berger, I. (2019). Colaboring: Within collaboration's degenerative processes. In B. D. Hodgins (Ed.)., *Feminist research for 21st-century childhoods: Common worlds methods* (pp. 187–196). Bloomsbury.

Vintimilla, C. D., & Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. (2020). Weaving pedagogy in early childhood education: On openings and their foreclosure. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 28*(5), 628–641. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1817235

Note

1. Andrea, Sanja, and Angélique are registered early childhood educators who actively take co-researcher roles in all elements of the research (intentions, questions, propositions, documenting, reflecting, writing). Nicole, as a co-researcher alongside Andrea, Sanja, and Angélique, acts as a pedagogist-researcher who works to create meaningful curricular processes within the research. For more on the work of a pedagogist, please see Land et al., (2022).

Nicole Land is an Associate Professor in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Andrea Thomas is a Registered Early Childhood Educator at Toronto Metropolitan University's Early Learning Centre, the licensed laboratory school of the School of Early Childhood Studies.

Sanja Todorovic is a Registered Early Childhood Educator at Toronto Metropolitan University's Early Learning Centre, the licensed laboratory school of the School of Early Childhood Studies.

Angélique Sanders is a Registered Early Childhood Educator at Toronto Metropolitan University's Early Learning Centre, the licensed laboratory school of the School of Early Childhood Studies.