

Reflections on the Art of Muddy Play: The Mud Kitchen

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Abstract

Due to Covid-19, much time and effort are dedicated to sanitizing at home and school. While we strive to protect children, we must re-examine the messages they receive about dirt and muddy play. Are we inadvertently prejudicing them against “unclean” entanglements that may afford them more significant learning opportunities? In this paper, I offer my experiences exploring the language of mud and its relationship with play, language, and learning for my four-year-old son. I explore how a mud kitchen can offer caregivers and children a space for collective inquiry in a post-pandemic world. This paper suggests that caregivers’ attitudes towards mess impact children’s openness to muddy play. Also, it highlights that muddy play can be a learning tool to encourage self-expression and teach personal hygiene and cleanliness. I discovered that storytelling normalizing muddy play positively impacted levels of engagement in the mud kitchen. I believe my findings demonstrate the value of mud for developing children’s resourcefulness, curiosity, responsibility, empathy, and self-reliance. My findings emphasize that children can thrive within discomfort with strategic support and compassion from caregivers. I hope that my experiences of muddy play can invite educators to reimagine educational engagements for the future.

Keywords: Muddy play, mud kitchen, outdoor education, attitudes, storytelling

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Introduction

Living in the shadow of Covid-19 dictated a new preoccupation with cleaning and maintaining a sanitary environment at home to protect my four-year-old son from risk. At school, his teachers went the extra mile to constantly sanitize play equipment and ensure that the school environment was germ-free. However, while we strive to protect children, we must re-examine the messages we communicate to them about dirt and muddy play. Are we inadvertently prejudicing them against “unclean” entanglements that may afford them significant learning opportunities? Is muddy play worth the mess? This paper explores the language of mud and its relationship with play, language and learning for children and individuals in caregiving roles such as teachers and parents. Drawing on research studies by Kind (2018) and the pedagogical work of Gianni Rodari (1996), I attempt to answer the question of how can muddy play, particularly in a mud kitchen, offer caregivers and their children “a space for collective inquiry” (Kind, 2018, p.8) in the future. The following sections highlight why I chose the mud kitchen specifically as a site of exploration, its construction process, and my reflections on his interactions with the mud kitchen over three consecutive days.

Why a Mud Kitchen?

The kitchen in our South Asian and Portuguese home is where food is prepared and eaten, but above all, where family happens. My son enjoys cooking, baking, cleaning vegetables and putting away groceries. To explore my questions about muddy play, I attempted to transition his familiarity with objects and activities from our indoor kitchen to the outdoors by creating a mud kitchen together. Mycock (2019) defines a mud kitchen as “an outdoor space where children are encouraged to play with mud” (p. 459). Rodari was a protagonist of fantasy for children in Italy.

My inquiry was grounded in Rodari's (1996) concept of the "fantastical hypothesis", defined in *The Grammar of Fantasy*:

The technique of the "fantastical hypothesis" is extremely simple. It assumes its form precisely from the question: "What if?" In order to form this question, any subject and predicate can be chosen haphazardly. The hypothesis that is to be elaborated is formed by linking the two together. The subject could be "Reggio Emilia" and the predicate "to fly". What if the city of Reggio Emilia were suddenly to fly? (p.18)

Embracing Rodari's (1996) concept of the fantastical hypothesis, I wanted to explore what would happen if mud was the focus of our engagement in a kitchen. A kitchen is not always a safe place for children to play, is typically found indoors, and is generally an unwelcome environment where mud is concerned. Displacing the kitchen from the indoors, adding mud and encouraging a child to play there embodies Ernst's "systematic shift of space," freeing the mud kitchen from all limitations and transforming it into a "fantastic" stimulus for childhood development (Rodari, 1996, p. 13).

