# Children’s Spaces of Belonging in Schools: Bringing Theories and Stakeholder Perspectives into Dialogue

## Abstract

This paper discusses the question: What is the explanatory power of bringing into dialogue theories of space and place with participatory research approaches that focus on joint perspectives of pupils, teachers and researchers in understanding the dynamics of children’s places of belonging in schools? It advances an argument that understanding children’s spaces of belonging in schools is relatively limited, particularly from a theoretically sophisticated stance or from children’s perspectives. The paper concludes that bringing together concepts of relational space as analytical tools with a participatory approach can create a third space that challenges binary positioning of ‘in/out’ with potential to act as a safe haven for reflection and growth.

Keywords: inclusion; exclusion; belonging; participatory research; space; third space

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## Introduction

Back in 2012 a special issue of *International Journal of Inclusive Education* asked, ‘What is the explanatory power of theories of space and place in understanding processes of exclusion and inclusion in education?’ (Hemingway and Armstrong 2012). This paper asks a related question: *What is the explanatory power of bringing into dialogue theories of space and place with the perspectives of pupils, teachers and researchers in understanding the dynamics of children’s places of belonging in schools?* Thereby, the paper contributes theoretically, drawing together work on space and place, participatory and inclusive research, inclusion/exclusion and belonging to generate more nuanced understandings of processes of inclusion and exclusion in schools.

First, we introduce the core concepts used in the paper before putting them to use in argumentation. Like scholars before us, we distinguish space from place – ‘space being socially produced: a social construct not a physical entity’, something that ‘produces particular forms of activity and sets of relations by configuring the identities and understandings of people who occupy it’ (Lupton 2009, 112). Space, Armstrong (2012, 611) argues, is dynamic; it is constantly ‘being transformed by the activities, circumstances and relationships which work through it’. Space is a ‘performative articulation of power’ (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434). This reflects the shift that Gulson and Symes (2007, 101) detect towards ‘*space as process* and *in process*’ (Crang and Thrift 2000, 3, original emphasis). In contrast, place is more physical – a setting for people and action (D’Alessio 2012) which is, however, also individually appropriated as a social construct (Bourdieu 2018).

The spatial turn, which is expansive and eclectic as a theoretical development (Gulson and Symes 2007), challenges the idea of school places as containers where we can put children together or alongside each other to learn. It also challenges the idea of school places being only socially produced, instead pursuing the notion that space emerges in the interplay of objects, structures and actions (Löw 2001). Hence, spatial arrangements are recognised as socially produced in relation to physical entities, as the relational-spatial models of Soja (1996) and Löw (2001) suggest. The social relations of schools are spatially inscribed, ‘concretely represented – in the social production of space’ (Soja 1996, 146). Examples include who occupies the nicest rooms at the front of the building, who and what is hidden from public view, and how pupils appropriate niches within the prefigurated architecture of schools, how they set them up, decorate them, name them and regulate who is allowed to enter and who is not. So, the spatial turn is a rediscovery of space in the interconnection of physical and social space, either physical space affecting social space or social space producing physical space.

Participatory research seeks to involve the people the research is about, valuing them not just as providers of data but as shapers of the research involved in critical agenda-setting and decision-making (Bourke 2009). Involving teachers and pupils in research often entails disrupting academic spaces, opening them up, making them messy and even configuring them differently (Seale et al. 2015) in order to make reflection and different perspectives on expectations and roles in school possible. Nind (2014) made the argument for bringing inclusive research, which encompasses participatory research, into the sphere of inclusive education. She asserts that while inclusive research and inclusive education both challenge exclusion, inclusive research harnesses and supports the agency of children and teachers in doing so. In this paper, we apply this argument in relation to the specific focus on spaces of belonging in schools – that to understand and foster children’s belonging in schools requires their involvement in research with this goal.

