Why Learning Pods Might Outlast the Pandemic

By Lizzie Widdicombe March 14, 2021

A classroom at the West 4th Pod, in Manhattan's West Village. ***Photograph by Teenisha Toussant***

It's probably foolish to put this in writing, but, over the past few weeks, a post-*COVID* future has started to seem visible in the distance. New case numbers are dropping. There are grownups in charge of vaccine distribution. The time will come, as we sift through the wreckage, to determine which pandemic-era conventions to throw in the trash and which ones to keep. Some calls are easier to make than others: Zoom meetings are clearly here to stay, as are sidewalk dining and mutual-aid groups. Masks will hopefully make the "out" column. But what about pandemic learning pods—the newly ubiquitous institution in which small groups of children gather for school in someone's living room?

Learning pods have played a fraught role in the *COVID* era. When the concept surfaced, a few weeks into the pandemic, it seemed to epitomize the worst elements of this crisis: the way it has cleaved the haves from the have-nots, and has set the have-lots adrift on luxury lifeboats of obscene privilege. There were reports of parents shelling out a hundred and

twenty-five thousand dollars a year to hire a tutor for their kids. But, as time and the virus have worn on, the concept of pod learning has expanded to include everything from home schools to babysitter shares and informal group Zoom sessions—the wide range of things that working parents are doing to occupy their children.

"This past year has been a huge jolt to the American education system," Erin O'Connor, the director of N.Y.U.'s early-childhood-education program, said recently. "I think we'll look back on it as a really influential time, for better and worse."

For an institution that has suddenly become commonplace, learning pods are a bit of an informational black hole. There is no official data on how many exist or who is forming them, beyond a few Facebook groups. (One of the largest, Pandemic Pods, has more than thirty-nine thousand members.) O'Connor, who trains teachers, has been tracking New York City pods informally so that she can better understand the world that her students will soon be entering. She also studies early caregiving relationships and helps run a platform called Scientific Mommy, which makes academic research accessible to parents. By contacting parents she knows through those projects, and by posting on parenting Listservs and Facebook groups, she's been able to form a rough picture of the pod situation.

Pods appear to be prevalent across the New York City public-school system, in which high schools are set to reopen later this month, while elementary schools—and, as of two weeks ago, middle schools—are open for in-person learning. Despite being nominally open, many of these lower schools only hold in-person classes a few days a week, and they have continually been closing and reopening, owing to new outbreaks of the virus and possible exposures. Pods are less common in private schools, which have offered more in-person learning throughout the pandemic. It's true that the families who form pods tend to be wealthier than average. "Not super-wealthy—they're using the public-school system—but they have enough resources that they can augment it," O'Connor said. "There's been some drama about good teachers being hired away from schools because a pod has offered them more," she went on. But it's not a common occurrence, she added, because most pods don't offer long-term benefits such as tenure and health insurance. Instead, many parents have drafted retired teachers or teachers-in-training to run pods. O'Connor said that, on average, these teachers are paid about a hundred and fifty dollars an hour. There are also tutors, nannies, grad students, retirees, teen-agers, and out-of-work performers who are being hired for tasks ranging from algebra instruction to tech support, often at a lower rate. O'Connor said, "I was talking to one working mom, and she was like, 'We hired someone just to help the kids deal with Zoom. I don't have the bandwidth to

troubleshoot stuff like that.' I was, like, 'Trust me. I get it!' "

One of the benefits of school is that it forces kids (and their parents) to get along with people who are not like them. "That's not happening this year," O'Connor said. (From a viral Slate article published in October of 2020: "In the end, every single kid in the pod was white.") But peeling off into cliques can have a certain usefulness. Untethered from social and institutional constraints—and from the physical boundaries of the classroom—the parents and educators running learning pods have found themselves free to experiment. They can try new things without having to rally a cohort of parents behind the idea or having to seek approval from the Department of Education.

