

Where Children Lead the Way: A Case Study in Democratic Education

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Abstract

Through interviews with children, educators, and parents, this article provides a picture of a democratic school in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. A rare example in NYC, Pono's philosophies, practices, and pedagogies provide a model of education that fosters child-centered empowered learning, supports community building and strong relationships, and counter-hegemonic strategies. Not without challenges, Pono, is not a panacea, but rather a case study in what is possible when we approach education from a truly child-honoring lens and a belief that education is a true means of transformation.

Keywords: democratic education; child-centered; community; counter-hegemony; choice

Introduction

Schools that model an ethic of care and support children's agency are few and far between. However, there are educators, parents, and administrators and future teachers committed to finding or creating spaces aimed not only at ameliorating the current challenges in the United States education system but striving to create a model of a more humane, collaborative, and caring society from the ground up. We conducted a case study of Pono, located in Harlem, New York City, as an example of a true democratic, child-centered education. I met Pono founder and director, Maysaa Bazna, in 2012 while running an interdisciplinary science play space in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan and have since been a consulting teacher at Pono. For the past fourteen years, Pono has been New York City's only democratic urban outdoor learning center, "a journey to becoming balanced human beings," named for the "traditional Hawaiian concept denoting perfect harmony and equilibrium" (www.pono.nyc). Questioning if and how those aspects could be incorporated into public education, I initiated a case study of Pono with my research assistant, Grace. To ensure objectivity, Grace conducted interviews with the children, while I interviewed the administration. We utilized a methodology that would allow us to examine both positive and negative aspects of Pono and create a picture of one possible pathway for a holistic, child-centered, and sociocratic education.

This article uses a critical pedagogy approach to analyze the formation and practices of Pono. Our conceptual framework draws upon progressive education, child-centered learning, and democratic education. Through our surveys and interviews, we explore how aspects of a democratic education support child development, how the school's values fit into the current educational paradigm, and the framework this model provides for transforming public education.

Background

Pono Learning was founded by Maysaa Bazna in 2010, inspired by her experience as an educator and her commitment to creating a learning space for her own child. Pono's website defines Pono as "a New York City-based independent learning center that offers democratic, urban and outdoor programs to children ages 6 to 16 years old." Although Bazna wanted Pono to be a public school, challenges with the NYC Department of Education led her to make it an independent school (member of NYSAIS). To ensure accessibility, Pono uses a sliding scale tuition model, and endeavors to promote diversity among the student body:

Each child's innate desire to learn is cherished as the children are immersed in a loving, harmonious learning community and authentic world learning environment. Children's intrinsic humanity and wisdom are nurtured on a journey to become life-long learners and balanced human beings. (www.pono.nyc)

Pono is grounded in three core values—kindness, respect, and inclusion. While many democratic schools allow values to arise from within the student body, Bazna chose to select three core values to guide the creation of Pono, motivated by the desire to cultivate "balance between the individual and the collective, protecting the inherent worth and curiosity of children without allowing them to forget that they form one part of a global community." She stated, "At Pono, personal development and participation in a community of kindness, respect, and inclusion are essential. In our daily operation, we value freedom, not license, collaboration not competition, resolving conflict through council meetings, not punishment." Pono's democracy means that adults and children collaborate to create the most effective and healthy learning environment by countering the prevailing model, a hierarchical system that stifles students' growth. Bazna's core values inform the school's organizing beliefs: 1) children are naturally

curious and innate learners; 2) children learn responsibility by being given opportunities to behave responsibly; 3) “learning happens everywhere;” 4) learning happens in community; 5) teachers serve as guides, facilitators, nurturers and supporters. (www.pono.nyc)

Upon its creation, Pono utilized shared and outdoor spaces, until they found a dedicated location in Harlem, across the street from a city park, that served as a home base for thrice-weekly city-based explorations. At the time of this research, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pono functioned online and in various experiential learning sites in the greater NYC area with a drastically reduced student body; Pono had five full-time students and another four part-time students. The students in this research are the oldest Pono cohort, ranging in age from 12 to 15.