The focus on belonging as a concept and manifestation or tangent of inclusion is important. As Strnadová and Nind (2020) discuss, the concept of belonging is gaining interest across disciplines. In education it has the attraction of being less sullied by competing claims to ownership than the concept of inclusion. It is less travelled and ‘jet-lagged’ (Slee 2004), less diluted by policy interpretations (Hall 2013). Belonging represents ‘a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort and security, and emotional attachment’ (Antonsich 2010, 645). It is about ‘feeling at home’ (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197) in a place, feeling safe and purposeful (Strnadová, Johnson and Walmsley 2018), which is ‘tied to the quality of interaction and acceptance by others’ (Renwick et al. 2019, 9). Belonging, therefore, can be ‘contested and fragile’ (Robinson and Notara 2015, 275) and it requires supportive institutional structures and social attitudes. A conceptualisation of full participation is implied (Hall 2013; Lähdesmäki et al. 2016; Vandenbussche and DeSchauwer 2018). In this way, belonging provides the nurturing ground for cultural development of inclusion in school (Slee 2019). Belonging in terms of interaction, acceptance and purpose is also a goal of participatory research and a nexus point for inclusive education and inclusive research (Nind 2014).

On the basis of these conceptual pillars, we now make the case for interweaving the concepts of place, space and belonging with the perspectives of pupils, teachers and researchers using a participatory approach with a view to better understanding how spaces of belonging in schools may be created and conceptualised.

## Spaces of belonging

There is a body of work on spatial practices in schools applying the theoretical orientation of the spatial turn. Mostly, however, the construction and use of spaces by children and young people have been absent in research on spatial practices in schools. Exceptions include the work of Dunne et al. (2018) invoking the concept of spatial justice in exploring how people are constituted through place and space. In their research, children and young people from four schools in England took photographs representing inclusion and exclusion in their schools. The photographs were used to explore the understandings and experiences of inclusion of them and various adults involved in (trainee) teacher roles. Dunne et al. make an important contribution in bringing spatial theory and perspective to bear on ‘(ex)clusion’, recognising that exclusion and inclusion ‘in part define each other and can exist simultaneously’ (22).

Theoretically rich work on space and belonging from the perspective of children and young people has not been limited to classrooms and formal spaces. Allan and Catts (2014) make use of the concept of social capital in exploring education spaces in drawing upon a series of Scottish case studies. They note that territoriality ‘in the positive sense of membership and belonging’ (224) was evident in one case study in which young people talked about their youth club; unlike school this setting was voluntary and held ‘distinctively different norms and values from school’. Hall (2020) explored socio-spatial responses to gender and sexuality messages among six- to eleven-year-olds in two English primary schools. His ethnographic study built on discussions from queer geographies on how ‘sexed and gendered performances produce space and, conversely, how spatial formations shape how sexual dissidents present and perform their sexualities in public spaces’ (167) and moved into the informal spaces of school toilets, corridors and playgrounds where socio-spatial negotiations of gender and sexualities education took place. Getting the children’s perspectives in formal (focus group) and informal interactions allowed him to see school messages being differently upheld or subverted and the children’s capacity to ‘recuperate heteronormativity through everyday spatial practices beyond the classroom’ (177-78).

Occasionally theoretical and empirical discourses on children’s geographies (e.g. Holloway et al. 2010) and school-oriented discourse on pupils’ spatial practices (e.g. Buchner 2017) address questions of inclusion, exclusion and belonging in depth. Largely though, space has been under-theorised and empirically neglected in education (Gulson and Symes 2007; Allan and Catts 2014) and this is amplified when it comes to the role of ‘space’ in processes of ‘shaping educational exclusion’ (Waitoller and Annamma 2017, 23) and children’s roles in the creation of spaces for belonging. Working with theory means ‘working to unsettle, to destabilize, to shift assumptions in educational studies’ (Gulson and Symes 2007, 98) and we seek to use theory (stemming from spatial, cultural, educational, and methodological roots) in interaction with children’s voices, to open up dialogue about the role of spatial practice for children. A focus on children’s micro-institutional spaces within the spatialities of schooling are important given the view of Moss and Petrie (2002, 41) that children’s spaces are the ‘place for the conduct of local politics around issues of childhood’. We contend that how space is used is important to how children understand their place and positioning in the hierarchies of schooling and we expand on this later in the paper. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic, which has disrupted how spaces for learning are used and socially constructed (Schaefer et al, 2020), prompts thinking afresh about children’s engagement with school spaces.