O'Connor said that, initially, the pods she saw were fairly straightforward. Now, though, "I'm seeing pods tailored towards different children's needs and the interests of the parents." There are art- and math-centered pods, and a pod that studies Buddhism and astronomy. "This idea of nature is something that's come up a lot," she said. Families have fanned out across the city in search of it. "They're going birding in Central Park and hiking on Staten Island." One parent-led pod meets on weekends, at a playground. Another rents out a church twice a week, "just so the kids can run around." There's also a pod that meets in a shuttered restaurant. "I thought that one was cool," O'Connor said.

“They do food-based science in the kitchen.”

“I said to my husband, ‘Why does it feel like we have more of a social life now than we did before the pandemic?’ ” a pod parent named Katrina Robinson told me recently. Robinson, a lawyer, has two children: a two-year-old and a five-year-old, who attends “hybrid” kindergarten at P.S. 41, in the West Village. The family is mixed-race, and well before the pandemic started, Robinson had become concerned about the lack of diversity at P.S. 41, which is mostly white, following the demographics of the area. She worried about how it would affect her child. “The issue of race isn’t discussed at the school, period,” Robinson said. “The kids are not being equipped with the tools to talk about race.” And, according to her, neither are the teachers. “Here’s my daughter, who’s Black—and who recognizes that she looks different from everyone else, and that she has one Black parent and one white parent—but there’s no discussion of any of it. It can leave a kid feeling rather isolated. It’s sort of like being the only alien in the classroom. And thinking there might be other aliens around but not knowing for sure.”

In the fall of 2019, Robinson teamed up with a group of parents who were trying to persuade P.S. 41 to bring in racial-justice trainers to work with the staff and review the school’s curriculum. Progress was slow. Then came the pandemic. For a few weeks, everyone was consumed with

the scramble to implement remote learning, and the racial-justice work had to be temporarily shelved. But, after George Floyd's killing, in May—and the civil unrest that followed—the group's project took on renewed urgency. Robinson said, "It's New York City. There were protests all around!"

A Zoom meeting with school administrators ensued, and the school leaders eventually decided to hold some racial-justice training sessions for members of the staff. Not everyone was happy about the plan, though. In November, at a P.T.A. meeting, some white parents grumbled about the idea of using school funds for the racial-justice training, saying that other things like art and chess programs had been cut. Robinson felt deflated: she was happy that the training was happening, but she wished that school administrators had done more to stick up for it. (In response, Kelly McGuire, the superintendent overseeing P.S. 41, wrote, "District 2 holds a deep commitment to racial equity, and has been focused on creating inclusive environments for all of our students and staff. It has been a difficult year for all of us, and it is more important than ever that we continue to build on the critical work and engagement happening in and with our school communities.")

A few months before the P.T.A. meeting, one of the parents in the racial-justice-advocacy group, Jenny Young, had begun organizing a pandemic learning pod for her son, who

was in the same class as Robinson's daughter. Robinson's family joined the pod, as did several other families from the group. Young told me that this was purely a coincidence: "We'd been working closely together, so we'd become friends, and everyone had a kid the same age." Suddenly, Robinson's daughter went from being an outlier to finding herself in a six-student pod where most of the children were mixed-race, like her. The teacher Young had hired to run the pod, Teenisha Toussant, a former teaching assistant at P.S. 41, happened to be Black, too. Robinson said that her daughter seemed to notice the difference. "I think, for her, it was, like, 'Oh, it's not so strange to have biracial parents.' " Another student in the pod told Toussant, "This is my first time not being the only brown person in my class and having a brown teacher. It makes me happy." As for the parents, Robinson said, the pod had created a "temporary reprieve" from school politics. "It's just taken the stress level down."

The West 4th Pod operates weekdays from nine to five, in a four-hundred-square-foot apartment next to the one in which Jenny Young and her husband, Ken, live with their two children, ages five and seven. The Youngs had bought the apartment in 2019, with plans to expand. But when the pandemic struck, they got the idea of using it as a place for their younger child, Sky, to do his remote learning. Young is the founder and C.E.O. of the Brooklyn Robot Foundry, an education company that teaches kids how to build robots.