Pono’s educational program includes both multi-age and segregated-age groupings depending on content and activities. Field trips are central to Pono; kids of all ages explore New York City. Classes are taught by both regular and visiting teachers who develop coursework from curricular ideas provided by the students. The development of curriculum is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Pono. All material is developed to respond to the students’ expressed interests; details on this process are explained in our Findings section. Another unique aspect of Pono is how all community members work together to create Pono Agreements - the daily lived expressions of Pono’s core values.

Pono encourages its students to engage with the world as valued members of the human race. This practice means that “each child and teacher has an equal voice in decisions that affect the daily operation of the educational program” (Bazna, 2022). This idea is in accordance with Bazna’s vision that “children at Pono have the responsibility and freedom to govern not only their learning but also their own Pono community.” The process of creating a community within

the school and working to help it flourish is an education in and of itself for Pono students.

According to Bazna,

Pono, a traditional Hawaiian concept denoting perfect harmony and equilibrium, inspires everything we do. We strive to create a learning environment of harmony with our children, families, teachers, and other members of the Pono community. We make every effort to have our lessons, meals, programs, and projects achieve a state of Pono among our community, bigger society, and nature.

Children and adults learn together and from each other, despite presumed or identified abilities, disabilities, challenges, and labels. All members of the Pono community work together on creating a fully inclusive learning environment that is free of attitudinal, structural, and physical barriers that would hinder the full participation of its members in the community.

Pono's mission is to create a space where children can learn from people who respect them and value their individuality, interests, and opinions, promoting an ethos of inclusion and care that its students will carry with them into the world.

Literature Review

Our conceptual framework draws upon John Dewey's (1899) progressive education, the work of Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1913) and elements of democratic education codified by Apple and Beane (2007). Dewey's work on progressive education centers the child and seeks to connect learning to the lived realities of children. In *School and Society*, Dewey advocates for an interdisciplinary learning environment that places children into real-life circumstances to promote relational learning. Dewey's model of education allows schools—and learners—to create the world they would like to live in through collaboration, problem-solving, and real-

world connections. Progressive education is counter-hegemonic, promoting cooperative, practical, and meaning-based schools that will ultimately build a society that reflects those values, rather than perpetuating the existing systems of a capitalist society that is hierarchical, stratified, and unjust. Dewey calls upon educators to unlock the innate gifts of children; to allow them choice and agency in their learning. He doesn't just make these assertions for the good of children, but rather for the good of all society. As he states,

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (Dewey, 10)

Dewey's work calls to mind other progressive educators including his colleague Elizabeth Irwin, who co-founded The Little Red School House in NYC's West Village in 1921, and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who founded the Bureau of Experimental Schools in 1913, and eventually Bank Street School for Children, focused on supporting the development of "whole children" to foster a "progressive, humanistic society." (Field & Bauml, 2014, p. 94) Mitchell spent her years in education wanting to understand how children learned, and her efforts at creating "experimental" schools utilized interdisciplinary learning to observe and understand child development. She aimed to support both children and teachers on a path towards a more participatory and progressive methodology of teaching and learning. While Pono's foundational beliefs do not explicitly include these early educators as influences, commonalities are evident. Pono does however represent another necessary shift that occurred in the United States education system in the early 1900s: a move towards Democratic Education.

Most of the Democratic schools¹ in the United States fall outside of mainstream public education. Some core characteristics of Democratic schools were analyzed and codified by Michael Apple and James Beane (2007). If, as Dewey posits, schools mirror society and society is built in schools, then in a “democracy,” it stands to reason that education settings would incorporate democratic principles. Even a cursory review of the United States education system demonstrates that it is anything but democratic. For the most part, it is hierarchical, and highly competitive, expanding the inequalities that exist in society. Schooling tends to be a site of Cultural Violence (as put forth by Johann Galtung, 1969) wherein maintenance of the status quo and adherence to capitalism and hierarchical societal stratification (Structural Violence) is embedded in every aspect of schooling. This education is not simply counter-democratic, it limits possibility, imagination, and freedom. As Bowles and Gintis state in their groundbreaking work, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1986), “The unavoidable necessity of growing up and getting a job in the United States forces us all to become less than we could be: less free, less secure, in short, less happy” (p. 54).