In considering the processes of inclusion and exclusion, adults in roles as educationalists and policy makers have appreciated the importance of school spaces and places, hence where disabled children are placed for their schooling is a hotly contested issue (Haug 2017). Moreover, adults as theorists have explored the intersections of space and place, power and spatial manifestation of power in ways that help us to appreciate the dynamics of children’s educational belonging. For example, Holt, Lea and Bowlby (2012, 2196) discuss the ‘scaling down’ of the spatialities of exclusion from large-scale segregation to ‘micro exclusions within school spaces’. As ethnographic researchers they show how the institutional space of an autism unit in a mainstream school acted as site for ‘acceptance of difference’, an ‘autistic space’, a ‘container for the abnormally behaving’ and a ‘space of refuge’ (p. 2200). (See also Buchner 2017 Köpfer et al. 2020.) The conceptual distinction is well-established between integration, that is, fitting children into established educational places, placements or spaces not designed for them, and inclusive education, which is more about the creating educational spaces that fit with and around the diversity of children (e.g. Mittler 2000). The idea that inclusive education is about more than physical presence has been rehearsed repeatedly (e.g., Falkmer et al. 2015; Florian and Beaton 2018); inclusion and belonging are perpetually negotiated while ‘the infrastructure of inclusive education is applied to monitor, calibrate and segment school populations’ (Slee 2019, 914).

School placement begins to define children’s identities and access to resources and opportunities. Placement and place have been at the heart of moves towards shared school sites and resourced classes and units where disabled and non-disabled children can be alongside each other and sometimes mix (Warren, Buckingham and Parsons 2020). Children may be moved between ordinary school spaces, where school norms circulate most strongly (Holt et al. 2012), and liminal ones such as therapeutic spaces away from normal school conditions (Atkinson and Robson 2012), positioned as special retreats within ordinary schools (Buchner 2017; Köpfer et al. 2020). Inclusive schools need special places within them, policies claim, because of the heterogeneous nature of the pupils. Hence funds to support inclusion are spent on special rooms with added or removed sensory stimuli for when ‘special’ pupils are deemed to need them*,* whereas children may resist or create their own versions of these semi-exclusive spaces.

In schools, as in other communities, spaces are infused with power (or lack of it). Places and spaces are variably under the surveillance and governance of controlling adults (Cobb, Danby and Farrell 2005). Walking around educational establishments, the spatial hierarchies and relationalities (Hall and Wilton 2017) can be seen and felt in their geography, even if they have been normalised and made familiar in the everyday (Gulson and Symes 2007). As D’Alessio (2012, 522) found, pedagogical places are developed into ‘spaces specifically designed for disabled or non-disabled students and which contribute to the production of students’ identities as “insiders” or “outsiders” of the learning community’.

A spatial reading of what is going on in education policy and school life is important, yet spatialising processes and practices here may be invisible or hard to detect (D’Alessio 2012). D’Alessio (2012) shows how the use of space and place in two lower secondary schools she studied in Italy may contribute to the reproduction of micro-exclusion. Spending time at the schools she saw and heard about an ‘invisible wall’ (526) between disabled and non-disabled students and ‘mechanisms of spatialisation’ (Armstrong 2003, 18) used to segregate or at least control and regulate diversity. This links with Soja’s (1996) ideas that space can determine social practices yet hide its consequences. School spaces are never innocent or neutral (Morgan 2000; Hemingway and Armstrong 2012); they are always prefiguring and canalising social practices (Schatzki 2019). Social space retranslates itself into physical space, which is in part how hierarchies become naturalised. Bourdieu’s (2018 [1991]) spatial theorisation of capitals, ­as being about proximity to goods and distance from undesirables, is helpful in reading how adults construct school spaces: Some children are enabled to enjoy the profits of space (closeness to practical resources and status markers), while some spaces are created to keep undesirables at bay.

