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Teaching in a third space during national COVID-19 lockdowns: in loco magister?

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought about rapid change in the way education was delivered in terms of online teaching and how this was managed by families in their homes. This study looks at the relationship between home (first space) and school (second space) and uses the concept of the ‘third space’ (Bhabha, H. [1994]. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge) to explore home-school links. Nine participants working in six local authorities in Scotland were questioned during the first lockdown in 2020 and then interviewed during the second national lockdown in 2021. Their responses were analysed in terms of the awareness they had of home funds of knowledge and the influence this had on their pedagogy online. The researchers investigated whether a third space had emerged and, if so, what the features of this hybrid space were. A key finding relates to the role of parents in the third space, in loco magister. In the first lockdown, glimpses of third space learning were visible in children’s achievements online. In the second lockdown, however, parental concerns to preserve some semblance of orderly family life led to the colonisation of the spatio-temporal dimensions of online teaching, seeing the return to more transmissive teacher approaches and missed opportunities for children’s learning.

Keywords: Third space theory; pandemic pedagogies; home-school links; parental roles in children’s learning

Introduction

This study looks at the impact of two COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns on teachers’ practice in Scotland during a period of unprecedented challenge to the education system (Daniel 2020; Doyle 2020). Study participants ($n = 9$) were questioned about teachers’ responses to the first nationwide lockdown in Scotland and how the second lockdown in January 2021 compared. The researchers used the concept of the ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994) to explore the relationship between home (first space) and school (second space) in order to understand teachers’ pandemic pedagogies (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020). Working at a distance with pupils in a third space has implications for teachers who have to institute new routines using new technologies and, as a result, think about teaching differently (Yandell 2020).

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There are implications, too, for parents who are positioned ‘in loco magister’. We were thus interested in understanding how teachers’ practices adapted to this emergency remote education (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020), in particular, the extent to which spatial and temporal relations were transformed in teachers’ online work with their pupils. The main research question was: to what extent does the new COVID-19 context for learning at home constitute a third space and what are the key features of this space? Early years’ practitioners, primary and secondary school teachers were contacted in 6 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

Theoretical framework

The relationship between what is learned at home and how this corresponds to learning at school has been a recurring focus of research enquiry. In Heath’s seminal *Ways with Words* (1983), for example, the argument is made that when home discourses are in alignment with norms around language usage in school, children gain an advantage over their counterparts whose home ways with language are very different from the school’s. While significant in documenting the embedded nature of language use in patterns of interaction in the home and school, it is grounded in a situated view of learning and development that sees home and school as ‘discrete material entities’ (Cook 2005, 92).

The tendency of home and school to be reified as separate, settled spaces has been critiqued by writers such as Pahl and Kelly (2005), Cook (2005) and Grant (2011) who highlight the power imbalance in the relationship between the two, with the terms of engagement often being defined by the school and communication being one way – from school to home (Marsh 2003). Grant (2011, 293) views one effect of this as ‘colonisation’, with parents being recruited to facilitate the objectives of the school. Where school learning makes few connections to the lived experiences of children’s home lives, the process of schooling may in time come to be seen by certain pupils as irrelevant to their future aspirations (Moll et al. 1992; Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014).

The construct of the third space has been utilised to disrupt the binary conception of home and school and to stimulate more productive pupil engagement (Moje et al. 2004). Its original conception as a tool of political resistance (Benson 2010) appeared in Bhabha’s (1994) analysis of cultural identity and colonisation which introduced third space theory in order to open up the possibilities of hybrid cultures that integrate conflicting discourses in less hierarchical ways. Bhabha argued that, within official spaces, oppressed people can create new spaces that operate more beneficially to them. His interest is in the potential of in-betweenness, where marginalised people negotiate the liminal spaces that come into being between the first space of their traditional culture and the second space of the more powerful and imposed colonising culture. In this transformative bridging space, the potential for ‘an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened’ (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda 1999, 152). With porous borders where ‘newness enters the world’ (Bhabha 1994, 227), third spaces have the potential to be innovative sites of collaboration and contestation (McIntyre and Hobson 2016).

Researchers with an interest in partnerships between home and school have capitalised on the affordances of third space theory by building on Bhabha’s notions of ‘neither the One ... not the Other ... but something else besides ...’ (1994, 28). Pahl and Kelly (2005), for example, show how the creation of a family literacy classroom within a school enables a threshold space that validates home ‘funds of knowledge’,

leading to parents experiencing a greater sense of ownership of a shared curriculum with the school. Grant (2011, 299), however, views using digital technologies to bring school learning into the home, as a 'fraught endeavour', illustrating some of the challenges that need to be overcome if successful third spaces are to be created. Beliefs about the roles of home and school in the learning process are shown to be deep-seated on both sides, with teacher, parents and children generally viewing learning in and out of school as separate entities and wishing to preserve the boundaries between home and school.