"I'm an engineer, so I'm really handy," she told me. She undertook a quick renovation of the adjacent unit.

With the help of a contractor friend, Young painted the apartment's closet-size rooms bright colors and outfitted the bathroom with a mini utility sink, which could be used for science experiments. She furnished the living room with low tables, chairs, and crafting supplies—all from the Robot Foundry, which had closed its in-person locations—and put an alphabet rug in one bedroom. In another bedroom, she installed a climbing ladder, rope swings, and floor mats to create a little gym. The entire operation is run like a business, with an L.L.C. structure and a contract that includes extensive *COVID* safety protocol, including a flowchart for scenarios such as: What happens if a child has a fever or is possibly exposed to the virus? What if a family travels out of state? The parents hold votes on most decisions, from what type of snacks to order, to which park to take the children to at recess. Young also created a cleaning checklist—the families take turns tidying up—and arranged for lunches to be delivered by a kids'-meal service called Yumble. "I'm a little O.C.D.," she acknowledged.

The cost for everything, including the lunches and Toussant's salary, amounted to just under twenty thousand dollars per student for the year. It's cheaper than tuition at some private schools—and cheaper than the after-school

program where the Youngs' older daughter used to do her remote learning—but more than most families can afford, a fact that all the pod parents seemed acutely aware of. Young said that they'd talked a lot about the inequities of pod learning and had initially sought to include one child whose parents couldn't afford to pay, on a kind of mini scholarship. "We even had a family lined up," Young told me, but they ultimately told her that they had to make other plans. So, although the pod had achieved racial diversity, socioeconomic diversity remained out of reach. "We basically created our own private school, because we had to," Robinson said. "It's awful," Young said. "If there were a way to propagate more of a socioeconomic divide in this city, this is it."

I visited on a Tuesday morning recently. The little apartment felt like a refuge from the beleaguered city. Toussant was sitting at a narrow desk in the kitchen, preparing the day's lesson plan, while John Coltrane's "Blue Train" played on a speaker. Before *COVID*, Toussant had been angling for a lead teaching job. "I realized, this is my opportunity," she said of the learning pod. "It may not be in a traditional school, but it's the same concept."

At 9 *A.M.*, the kids bounded in. (They're being identified by pseudonyms.) A boy named Eastwood arrived, wearing army pants and a Spider-Man shirt. He hugged his father, Ekow N.

Yankah, a law professor, at the door. “Who loves you more than Papa?” Yankah asked.

“Nobody!” Eastwood, who is now five, said, before running to hang up his backpack.

Robinson’s husband dropped off their daughter, Titania, who was wearing a pink skirt and a headband with pink pompoms on it. “Hi, Miss T.,” she said to Toussant.

A boy named Zachary burst in behind her. “It was so much work!” he gasped.

“What?” Toussant asked.

“Walking to school!”

Toussant scanned the children’s foreheads with an infrared thermometer—per pod protocol—and hustled them to the little work tables. “Four minutes till we have to get on Zoom!” she chirped. All six children in the pod are still enrolled at public schools, and they attend in-person classes a few days a week, on different schedules. That day, Toussant was facilitating multiple Zoom sessions. She helped Titania, Zachary, and Young’s son, Sky, put on headphones and get situated in front of their tablets. “The fun part is memorizing all their computer passwords *and* all the passwords to get into the Zoom meetings,” Toussant told me. Teachers appeared on the tablet screens, reading picture books and

holding up calendars. The children wiggled, gestured, and occasionally shouted out answers to questions.

Two children did not have morning Zoom sessions: Daisy, because she attends a different school from the others (P.S. 3), and Eastwood, who is in pre-kindergarten. Toussant gave them handwriting worksheets to keep them busy. “What letter are we going to practice today?” she asked. Eastwood said that they were practicing the letter “S.”