Adults have agency and potential to, as Allan and Catts (2014, 218) argue, ‘influence possibilities for developing social capital by altering the nature of school spaces’. Indeed, Anthony-Stevens and Stevens (2017) illustrate this in their ethnographic exploration of an outside of the reservation, community-based and Indigenous-led, Indigenous-serving charter school in the USA. Here, school spaces expose the battle for power when schools have been unsafe spaces for Indigenous peoples. Anthony-Stevens and Stevens (2017) use Appadurai’s (2007) theory of reterritorialization to understand the (re)appropriation processes at work, with adults and students engaging in ‘discursive space mapping’ (334) around where educational success could be achieved. Morgan (2000) and D’Alessio (2012) have highlighted ways in which inequalities may be created and perpetuated through spatial practices that represent values and interests. Hence, it is possible to ‘detect the underlying values and pedagogical, curricular and assessment procedures’ (D’Alessio 2012, 523) occurring within a school space. The spatial turn underlines how placement does not guarantee inclusion, and how exclusion can manifest in ordinary settings, ‘sometimes disguised as inclusive practice’ (D’Alessio 2012, 521). So-called inclusion rooms in schools (which serve to separate some children from others) illustrate what happens when some children lack sufficient capital of a certain kind and do not fully meet the conditions for occupancy of the school space. Adults create an ensemble of sub-spaces within schools. These might be explicitly planned reclusive, respite or well-being spaces (Allan 2012).

Social and particularly spatial theory is helpful for thinking about what different actors do with and to school spaces. For teachers and other adults in schools, the production and appropriation of space is a habitual, reciprocal process, influencing and producing physical space while simultaneously being influenced by prefigured space. Through dialogue with these teachers and other adults, it becomes possible to make explicit the implicit, preconscious and hidden powerful interaction of physical and social space. Next, we look at children’s agency in their socialisation processes as pupils (whose belonging is fragile); we condsider how they are subject to the prefiguration and the hidden consequences of inclusion/exclusion and how they enact their own agency.

### Children’s construction of school spaces

Turning to construction of school space by children, Fay (2018, 407) argues that schools are mainly places of childhood ‘where children’s roles, relations and expectations in society are debated and manifested. They are social worlds often reflecting wider societal tendencies within their walls.’ Within these worlds, recent theories of childhood argue, children are competent active meaning-makers with agency who shape their own lives with their unique perspectives (Betz and Esser 2016; Bollig and Kelle 2016). Children demonstrate their abilities to make meaning and express themselves while enacting their agency in relation to culture and structure. Using the notion of agency from Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 963), we see children and adult practices as habitually performed and embedded into a process informed by the past and oriented toward the future, oscillating between structural contexts and emancipatory self-expression. In school research, agency is used to address structural contexts, inventiveness and reflective choice through the lens of teachers and pupils. As James and Prout (1990, 8) stress, children ‘are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’. The idea that children are active agents of social processes connects with the claim of a relational space theory that children constantly produce and construct spaces within their practices and interactions with their peers as well as adults.

Children’s perspectives illuminate how spatial relations are simultaneously temporal and embodied (Holland, Gordon and Lahelma 2007). Within educational settings, children in the role of pupils negotiate their interactions and presence with adults and each other. These interactions unfold in spaces created for children (by adults) or even developed with them to encourage and support them to become agents of their learning and active participants in society (Ragnarsdottir and Kulbrandstad 2018). As social reality is always spatialised (Soja 1996) and material space has an impact on shaping pupils’ identities and relationships, space is relationally produced and appropriated by children. Accordingly, children’s practices and relations are the key to the production of their spaces within schools and their understanding of spaces in research.

Using social and spatial theory to understand the relationships between children, school spaces, inclusion, exclusion and belonging is limited without bringing such theoretical work into research-based dialogue with children’s and teachers’ perspectives. Valuable insights can be gained into children’s creation and use of space by asking what they do and feel in the spaces of their school. As Jurczyk and Lange (2007, 217) point out, children create and use space in a more flexible system than adults intend, which ‘blurs boundaries’ as learning and playing can take place in the same space. We endorse the argument of Saraví, Bayón and Azaola (2020) that children and young people can help understanding of how school experience is more nuanced and fragmented than simply inclusion/exclusion in the sense of a binary notion of in/out; belonging instead is ‘a socially constructed, fluid, and multidimensional condition, where participation, conflict, and power relations are also involved’ (1109). We share with Saraví et al. (2020) an appreciation that constructing a sense of belonging means sharing local norms and customs so that children can feel at home in particular spaces – spaces they play a part in developing.