As the COVID-19 pandemic triggered the widespread closing of schools around the world, education shifted from the school to the home (Doyle 2020) and, with very little teacher preparation time (Daniel 2020), 'pandemic pedagogies' (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020, 108) were quickly instigated. Noting a corresponding shift in the roles of teachers, children and parents within online instruction, Williamson, Eynon, and Potter (2020, 111) have challenged researchers to explore what happens when 'classroom space-time travels in the opposite direction into the home environment' and where 'the polysynchronous world of learning in the digital age is introduced into the rhythms of family life'. The current research which forms the basis of this article is one such attempt. It seeks to address the extent to which, in the narratives of participant teachers, signs of third spaces were present in the shift from learning in school to learning at home.

Methodology

Information was collected via email during lockdown 1 and through semi-structured interviews of between 35 min and one hour during lockdown 2, from three primary teachers, a deputy primary school head teacher, secondary teachers of Biology, English, Mathematics, a secondary school head teacher and two regional education officers. This deliberately heterogeneous sample (Robinson 2014) allowed a wide range of teacher voices to be heard. Participants were provided with information about the research purpose before being asked to consent to take part. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant committee at the researchers' institution.

Building on initial email correspondence which sought to gather salient information (Andrade 2009) about respondents' early experiences of lockdown, further depth of data (Chamberlain et al. 2011) was built by asking the interviewees to explain what stood out as interesting and surprising in relation to how remote teaching worked or did not work during the first lockdown. We wanted to find out about teachers' perceptions of effective online provision (Cope and Ward 2002). For example, how did teachers respond to the blurring of boundaries between home and school in the new learning spaces online?

We then turned to the second national lockdown in Scotland and asked how teachers' experiences compared in terms of their own practices, as well as children's engagement online and in terms of perceived parental support. We also asked whether expectations had changed: their own; their school's; their pupils; and the pupils' parents. We enquired about the teaching-learning relationship and whether the term 'third space' might help to explain their online experiences.

The researchers transcribed their own interviews and did an initial open coding exercise. During a series of meetings, a common coding framework was agreed upon and this was used to re-analyse the data.

Findings

New openings in difficult times

Almost immediately on the announcement of lockdown at the end of March 2020 and with negligible preparation time, teachers started transforming their home spaces into workspaces and, initiating lessons online, essentially relocating school learning into the homes of their young learners via online technologies. While respondents described this transition shock variously as ‘stressful’, ‘extremely challenging’, and ‘overwhelming’, planning commenced immediately, and colleagues worked together to make decisions on the best ways forward for their pupils. As head teacher R6 explained, ‘it was just having youngsters engaged and being realistic about what they were going to manage to produce’. At this early point, with no such previous experiences to call on, there was an over-riding feeling of ‘playing it by ear’. This, however, led to some surprising outcomes where third spaces were seen to emerge.

There were a number of instances in the data where working online opened up children’s home lives in positive ways for teachers who were able to see their pupils and families differently. R3, an early years’ practitioner, commented positively on the videos that parents sent in, which revealed important details of the relationship between parent and child: ‘you can see the kind of things they loved doing at home. You really got to know their personalities, compared to the classroom where you can miss stuff’.

Similarly, R5 reported rethinking her conception of a girl in her class during online work that experiences of working with her in the class had not revealed:

it made me have huge admiration for her because when she came on the screen on See-Saw, this little girl and mum were speaking Russian and then having to speak and switch and how bright that little girl is’. R5 also spoke positively about a pupil who made a birdfeeder and got experience of using a drill and staple gun: ‘when would he ever have had the chance to do that at school?’

R6, a secondary head teacher, reported on successes with children who struggled at school but who thrived in the home environment and on how learning became integrated within the home practices of family life. Commenting on how a Home Economics project had led to recipes becoming part of family meal times, she said:

the parents were even more involved than they had before, because you come to school, you do the task and you go home. But they could see what was going on and I think it was good quality family time to be honest.

The primary school participants, in particular, noted how the quality of much of the children’s work seemed to improve when they were able to call on resources from home in undertaking school activities: ‘I was really amazed by what they were able to post up. It was impressive and showed real signs of engagement’ (R8).