“I know the S-word,” Daisy announced.

Eastwood giggled. “I only know the D-word,” he said.

Zachary looked up from his screen with interest. Toussant shushed them. “Let’s be quiet,” she said. “We have friends right next to us on Zoom meetings!” She told them to do their worksheets in the gym.

When the children aren’t on Zoom, Toussant instructs them, following a curriculum of her own devising. (According to O’Connor, many pod leaders have been tasked with creating curriculums, with little guidance from the schools.) She’s led several discussions about race, reading the class books such as “Don’t Touch My Hair!,” by Sharee Miller, and “Mixed Me!,” by Taye Diggs, about a boy who has mixed-race parents. The children have been eager to explore their similarities and differences. During one discussion, Toussant

recalled that Eastwood put his hand next to another student, Jiva, and said, “You’re brown like me.” And then Daisy went over to Sky and said, “I think we’re both white.” They talked about the different countries their parents were from—Jamaica, Ghana, Pakistan—and the significance of Kamala Harris becoming “the first brown woman” to serve as Vice-President. “They were so into it,” Toussant said.

On the academic front, Toussant found games and activities that would help the kids practice the skills that they were learning in school on their “on” days. Kindergarten is when most children begin to learn how to read. Toussant has the kids play Go Fish and Hangman to practice sight words—common words, such as “the,” “and,” and “like,” which they need to recognize on sight rather than having to sound them out. But their favorite activity is a quiz game called Math Jeopardy, in which they practice addition, subtraction, and simple geometry. (Toussant has also instituted Friday spelling quizzes, a practice that was used by her own elementary-school teachers.)

When I visited, Toussant had three exercises planned: a phonics game that involved rolling dice and spelling words, another handwriting exercise, and a math worksheet that used counting cubes. But she’d learned not to attempt anything too ambitious after the morning Zoom sessions. “They’re just bouncing off the walls,” she said. Instead, she

gave the kids thirty minutes of Choice Time, to unwind. Titania chose crafting, making purses out of construction paper and plastic jewels. Daisy and Sky played with Magna-Tiles. Zachary and Eastwood swung from ropes in the gym. "I'm pretending the floor is lava," Eastwood explained.

At 11 *A.M.*, they had a morning meeting. The students sat on the alphabet carpet, and Toussant stood at a whiteboard, holding a pointer. "Good morning, West 4th Pod!" she announced. They called out, in unison, "Good morning, Miss T.!" They reviewed the day's schedule, and then it was time for a ritual called Community Circle. "Anything they want to talk about, we'll talk about it," she explained. "They can share things and ask questions."

Four- and five-year-olds are more sophisticated than we give them credit for, Toussant said: "They want to know everything." In addition to race, they have tackled topics such as Presidential elections, same-sex marriage, and their bodies. It helps knowing that the pod parents are open-minded. "They want their children to be having these conversations," she said.

That day, they were concerned with less weighty topics. Eastwood made an announcement. "Today is my brother's birthday," he said. "My mom let him open an early present this morning." There was a discussion about the present and about an upcoming birthday party that Sky would be having

in the pod. "We're going to have a piñata!" he said. For my benefit, Toussant steered the discussion toward pod learning. "Why are we in a pod?" she asked.

"Because of the coronavirus!" the kids said, in unison.

They talked about the ways it differed from regular school. "We're at somebody's house," Titania said. "It's also a smaller group." The children agreed that they were learning more in the pod than they had been before.

There were a few drawbacks. "I miss the playground," Eastwood said.

"I don't get to go outside anymore, because of the virus," Daisy complained. Titania said, "I miss being in big groups, because we had more friends." She talked about the other children who she used to play with at school, before the pandemic.

I felt a pang. These kids were the lucky ones, but they were still under strain. Once the novelty and excitement wore off, pod learning was just spending day after day in a tiny apartment, with five other children.