Taking into account pupils’ perspectives on the conditions for learning and education in schools as well as the possibilities for pupils to appropriate space and belonging, it becomes clear that the structures address specific (spatial) conditions for the pupils. As Westlund, Rutten and Boekema (2010) indicate, schools are constituted of different forms of space which reach from shared horizontal space, over horizontal space separated by physical space, different multisensoric spaces (Breidenstein 2006), to hierarchical power connoted spaces between and within groups of children and adults. It is the power relations circulating within these spaces that affect the use of and access to social capital in schools (Allan and Joergensen 2021). Because of an unconscious coding of space, marginalised agents are often considered as being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place (Cresswell 1996). As Holt (2004) summarises, ‘school spaces are integral to the reproduction of positive and negative (dis)abled identities’. Through power relations, barriers to children’s doing and being in these spaces can be created (Nind, Flewitt and Payler 2010), thereby reproducing norms of expected development and preparation for expected adulthood (Holt 2004). Pupils who do not match with these ableist expectations within a mainly achievement-based setting may be othered (Buchner 2017; Allan and Joergensen 2021). As belonging is relational and performative, however, children and adolescents in schools work actively and tirelessly at being accepted, constructing their identities in particular spaces (Saraví et al. 2020).

Since children have a constant drive for creative production (Olsson 2013), they encounter and experience space on a physical level through their bodily movements and senses as well as socially through interactions with others (Hackett, Procter and Krummerfeld 2018). Therefore, agency and space intermingle through children acting on or towards spatial restrictions – they constantly and unconsciously create and produce (unexpected) spaces (Massey 2005). Consequently, ‘the chance of space’, as Massey (2005) calls it, understood as an unknown element of change that connects spatial routines and patterns of familiar spaces, is challenged by children’s imaginations, feelings, memories, senses and emotions which may (re)produce and construct places as welcoming or pleasant (Trell and Van Hoven 2010) as places where they belong. Such welcoming spaces can, according to Power and Bartlett (2018), be conceptualised as ‘safe havens’ – created or found – where they feel welcomed and free to be themselves. These include relational spaces, places to rest, remember, engage with other people, enjoy insider status or pass relatively unnoticed. Hence, space is constitutive of personhood and social webs in which safe havens are embedded (Fay 2018).

Seeking belonging can involve the rejection of the pathologisation of stigmatised spaces (Saraví et al, 2020). Thereby relationships can be enriched in shared spaces, third spaces (Veck 2009) or counter-spaces. Third spaces, as we explain further in the paper, are hybrid spaces where new things can happen. Counter-spaces in school environments are where pupils can affirm and validate their (racial and other) identities (Carter 2007). Counter-spaces serve different purposes; they can be formal or informal, academic or social. Creating counter-spaces can be a coping strategy in response to racism, sexism or ableism and a means to build peer-networks. Clearly, a relational approach that acknowledges children as being situated agents is needed when creating research spaces for exploring with children and these research spaces cannot be ‘detached from the meanings inscribed on them’ (Fay 2018, 408).

## Research disrupting spaces and creating new spaces

In this final section, we turn to dialogue between children, teachers and researchers through participatory research and to the value of this in disrupting spaces and creating new spaces. To date, research that has addressed pupils’ spatial practices has often asked them to show where they like to be in school (e.g. Buchner 2017) as part of seeking their voices and perspectives on the use of space in school. Thereby, children contribute perspectives on where they feel they belong, but with greater involvement in research, their belonging might be transformed rather than just reflected upon. Participatory research exploring spatial practices *with* children and teachers permits rethinking of how spaces and identities are performed (Thomson 2007) and, of particular interest to the argument of this paper, participatory research could support the emergence of hybrid spaces or ‘third spaces’ (Bhabha 1994, 2011). Participatory research brings different stakeholder perspectives into dialogue, which Seale et al. (2015) argue creates a third space of negotiation and shared power. Creation of a third space in this respect means dissociating from the field of practice and is always associated with friction, with a disruption within the interstices – meaning the ‘overlap and displacement of domains of difference’ (Bhabha 1994, 2) – of powerful hierarchies between stakeholders in (educational) organizations in order to create a collective yet demanding experience. It can be transformative yet still loaded with pre-determinations and leading assumptions.