According to Apple and Beane’s research, these structurally violent/oppressive structures need not exist and schools that subscribe to a democratic framework can and should incorporate certain characteristics. Starting with the assumption that schooling is designed to prepare students to be productive members of society, and the belief – although questionable given the current political climate of removing rights from individuals and marginalized groups – that the United States is a democracy, it stands to reason that schools should be guided by an idealized set of democratic values that are openly shared, discussed, and continually re-examined. This requires reflective practice, collective non-hierarchical decision-making, collaboration at all

¹ Currently, there are only about one hundred twenty democratic schools in the United States, according to Education Revolution (<https://www.educationrevolution.org/store/findaschool/democraticschools/#Unitedstates>).

levels, and a healthy dose of skepticism which allows for critical inquiry and critical pedagogy. Democratic schools are often intergenerational, allowing all ages of children of all ages to learn from one another, and carry a strong ethos of social consciousness, through which they examine and mitigate structural inequality and foster an ethic that puts the well-being of the community before the purported “rights” of the individual. Contrary to popular belief, democratic schools have high standards for learning and behavior without the traditional standardization which often means the erasing of individuality and a true child-centered ethic of learning. To foster real learning, children are given choice, and the curriculum is connected to real-life issues, as in Dewey’s model. Thus, the curriculum at democratic schools is dynamic. Schools such as these trust their students and empower them to be both agents of their own learning and agents of change in society. Children are the “meaning-makers;” teachers, students, parents, and administrators must be open to different perspectives because all voices matter. Unlike traditional schooling wherein one dominant paradigm reigns supreme and decisions are made from the top down, “in a democratic school it is true that all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in the process of decision making” (Apple and Beane, 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, diversity of thought and diversity of population is valued, and children learn to be advocates for themselves, their learning, and their peers. In democratic school settings, children learn that advocacy is a path to systemic change. To make all of this happen, teachers need to have autonomy and significant planning time to ensure their ability to meet the curiosities and questions of their students. These schools exist as an alternative to traditional education to fight against “the system that...uses a set of institutional rankings to deem a small subset of individuals more worthy of advancement than others, thereby

compounding the privilege of a select few while degrading everyone else” (Mercogliano, 2014, p. 134).

Methodology

To capture a full picture of Pono, we utilized a qualitative case study, to investigate phenomena within a specific setting utilizing various data sources. Case studies allow a picture to be painted with the direct voices of research participants. Upon receiving IRB approval, our mixed methodology included surveys completed by parents and students, individual interviews conducted via Zoom with students and two Pono staff (founder/director and head teacher), and a follow-up small group interview with the students in person, as well reviewing the Pono website for core content. It is important to note that the research was conducted post-COVID-19 Pandemic, which was a devastating blow to the Pono community, thus our sample size was limited. Pre-Covid, the school had twenty students and we had hoped to conduct the research with the entire community. When we began our case study, we worked with a cohort of six students, with only five of them agreeing to participate in the study. The sixth youth opted out, but his parents did not. We were able to collect data from at least one parent of each child enrolled.

Survey questions for parents included information about family demographics, motivations behind choosing Pono, most valued elements of Pono, relationships with the school and staff, what they hoped their children would receive from a Pono education, plus the option to share any favorite experiences. Survey questions for the students were similar but focused more on their learning experiences, what they valued most in their learning at Pono, and what they believe they will carry with them into the world.² Interviews were semi-structured and included

² We note that, as Pono has only existed for thirteen years, the school has not yet graduated any of its students. However, since the time of our research, we have learned that the three oldest students are currently exploring colleges across the United States.

questions for both the adults and students that addressed learning experiences at Pono, the culture of the school, relationships and processes, and their feelings about Pono. For adults, we dove into the school's history and functioning as well. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and we watched and read all interviews separately and compared our observations. To code our qualitative data, we used an iterative process, reviewing the interviews, coding for emergent themes, sharing our ideas, and disaggregating our findings.