At this point, several kids were writhing on the floor. Toussant announced, "O.K., friends, we're going to stand up for a minute, because your bodies are a little wiggly." She played "ABC," by the Jackson 5, and they had a brief dance

session.

There’s one thing that everyone seems to agree on about this school year: when it’s over, the gap between the wealthy and the poor, already enormous in New York City, will have become a chasm. O’Connor has been tracking low-income families from past research projects, and, in general, she said, the education picture is grim. Some children are babysitting younger siblings while attempting to do their own remote learning. “Last year, some kids were not able to even get on remote,” she said—meaning their academic growth was likely stunted.

Meanwhile, under Toussant’s tutelage, the children in the West 4th Pod have pulled past their peers. They started reading, according to Toussant, several months ahead of schedule. Eastwood, the preschooler, is even further ahead. (Robinson said, of her daughter, “We weren’t even sure she’d learn how to read this year. Instead, she’s coming home and trying to teach her baby sister how to read.”) Something similar has happened with math. Young said, of her five-year-old son, Sky, “He’s doing math at the level of my second grader.” When the kids were beginning to solve first-grade-level "story problems''—arithmetic exercises that involve reading a scenario and then solving a math problem—Toussant started to hold back on some types of math instruction, out of concern that the kids would be bored

when they return to regular school. (The parents later asked her, after a vote, to keep going.) The experience has made Toussant a small-group-learning enthusiast. “These six kids are now my purpose every day,” she told me. “To be able to deal with them in such an intimate setting, where you can focus on everyone’s individual needs—I wish this were something that all parents could do for their children.”

Not all learning pods have been so successful. “I’ve heard a lot of nightmare pod stories from my friends,” Robinson said. “It’s basically like being on a co-op board. And, as everyone in New York City knows, that can be a headache.” Many pods have fallen apart due to disagreements over *COVID* safety, or personality clashes among the parents, teachers, and students. O’Connor described a pod that fell apart because the parents felt that one child was monopolizing the teacher’s attention. “In a bigger setting, with twenty-five kids and multiple teachers, that probably wouldn’t have happened,” she said. The virtue of learning pods is also their flaw: with fewer people involved, it puts more pressure on individual relationships.

Could there be a way to split the difference? Elise Capella, a psychology professor at N.Y.U. who studies child development and education, told me, “I know a lot of people are asking the what-if question. What if we could do this in a more equitable way? And have learning pods that were

distributed across all kids ages four to ten, and not just some subgroup from middle- or upper-income families?" It's possible to imagine learning pods becoming like sidewalk dining—an experiment that sticks. O'Connor, however, was skeptical: "I think it requires a degree of parental engagement that most people couldn't manage," she said. Instead, she said, "It would be great if we could take some of what has worked so well for these pods and think about how it might translate back into the public-education system." There could be implications for how we consider issues like classroom size, parent participation, learning outside of the classroom, and allowing people to peel off into smaller affinity groups. She envisioned trainees from teacher colleges working with clusters of students. "You could find ways of creating microenvironments in these larger classrooms."

Robinson, too, said that as great as the West 4th Pod has been for her family, she doesn't want the experiment to drag on longer than is absolutely necessary. "It's just going to create more inequity," she said. "And that's not good for anyone."

But, even if the pods aren't permanent, they seem destined to continue for at least a little while longer: remote learning will likely persist until the end of the school year. Still, the families of the West 4th Pod have continued to lobby for

changes at P.S. 41. They recently formed an official Diversity Excellence and Inclusion Committee, and they have begun recruiting other parents from the school. The school, for its part, is taking many of the steps that the group called for, from training staff members, to revising the curriculum to make it more inclusive. Life may be easier in a pod, Robinson said, but that's because it's not the real world. "It's a fake world that we created," she said, "because the real world is dysfunctional. We can't have our children growing up thinking that life is always like that. Like, 'You're only going to be surrounded by people who love you, and you're not going to have any conflicts, because, even if you did, your parents are friends and they're going to fix it for you.' "

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