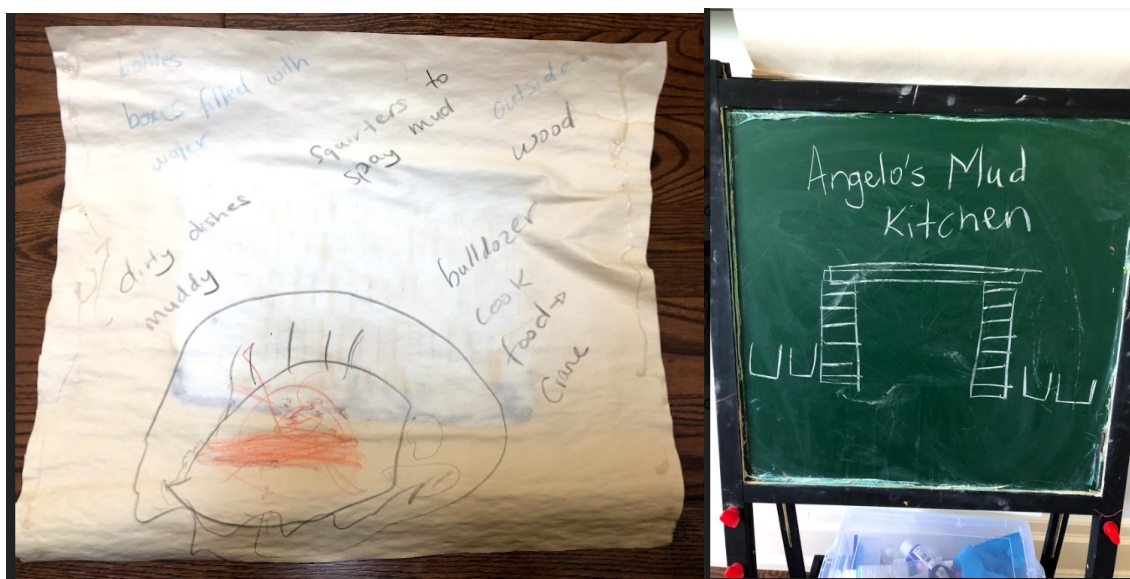
Constructing Empowerment: Drawing and Building Together

Rodari (1996) emphasizes that the teacher is an active participant, artist, and visionary who follows the child's lead in developing projects (p. 10). I experienced this working with my son to plan his mud kitchen. I set up a blackboard, a piece of paper, chalk, and crayons. My son enthusiastically entered this space with a construction crane (see Figure 1). I reflected on his natural ability to associate the act of planning with the object of a toy construction crane.

Figure 1

Note. My son with his construction crane, drawing his plan.

By posing several questions (see Appendix for the list of questions), listening intently to his feedback, and writing some of his ideas on paper, the discussion became “empowerment in a communal context” (Rodari, 1996, p. 20). This drawing experience was reminiscent of what Kind (2018) speaks of: “drawing alongside [my son] in a sensitive engagement with [my son’s] marks, movements, inventions, and forms of representations” (p.8). We achieved Kind’s (2018) goal of creating an experience of relational experimentation and collective inquiry (p. 9). As a result, I became attentive to instances where my son corrected my misinterpretations of his ideas - “BOXES, mama, not bottles!”. He demonstrated agency and confidence while teaching me to play along. Like Kind (2018), I found “unique delight in the struggle and difficulty of drawing and this ‘co-motion’ with [my son]” (p. 9). Soon we had completed a concept map with his main ideas for the mud kitchen, and I drew a tentative structure on the blackboard (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Note. Concept Map and Tentative Structure on the Blackboard.

During our discussion, my son shared that he had interacted with mud in his school and, while doing so, wore gloves to protect his hands. His teacher told him his hands “needed to stay clean and healthy”. When I asked if it was safe to play in the mud, he immediately replied, “No, you could get mud in your eyes which would burn you!” He also added that we (his parents) wanted him to keep his hands clean. It was evident that my son was sensitive to our attitudes about cleanliness and our conversation revealed his fears of getting dirty. By prioritizing cleanliness over connecting with mud and nature, we, his parents and teachers, unknowingly influenced his openness to muddy play. Rodari (1996) suggests that through imagination, children can challenge ideas imposed on them through language (p. 19). I wanted to examine if my son could overcome his fear of germs by using his creativity as a tool for imagining different realities in the mud kitchen.

My son immersed himself in the construction of the mud kitchen. We decided to build a simple structure by repurposing old interlocking bricks and a piece of plywood. My son wore his yellow hard hat, which made me reflect on the importance of pretend play in children's lives (Rodari, 1996, p. 12). We had to move the interlocking bricks from the side of the house to the backyard, and after a few trips, my son realized the bricks were too heavy for him to carry. Instead of giving up, he demonstrated resilience and problem-solving skills by using his wagon to help us reach the goal of moving all the bricks. He engaged in stacking, counting, and levelling the bricks. Then we set the plywood countertop on them. Together, we reimagined the kitchen by breathing new life into old materials. My son was proud of his accomplishment, and his involvement in the physical construction of the mud kitchen helped build a strong sense of personal competence regarding showing initiative and overcoming challenges (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



Note. Sitting on the Countertop of the Mud Kitchen.