Findings

Parents and educators shared a desire to center the voices of the children and to provide them with an education that would counter messages perpetuated by the more standard education system. Students' responses reflected these priorities as well, sharing an appreciation for the ability to guide their own education and a desire to influence positive change in the world around them.

We asked parents to rank elements of Pono's mission based on personal importance. Responses were, in order from most to least important: child choice of learning, learning to care for others, democratic practices, excursion-based education, diversity of student body and care for the planet, and finally inter-age experiences. When we asked students to rank elements of Pono from most important to least, the order was: collaboration, care for others, lifelong learning, critical thinking, and interacting with peers.

Families' length of time at Pono and their reasons for initially enrolling their children varied, but all parents valued Pono's child-centered approach. Some parents came to Pono after negative experiences with other schools. Others chose Pono when their children were beginning school. In either case, the ethos of Pono drew parents who wanted to center their children's voices as they navigated the education process. Parents chose Pono because:

I wanted a small school that welcomed my kiddo for who she is. A place where her voice could grow and she could get to know herself. A kind place. I visited and immediately loved the kids. I thought, “these are my kid’s people.

I wanted him to feel free and have plenty of time to explore his interests.

I was immediately intrigued by the director and staff and learning philosophy.

Although most students were young when they enrolled, they still had a voice in the decision to attend Pono. The children told us:

I felt like I learned more at Pono than any other of the schools I visited. My mom asked me which school was my favorite and I said, “If you want me to learn I should go to Pono.

I attended it and visited for two days and enjoyed it...My mom showed me the school and I went on a test trip and I liked it and that was that.

I visited for two field trips and I really liked it so me and my parents decided that it would be a good school setting for me.

After analyzing the surveys and interviews, we broke the findings into four broad categories: Choice, Empowered Learning, Community and Relationships, and Counter-Hegemonic Experiences.

Choice

The element of choice emerged as the most highly valued aspect of Pono education. As one parent observed, “My child gets much more engaged with the idea of learning when they get to pursue their own interests.” Another parent commented, “Children who create their own curriculum based on interests are far more prepared for their lives out of school...promotes an entrepreneurial mindset.”

The learners themselves love that they can explore things they are passionate about and that at a democratic school, they can choose their activities. When asked about this, they replied:

[At Pono] Children design their own curriculum...I love how we can choose our own stuff, things I want to know about, instead of random stuff [and] useless facts.

I like having a say in what I learn. [During one term], I requested to see baby animals, got a visit to a zoo, held baby animals, and pet them...I would request outrageous things and Pono would try to connect with them!

We all get to choose what we want to do. It's also outdoor, so we spend time on field trips or other areas of the city or nearby...I really enjoy the model. It's like nothing I've experienced before. I really like having a choice and say in what we do. It's a fun system seeing what other people want to do...we are part of the planning – when, how, where. I remember requesting to do more geography [and we] started doing that.

Pono has a distinctive methodology for creating these choice-based learning experiences that balances personal choice within a collective ethos. In other democratic or “free school” settings, student choice is a truly individualized pursuit. In some sites, this could translate into students focusing only on art or drama or video games. At Pono however, personal choice is

balanced within a collective ethos. While the Pono curriculum development process is time-consuming and intricate, it creates a truly engaged and egalitarian learning environment. Each term, every student sits with Maysaa or Kate, the lead teacher, who records their list of interests. They plot ideas on large sheets of chart paper and after input is gathered from each student, age groups sit together, review the lists, and discuss the options to come to consensus. According to Bazna, the criterion is to have 70% of each child's interests met. During the process, kids exercise their ability to give and take. They engage in discussion on the topics at hand, asking one another questions, determining which areas of interest can and will be pursued in that term and which will be set aside for a later date. They learn to balance their own needs and those of their classmates. As students are evaluating ideas and interests, they are also given the cost of certain items—including guest teachers and field trip costs. Students engage in a cost-benefit analysis which becomes a multivariate analysis of how to best meet their wishes and those of their peers in relation to time and financial feasibility.