Preserving the boundaries: in loco magister

Respondents reported that their experiences of lockdown 2 in January 2021 were different, however, with references to ‘structure’ and ‘routine’ beginning to permeate the teachers’ narratives. After lockdown 1, schools had surveyed parents about their

experiences of online working as a response to parental requests to help them to navigate their very busy and often chaotic home lives. Primary schools tended to opt for asynchronous models of learning. R4 talked about parents 'liking to get work posted the night before so they can plan their day', while R8 indicated that her school's parents wanted everything for the following week to be posted on a Sunday night, 'so they can print off all they need and it doesn't impact home life so much'. R5 was clear about the reasons for this: 'It is much more like direct teaching and that definitely has come from parental pressure'. References were also made to more traditional didactic pedagogies – creating PowerPoints with audio explanations of tasks and videos to explain clearly how to tackle activities – in order to ensure that pupils could be more independent of parents. The boundaries between home and school were thus less porous and teachers commented on the time-consuming and stressful nature of their activities online.

What also seemed to lie behind parental requests for the structure was a traditional conception of learning and teaching. R8 spoke for her other primary colleagues by observing, 'the parents want physical worksheets... they want something that they can print off and perhaps it's just safe and secure for them... their children are busy, they're doing what they perceive is school work'. R3 concurred, 'the parents don't value this active and play-based learning. They would like their kids to sit with these wipeable workbooks and things'.

Teachers reported their frustrations at not being able to engage in more interactive work, with R8, in particular, voicing strong views as to her professional identity being compromised: 'It goes against everything you believe in ... I honestly think it's the social interaction part and the relationship with the teacher ... we all know how important that is ... but this way of working doesn't really allow that to happen.'

Discussion

Engaging with parents is a highly significant part of the provision of educative experiences for children (Feiler et al. 2008), although the relationship between home and school has tended to be one-sided (Marsh 2003), with the privileging of school discourses. Third spaces have offered ways of unsettling separatist notions of home and school (Cook 2005) and of promoting the cultural capital of homes as important to school learning and to the identities of young learners. There were glimpses of such spaces in our data, particularly in lockdown 1, where home 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) were drawn on to enhance children's learning. Teachers spoke most warmly and positively when children's identities as successful learners were revealed to them (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014) – especially when the examples illustrated learner characteristics that had not been witnessed previously in classrooms. These examples were all located in situations of hybridity, where children and their families took centre stage, with teachers in less controlling and powerful positions. The learning evidenced in videos and other postings online could be characterised neither as typical home learning nor as school learning, but something in-between – where children were meeting the purposes of the school but very much on their own terms (Gibson 2000) and making use of their home resources, supported by interested parents and carers. There were examples of very impressive achievements that enabled teachers to see their pupils in a positive light.

Grant (2011) argues that for such learning to be transformative, however, what both home and school contribute has to be valued. Lockdown 2 demonstrated a return to the hegemonic position of traditional school discourses. Ironically, this came about through parental requests for more structure and routine in order to help them to manage the multiple demands being made on their time at home. In loco magister, parents drew on traditional conceptions of learning and teaching by asking teachers to provide worksheets supported by PowerPoints or videos of teachers explaining how the tasks should be undertaken – in a manner that enabled children to be more independent in completing their tasks as and when possible. While understandably pragmatic in intent, the consequences were to close potential third spaces down. For teachers, this felt less like any time, any place learning but all the time, everywhere (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020), making the planning and assessing of such work arduous and stressful. One secondary school reinstated the spatio-temporal norms of pre-COVID schooling by translating the school timetable into an online format and running live teaching on a lesson-by-lesson basis. While understandable, what was lost in all these examples was the involvement of parents as more equal partners in the learning process and the reinserting of teachers and traditional conceptions of teaching as of primary importance. In a sense schools, it could be argued, were being colonised by parents and what emerged preserved the boundaries between home and school and instituted transmissive pedagogies.

Conclusion

Both COVID-19 lockdowns were undoubtedly very difficult and stressful for teachers and families. Our research, albeit limited in size and scope and thus not generalisable, tentatively points to the importance of two-way communication between schools and parents in order to promote the potential learning gains that accrue when home ‘funds of knowledge’ are valued and capitalised on in supporting children’s identity development as successful learners. This is clearly not a straightforward task as traditional discourses that value teaching as a transmissive activity is still powerful (Allen, Rowan, and Singh 2020). However, we believe that it is one worth striving to achieve. Going forward, we would encourage schools and families to find ways of coming together in dialogue around practical projects that forge links between learning at home and in school. Future practices, post-COVID-19, could ensure that both contexts are valued in making the most of the ‘values, skills, knowledge and interests’ (Grant 2011, 292) that children bring with them to school, as well as enabling them to apply school learning to everyday life activities. In such ways, the isolation of the school from life that many writers have noted, from Dewey (1899) onwards, might be a less pervasive feature of children’s experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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