Observations and Provocations

Day 1: Hesitations and Aversions

While my son was at preschool, I placed several containers in the mud kitchen with rocks, mulch, sand, fresh soil, and water. I also scattered around beach toys such as a bucket, frisbee,

measuring cup, a small watering can, and a small metal bucket. When my son returned from preschool at 3 pm, I handed him a squeeze bottle with water and introduced him to the mud kitchen. For his first day in the mud kitchen, I intended to observe my son's interactions with the mud kitchen and surrounding materials without interfering. However, his initial response to the squeeze bottle was, "What are we supposed to do with this?". He hesitated to touch anything. Responding to Kind's (2018) assertion that what matters for my son's engagement with the mud kitchen is "to keep in the movement towards increasing complexity while provoking each other and enlarging the choices that might be made" (p.17), I asked if he had ever done anything like this before. He responded that he had played in the mud with his friend. He then began mixing the water with the soil to make mud, as if by muscle memory. Once the mud was ready, he plastered it onto his countertop. Soon, my son became preoccupied with cleaning. He constantly wanted to wash the mud off his countertop and reminded me, "you got to learn to keep things clean, mama". After one hour and fifteen minutes of mostly cleaning, my son was exhausted. We both sat down, and I gave him a chance to express his emotions:

Ayesha: "How do you feel?"

My son: "I don't feel great."

Ayesha: "How do you feel about the mud?"

My son: "Uncomfortable."

Our conversation exemplifies the need for parents and teachers to allow children opportunities to discuss their feelings and anxieties. My son's ability to identify and communicate his discomfort with getting muddy reveals the potential of muddy play to encourage self-expression and communication. I also reflected on how caregivers need opportunities to understand the impact of their attitudes towards mess on children's access to experiences of muddy

play. I also began rethinking the tools and materials I set up for him and my level of engagement in his activities in the mud kitchen.

Day 2: Storytelling and Provocations

My son played in the mud kitchen for one hour and thirty minutes on the second day. Rodari (1996) emphasizes that when a stone is thrown into a still pond, a ripple effect occurs with far-reaching effects within and around the pond, stirring up the mud and bumping into things that have rested there forgotten. Similarly, I had to transform myself into an “animator” to help my son fully “express the best in [himself], to develop [his] own creative inclination, imagination, and constructive commitment” (p. 116). Rodari (1996) and Kind (2018) highlight the value of storytelling and how a story can permeate “children’s conversations, enactments, and narrations, in the images and metaphors that are evoked, [and] the drawings and clay constructions that take shape” (p. 10-11). When my son returned from preschool on the second day of our muddy play experiment, I presented him with two stories: *I’m A Dirty Dinosaur* by Janeen Brian (2014), a book about a small dinosaur who loves covering itself in mud, and the 15th episode of *Peppa Pig, Season 6: Peppa’s Muddy Festival* (2019). After encountering stories that normalized playing in the mud, he was excited to go outside to play in the mud kitchen.

This time, I decided to be more active in the mud kitchen alongside my son. I laid out several tools such as chopsticks, forks, knives, cups, plates, bowls, and small moulds. I plastered mud on the countertop and began making a circle with rocks. My son was intrigued and asked if he could join me. He picked up a measuring cup and began heaping mud into the rock circle. As his confidence grew, he suggested we transfer the mud from the countertop into a “pie dish” (frisbee) to make a mud pie. He used a fork to compact the mud. Although he said “Ew” several times, he did not seem concerned about washing the countertop or his hands like he had the

previous day. He asked me to find some decorations for the pie. I obliged, offering him lavender, grass, and leaves. After the pie was ready, he pretended to place it in “the oven”. Then, he independently began making a lavender soup, carefully adding water from the hose pipe into a slurry bucket. While he made his soup, I proceeded to create a mud volcano. Upon seeing the volcano, he became upset and destroyed it. He explained that volcanoes “kill dinosaurs!” and that the volcano could erupt and hurt us. Here, he was building empathy and modelling care for others. The importance of intra-active play, “being ‘in it’ together”, is highlighted (Kind, 2018, p. 10). My son and I were “creating a relational space of investigating and creating together; constructing, making, and composing understandings” (Kind, 2018, p. 8). Playing in the mud made me remember an Ojibway Creation Story of Turtle Island. I told Angelo about a muskrat who gave up his life diving to the bottom of rising waters to retrieve a handful of mud to recreate the Earth. Hearing this story, he became wide-eyed with astonishment and exclaimed, “Mud saves the day!”.

When he finished playing, he asked if it was time to tidy up. It was significant that he understood the importance of cleaning, and I provided dish soap and a washcloth. He washed and hosed down the tools and proudly set them in the sun to dry. I believe his involvement in creating the mud kitchen and leading our play activities gave him a sense of ownership, making him feel responsible for its upkeep. My son recognized the value of cleaning up, and he did it willingly, demonstrating the tremendous potential for the mud kitchen to act as a learning tool to teach children personal hygiene and cleanliness. He understood that he was responsible for his mess and perfectly capable of cleaning up after himself.