At the heart of the process is profound learning about community, collective decision-making, and honoring choices within a framework of “freedom, not license” (Neill, 1966). Children, as Bazna says, have the “freedom to decide limited by impact on others.” The process does see challenges, namely from children who don't have opinions or who need time to adapt to the system since it is so different. Another challenge is found when certain kids have to learn something they're not interested in, because a classmate picked it.

Once the curriculum has been agreed upon, Pono administration sends the topic list to the primary teaching staff – who teach literacy, math, science, etc. – to develop lessons based on the interests and learning goals of the students. The administration researches to find guest teachers and/or field trip sites. Some of the students expressed frustration with the fact that they don't

have a say in who the guest teacher will be. However, they can share if a teacher is not working for them. The parents surveyed are all fully supportive of this practice. We asked about the impact of this choice-based model and they shared:

[The Pono model gives] zest for learning, independence, curiosity, and a vivid imagination.

[As a result, my son is] much more interested in the world, to learn about it, figure out his own interests, pursue them for their own inherent joy. He's calmer, more centered in everyday life, loves school, cares about his peers and teachers.

[We love] the guest teachers from different fields who are more passionate about what they do than most schoolteachers.

The first year or more was a healing process from the trauma of public education. A kid who learns differently than neurotypical norms discovered tremendous agency as he broke through previous barriers.

Empowered Learning

An overarching feature of Pono is what we are calling Empowered Learning. Using the definition from Ira Shor (1992):

Empowering education...is a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy in school and society. It approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other. Human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together. The goals of this pedagogy

are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change. (p. 15)

Pono provides students with opportunities not typically seen in traditional schools, empowering them with opportunities to be heard, to build relationships, and to have agency over their education. Empowered Learning in this sense encompasses all the following elements—choice, community, and relationships—and forms the basis of Pono’s counter-hegemonic model of education. Pono students choose what they want to study and participate in the actions necessary to realize those desires. The students appreciate their say in their education and are consequently more involved in the learning process. All students cited this ability to choose their own educational paths as one of their favorite parts of Pono, as they learn how it feels to pursue their own interests and presumably will carry that sense of agency beyond Pono. Students expressed love for their peers and teachers and appreciation for a tight-knit and supportive learning community teaching them to take responsibility for themselves, one another, and the greater community/planet/world. Pono students are also empowered by field trips and immersive excursions, practical learning and real-world applications, and mentorships.

Pono parents also want to empower their children, sharing beliefs that:

Children who create their own curriculum based on intrinsic interests are far more prepared for their lives out of school, promotes an entrepreneurial mindset.

He knows that he can make his life happen on his own terms, create his own opportunities. He knows he has a voice that matters and can resolve differences using democratic methods. These methods take time and easy fixes aren’t always available.

Pono has given him a voice, one that is heard. I imagine these are all future leadership

qualities, qualities “baked in” to his psyche by Pono.

Pono provides a safe environment where students can experiment with their interests under the guidance of adults who value them and endeavor to promote their individuality. Students’ experiences in the city are an extension of their experience within the Pono community. They build their curriculum to make sure everyone’s interests are included and thereby are empowered to take control of their education and their lives. Pono students spend much of their time outside of the traditional classroom setting, learning “on the job” around New York City. For example, Pono uses “mentorships” to allow the older students the opportunity to explore different careers under the guidance of a working professional. A favorite of one student was the “Art to Wear” mentorship. The students collaborated with a store to create sustainable upcycled clothing, designed the window displays, and were able “to make something big and personal and intense.” These mentorships foster empowered learning by allowing students to have personalized, real-world experiences and deepen the relationships they have with each other and the world around Pono.

I feel like our mentorships have helped me understand what that field is like to work in, for example, we recently had an art history mentorship, and before that, a graphic design mentorship.

I’ve always been a visual learner, most of us are, so field trips....I feel like it’s changed my education in a good way.

Students’ ability to choose their classes means that they are empowered to think for themselves, to make decisions and solve problems collaboratively. They are engaged in the learning process and excited to pursue a wide variety of academic interests. Students are exceptionally aware and

appreciative of the effort Pono makes to empower them. Of her teachers, one student said, “They’ve always empowered us! They’ve let us have a voice.”