Disrupting spaces to create a third space in a praxeological sense means creating a discrepancy between the institutionalised role (defined as an ‘expectation’ to act in a specific way, fulfilling the routines and cultures of, for instance, an educational organization within the role of being a pupil, professional, or researcher) and the individual and personal (research) habitus. In this respect, space is not a formal learning object within a teaching subject but an existential physical and social phenomenon that pupils, professionals and researchers construct and appropriate. This might help each to reflect on institutional roles (so-called ‘memberships’, Goffman 1958) and their interruptions and borderlines as well as their potentials for belonging. It emphasises the need to look at the ‘openness’ (Davies 1989, 83) of the individual and personal appropriation of space, the dissociation with one’s expected role in the setting (e.g. Wagner-Willi 2005). Hence, pupils, teachers, and academic researchers engaging with participatory research can dissociate with everyday practices by creating a space where hybrid identifications are given space and where cultural transformations could be initiated (Bhabha 1994) in relation to the physical and social spaces given. Liminal space or ‘in-betweenness’ has been created in research in schools, and in autoethnographic explorations of the construction of the research role as in-between the research and practice system (Sigurdardottir and Puroila 2018). The status of researching in-between is a multidimensional construct of the institutionalised role and the reflective self, a transmitter between research and practice systems, and a hybrid and third space between stakeholders’ perspectives and (cultural) identities.

Stemming from a postcolonial and poststructuralist background and the negotiations on subaltern, oppressed and vulnerable groups (e.g. Spivak 1988), third space theory has been of particular interest to disciplines dealing with cultural phenomena of alterity, borders and communication. Bhabha (1994) outlined the theory of third space as a theory of the ‘in-between’ of cultures, meeting in a specific framework of time and space. He puts the meeting of cultures as a focal point, while also being suspicious of any kind of bipolar conceptualisation. Therefore, he sketches a third space as a crossing of borders in which the border differentiates, and makes visible the differences in the way of splitting and bounding. It makes visible the specificity and the identity. Creating a third space, or specifically Soja’s (1996) ‘Thirdspace’, is the product of ‘thirding’ of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that involves imagined spaces, and new identities too – a kind of creative restructuring. This echoes the description by Allan and Catts (2014, 225) of their ‘Inclusive Learning Network [which] utilised a neutral space not linked to either work or community … within which parent and teacher members engaged in bridging practices which brought them closer to each other, and an altered sense of self’.

Within participatory research, the creation of a third space and its associated dialogue and identity work, has potential to create the ‘democratic spaces of radical inclusivity’ and ‘diverse democratic spaces of inquiry’ that Torre (2005, 258) describes. This necessitates, however, that individuals and spaces become seen as under construction, in their own form of ‘spatial practice’ (Lefebvre 1991; Thomson 2007). Our argument is that spatial theory cannot sit outside participatory research as a way of looking in at and reflecting on it, rather that bringing theory and perspectives together in dialogue in participatory research *is* spatial practice.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have adopted relational approaches to space as being an entity between ‘materiality, social structures and action’. This relationality functions both ways such that spaces in schools can be seen as a materialised expression of a hierarchical relation of pupil/teacher, which is produced in everyday action and at the same time, ‘material arrangements ubiquitously prefigure the perpetuation of practices, that is, the repetition or redirection of the doings and sayings that compose particular practices’ (Schatzki 2012, 17). The latter does not mean a spatial deterministic view, rather a ‘prefiguration’ (Schatzki 2019, 43) meaning a latent influence, ‘the bearing of the present on the future’. In exploring how dialogue between social, spatial theory and different perspectives (as in participatory research) can be beneficial, prefiguration of spaces inevitably shapes the paths taken and spaces created. Yet, as Holland et al. (2007) argue, while spatial practices may be habitual, they can also be reflective and creative. We recommend that empirical research seeking to understand the multidimensional and complex layers involved in children’s belonging in schools needs to foreground the hidden consequences of physical and social space in school alongside supporting children’s agency and creativity in the research process. We suggest that the ‘in-betweenness’ described above can be explored by building a third space with potential to function as a safe haven within the research and education crossover process.

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