Day 3: Improvisations and Uninhibition

On the third day, my son returned home from preschool in anticipation of playing in his mud kitchen. For the first time in the mud kitchen, I saw him as a “child who is deeply interested

in [his] own learning, the protagonist of [his] own growth and development (Rinaldi, 2006, as cited in Kind, 2018, p. 9). Without any prompting from me, he picked a badminton racket and items from the recycling bin to play with in the mud kitchen. My son's act of repurposing discarded items demonstrates the importance of Rodari's (1996) belief that through imagination, children can reinvent new meanings and understandings of ordinary objects (p. 19).

I experienced firsthand the truth in Kind's (2018) words, "The roles of artist, teacher, and researcher are shared and interchangeable between children, atelierista, educators [and caregivers]" (p. 7). My son seized control of his mud kitchen, instructing me, like his sous-chef, to fill buckets with sand and wash rocks. I was impressed by how the mud kitchen built his numeracy and math skills as he measured, filled, and emptied buckets of mud, water, and sand to make his version of an iced tea. He ventured out of the backyard to collect lavender, leaves, and rose petals for his concoction. When the slurry was ready, he prepared the cups with "ice cubes" (rocks). He understood how the rocks displaced the water, shrieking with laughter as more water spilled out of the cups with every additional "ice cube" added. The mud allowed him the flexibility to remove and add ingredients as he saw fit without any fear of making mistakes.

After preparing the "iced tea", he began working on a cake, improvising with rocks for candles and a lavender stalk for a sparkler. My son's level of autonomy and creativity exceeded my expectations. He served me a piece of mud cake, and as we sat together enjoying this picnic, he became a storyteller. My son invited me into the world of a mudskipper, a fish who could breathe and live outside of water. My son's vocabulary, sequencing of events and presentation skills held my attention. He expressed ideas that I had never heard about before. As he talked about fish and water, he began to wonder about the birds in our garden, and he decided to offer the birds water by filling a used ice cream container with water. Noticing details in his environment brought

him closer to nature. The mud kitchen contributed “towards an all-around development of [my son and I]” (Rodari, 1996, p.116).

Conclusion

During Covid-19, many of us played host to a fear of germs and increased anxiety toward “unclean” entanglements. Children were caught in the middle of this perfect storm. Engaging in the creative techniques of Rodari (1996) and Kind (2018), I became aware of the tremendous value that mud possesses in teaching us “to act and think for [ourselves]...., question, challenge, destroy, mock, eliminate, generate, and reproduce [our] own language and meanings” (Rodari, 1996, p. 19). My son and I were involved in every stage of the mud kitchen’s creation and evolution. Through the mud kitchen, we successfully “create[d] a collective space of mutual and reciprocal engagement” (Kind, 2018, p. 8). As caregivers, we must be more conscious of the physicality of storytelling and offer children opportunities to visualize the narratives they hear. We must also remember to permit children to engage in muddy play freely. Recognizing the importance of these connections is paramount to inspiring creativity and developing literacy in the future.

Furthermore, this inquiry prompted me to think about the art of playing in the mud as a social practice. Physically engaging in a mud kitchen facilitated a “dance of attention” (Kind, 2018, p. 9) and positively impacted my child’s relationships, experiences, and understandings of the world so that “[he was] no longer a “consumer” of culture and values, but a creator and producer of values and culture” (Rodari, 1996, p.11). On a broader level, my experiences with the mud kitchen evidence the potential value of mud for developing children’s oracy, resourcefulness, curiosity, responsibility, empathy, and self-reliance. From this perspective, the mud kitchen is a valuable resource to stimulate the imagination. Engaging repeatedly with the mud kitchen demonstrated that with strategic support and compassion from caregivers, children can overcome

anxieties and fears of germs. Collectively, we can work to envision a reality where mud is “not dirty” and is acknowledged as a vital tool to help children, parents, and teachers deal with problems and find solutions together.

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Appendix

Planning Stage: Questions

1. What do you know about mud?
2. What do you know about a mud kitchen?
3. Have you done anything with mud in your school?
4. Have you played in a mud kitchen before?
5. What did your teacher tell you about mud?
6. Is it safe to play in the mud?
7. What kind of things do you want in your mud kitchen?
8. How should your mud kitchen look?
9. What will you use to spread the mud in your kitchen?
10. Will you use your hands to play in the mud?
11. What happens if mud gets on your hands?
12. What did your teacher say about your hands being dirty?
13. What do mama and papa say about your hands being dirty?
14. How big do you want your kitchen to be?
15. What kind of shape do you want your kitchen to be?
16. What kind of materials should we use to make your kitchen?
17. Who can help you build this kitchen?