Children’s empowerment impacts everything they do at Pono. They are treated as people with agency and value by the adults around them, which empowers them to create change in the world. Over the years, they have participated in protests, political actions, etc. The result is a generation of students who speak confidently, can articulate their opinions, and understand and appreciate themselves and others.

Community and Relationships

Both students and parents expressed that Pono creates an environment in which learning to care for others is paramount. Students said that kindness, camaraderie, empathy, concern, and care for others were central to their experience. Many described their community as familial and a place where they grew up feeling safe and supported by the adults in their lives. Pono’s community is based on reciprocal respect and collaboration between children and adults. The creation of community is intentional and carefully done through the actions of Pono’s founder, administrators, and teachers. Pono’s holistic approach to education meant creating an environment that would foster not only children’s academic career but also their emotional intelligence, maturity, empathy, and ability to connect with others. Bazna and the rest of Pono’s teachers model healthy communication and conflict resolution, treating children with the same level of respect and trust that they expect from them.

Students told us that, at Pono, the teachers genuinely care about them and endeavor to guide their learning in the most effective way. “Teachers can really get to know us,” and focus on making sure each student receives the attention that will help them flourish academically and build their belief that they are important and valued in the world. One student explained how she

was having trouble in math and her teacher understood: “I didn’t have to ask, he picked up on me not getting it and tailored the lesson to me”.

Students described their experiences within the Pono community:

I have a really good relationship with my teachers! All of the teachers we have are not only talented (besides the odd one or two who were not asked to come back) but they really “get” the vibe of us.

Since it’s so small, and we’re not in a classroom anymore, I feel like I can have conversations with Kate and Maysaa, and I feel comfortable around them to express my emotions. I wouldn’t consider them my “boss” like how other teachers I’ve had outside of Pono have been, and they’re more like a friend to guide me as opposed to enforce me.

Close relationships with teachers where you feel like you have an ally.

Kate was someone who helped me work through [that] and learn to say, “I’m proud of what I’ve done, I’m good at something.”

Pono operates with an explicit goal of diversity and fosters community by having parents serve as visiting teachers. Students and families from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and experiences come together to support and educate each other. Bazna wanted to create a place where teachers would respect their students just as much as most schools expect students to respect their teachers. Respect at Pono is grounded in the simple fact that everyone is a human being with inherent worth. When asked if they felt respected and valued by administrators and teachers, students shared:

Yes definitely. Mayssa and Kate really honor what all the students want to do in the next term and try as hard as they can to make it happen.

Yes, if I ever have a problem with someone or something happening around me, I can talk to them and they will try to help me get through it.

My administrators are really great!! I feel quite close to them and that I can be myself/open up to them. I do feel respected and valued at all times.

Naturally, members of the Pono community do not always agree, but Pono's approach to conflict resolution incorporates and extends the values upon which Pono was founded. Administrators use conflicts as opportunities to model effective communication and guide students through the process of finding resolutions. In the process, Pono community members not only learn to listen to each other and make collective decisions on how to proceed but they also learn to take accountability for their actions and how they affect others. Through the Council Meeting process, everyone learns how to sit together with uncomfortable conversations or negative emotions. We asked students to describe how conflicts are handled at Pono:

We have council meetings when there's a problem between people, or people aren't respecting others' boundaries. We haven't had to have one in a while, but it would involve explaining to the person who wasn't following agreements. As well as apologizing if someone's feelings were hurt.

If someone is rude or acting up, we process it together, with a teacher, what they're doing and how it's affecting us. It works...none of us really like doing it...it's awkward, but it's better than detention...we don't do that.

All students described their relationships with each other as a deeply valued element of their experience at Pono. Pono's inter-age model means that children grow up learning with and from others of all ages rather than remaining exclusively within a class of kids their age. All participating students referenced their relationships with the other students as "open, close, comfortable relationships." "like siblings," "even though the circle is small, relationships are strong," and "like a family." Pono students learn from each other as much as they do from their teachers. They all valued the unique experience of growing up with the same small group of kids and creating deep bonds with their classmates.

Counter-Hegemonic Model of Education

Through our conversations with the children and staff of Pono, we found that their experiences, their understanding of the role of education, and the school's ethos all support a counter-hegemonic education. Meaning, that education at Pono is not designed to support or sustain the capitalist competitive status quo that we find in so many educational institutions. Numerous aspects of Pono contribute to this assertion. From our observations and the voices of all stakeholders, Pono is counter-hegemonic because the school is founded upon respect for children as agents of their learning. Secondly, Pono engages in the belief that learning and relationships go hand and hand and are ever-evolving. Third, Pono utilizes a practice of addressing conflict in non-punitive ways via a restorative and transformational framework. Fourth, Pono prioritizes caring for each other, for their community, and for the planet which leads to cultivating a community where a love of learning and one another is paramount. Finally,

Pono actively seeks harmony and equilibrium, fostering collaboration and community over competition and hierarchy. One parent described Pono's unique contribution to schooling that is counter-hegemonic:

Traditional school environments are not focused on social-emotional health. Rampant bullying and teasing are considered a normal part of education. Traditional school environments almost train children to externalize their emotions. When kindness and empathy are integral to the learning environment, children develop much more sophisticated understandings of themselves in their social environment and have a deeper capacity to go inside themselves for support and answers. At Pono, New York City is the classroom. This has given my son an understanding that education is a daily part of life, not just something that happens in a classroom. I imagine he will be a lifelong learner. The amount of busywork and testing in traditional school does not benefit children, it is designed to benefit adults in their classroom management. The small class sizes at Pono create a personalized, artisanal learning environment. Traditional schools are factory-like in their approach. Traditional school is highly processed, Pono is natural and holistic. Traditional schools are ugly boxes where children are forced to sit under artificial lighting. Pono is an outdoor education model, dedicated time in nature weekly promotes better overall physical and mental health.

A variety of practices including no homework or testing, outdoor education, council meetings, democratically created dynamic agreements, inter-age interactions, community-based learning, and multi-generational collaboration all defy the dominant mindset currently present in US schools. Parents need to buy into this type of learning and Pono parents do. As one parent told us, "An abolitionist framework can and should guide every school. Curriculums that emerge

from the kids themselves – instead of from adult experts – can create a more empowered society. Children who learn to ‘go within themselves’ for the answers they seek are inherently more innovative in their approach to life.”

When we asked Bazna to describe her core beliefs around why Pono is unlike other formal school settings, she shared this:

Learning happens everywhere, and it happens best when children are immersed in authentic environments and situations, rather than through rote or forced instruction in rigid artificial settings. Children and adults learn together and from each other, despite presumed or identified abilities, disabilities, challenges, and labels. All members of the Pono community work together on creating a fully inclusive learning environment that is free of attitudinal, structural, and physical barriers that would hinder the full participation of its members in the community.

Pono eschews the traditional top-down model of schooling including the role of teachers as “experts” who utilize what Freire termed the “banking model” of education. At Pono, the role of teachers is to nurture, guide, and support the interests and natural progress of the children. More importantly, they teach by example how to be socially conscious; how to pursue learning journeys; and how to live harmoniously in a community where one’s freedom ends when it interferes with the freedom of others. Pono’s low child-to-teacher ratio and small-size groups ensure that each child gets the individual guidance and support they need.

Challenges

Pono is not without its challenges. Like any school, issues arise and perhaps more so in a school deliberately designed to work against the forces that seek to create obedient, unidimensional future workers in an exploitative capitalist society. Since Pono does not utilize

any form of competitive framework, some parents raise the question, “How will [our kids] survive in a competitive society?” In response Bazna points out, “We are trying to protect and support them now, thus they’ll have the strength and skills to deal in a competitive environment.” While most parents understood this philosophy, others have had trouble. At times, parents removed their children from Pono or were asked to reconsider if Pono was the right choice for them. This typically happened when parenting styles and the Pono ethos did not match. For example, some parents interpreted democratic education as letting their kids do whatever they wanted. On the other hand, some parents used absolute punishment at home, which was a big disconnect with Pono. For Bazna, she saw the challenge come down to a disconnect over “You’re free to do what you want as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of other people.” Other challenges arose based on school size. Since classes are small, new or part-time students have had difficulty fitting in with classmates who had spent years together in such a tight-knit community. Pono also welcomes home-schooled children to join on certain days, but it was noted that at times they didn’t fully understand the Pono ethos and struggled to behave in alignment with Pono’s core values.

Finding teachers has also proven to be difficult since Pono looks for teachers with heart and mindfulness, who really understand the kids they work with. Teachers need to understand the vision, mission, and approach and often that means that they need to unlearn what they thought they knew about education. Salary issues and turnover could also be problematic. Budgetary issues in general were stressful. Since Pono used a sliding scale to ensure any interested family could attend, financing staff and trips was a regular concern. Naturally, there were other issues as well, including people fighting the outdoor aspect of Pono, uncertainty about parental role (especially when parents tried to influence their child’s choices for activities),

balance between flexibility and boundaries, and allowing the time and space for children to learn respect and how to resolve issues. The most significant challenge was COVID-19, which drastically shifted how Pono functioned.

Discussion and Applications

From our interviews, observations, and surveys, Pono models an education that is designed to create thoughtful, caring, curious, committed learners who believe in community, collaboration, and holistic well-being. By using Freire-type problem-posing activities, they allow students to “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, p. 83). In addition, their Deweyan model of interdisciplinary and experiential learning, “introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating [him] with the spirit of service, and providing [him] with the instruments of effective self-direction” (Dewey, p. 10). Through their counter-hegemonic practices, Pono not only creates a true model and experience of a democratic, egalitarian, and student-led space but also a model that explicitly aims to address the empathy gap that exists in education and the world (as put forth by Noguera). Furthermore, Pono’s focus on consensus and collaboration fosters social responsibility: “True education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers as demanded by social situations. These powers are what make youth act as members of a unified group; they can begin to see themselves as part of and instrumental to the welfare of the entire group” (Ardizzone, 2007, p. 34).

Pono children provide the most compelling evidence that formal education can and should be more open to what young people have to say about their educational experiences. We asked the students what they love about Pono:

That it's democratic, we are outside much of the time, it's not a huge group and doesn't feel as overwhelming, and our main values are kindness, balance, and resolving any conflict through council meetings.

I love the fact that we can choose our own curriculum, and learn about the things that we are passionate about instead of suffering through a regular curriculum. And I ADORE the trips we take!! They're all really fun and educational.

My friends...the trips...interesting visiting teachers...being able to travel around the city...being able to decide what we do during the term.

Through their ethos, pedagogy, and definitions of community, we see Pono as a transformative space that while not overtly pushing against the status quo, provides children—and their parents—with opportunities to bring forth a new way of thinking and being alive. To wit, we observed Pono students producing academic work well beyond what is expected at their grade level. Via mentorships, two students found their love of science, and then through a science research course, they developed full research studies. One wrote a research proposal for a two-year study examining the relationship between telomere length and physical well-being to study the aging process. Another researched the effects of different alkaline relaxing products on kinky-curly hair, incorporating an analysis of structural racism into her discussion of chemistry.

Beyond Pono, it would take a lot for the public school system to shift towards a model such as this, but there are ways in which aspects of the Pono model could be incorporated into schools. For example, classrooms could offer children more choice in their learning thus supporting children as agents of their learning as well as agents of change. Schools can also

nurture close relationships grounded in collaboration and care. To do this, schools could actively take on an anti-competitive worldview and limit the ways in which students are pitted against each other. Finally, schools should see learning as an empowering experience rather than a passive one gauged by external exams and top-down mandates. Overwhelming research exists that shows the limitations of hierarchical, competitive models of education, not the least of which is its impact on the mental health of learners. Our research, which utilized the direct voices of children, provides an antidote to the dominant educational paradigm.

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