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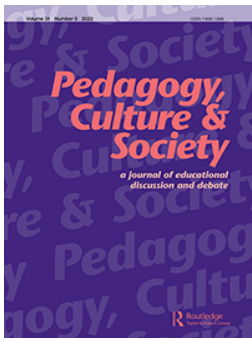
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A systematic literature review of Third Space theory in research with children (aged 4-12) in multicultural educational settings

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a systematic literature review of Bhabha's Third Space theory in empirical research focussing on children (aged 4–12 years) in multicultural educational institutions. Communities around the world are becoming ever more diverse and, within educational policy, there is a resultant paradox between increasing diversity on the one hand and complexity reduction through curriculum standardisation on the other. Third Space theory has gained significant popularity within educational research as a powerful lens which practitioners can adopt to support children in culturally diverse communities to fuse knowledge from home and school contexts. This paper reviews empirical research that utilised the third space to support children's development of academic skills while simultaneously nurturing their agency and identities. The paper also draws attention to contemporary applications of Third Space theory with some cautions. While modifications to theory over time are inevitable, some adaptations are far removed from its founding principles of transformation and liberation. Hence, the appropriateness of using the term Third Space becomes questionable. The article concludes with recommendations for future practitioners, policy makers and researchers to consider when adopting Third Space theory as a framework for supporting children's learning and identity development in educational institutions.

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Third Space; super-diversity; multicultural; early years; primary Education; elementary Education

Introduction

This article presents a systematic literature review of Third Space theory in empirical research focussing on children (aged 4–12 years) in multicultural educational institutions. Linguistically and culturally diverse communities are increasingly prevalent in the UK, and indeed, globally (Crul 2016; De Bock 2015; Sepulveda, Syrett, and Lyon 2011; Vertovec 2007, 2019). In these contexts, children move between home, community and school settings, and encounter multiple discourses – discourses that may bear little resemblance to each other. This dissonance can cause confusion, or even personal conflict for children who are attempting to reconcile different cultural identities (Guss 2010; Yahya and Wood 2017) and the situation is

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exacerbated by increasing mechanisms of standardisation within education (Lenz Taguchi 2010). Bhabha's Third Space theory (Bhabha 1990, 1994) has gained popularity within educational research as a meaningful lens through which practitioners can understand and support children to fuse knowledge from home and school contexts, thereby deepening their understanding of new concepts, while also emphasising their agency to craft their own identities (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lo'pez, and Turner 1997; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejada 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995; Moje et al. 2004; Sjödin 2022; Tatham-Fashanu 2021). The Third Space is an in-between space (Bhabha 1990, 1994) where 'cultural boundaries meet and blur' (Smith 2008, 8) allowing people to synthesise elements of different identities and create new, hybrid identities and knowledge. The Third Space is particularly appropriate in early years and primary school contexts as children 'create their own unique identities from their own unique understandings' (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2001, 117).

With the above context in mind, this literature review considers how the concept of Third Space has been adapted and applied in primary (elementary) schools. The analysis focuses on research set in primary (or elementary) schools, encompassing the age range of 4–12 years old.

In this paper I begin by presenting the context of increasingly diverse communities, and the associated complexity reduction within educational policy worldwide. This is followed by a summary of Bhabha's Third Space theory, its adaptation to educational contexts and the key critiques that have been developed by researchers considering contemporary applications of Third Space theory to education. I then present a systematic literature review of empirical research that adopts Third Space theory in relation to children in multicultural early years or primary school settings (aged 4–12). In doing so, I explore the ways in which Third Space theory has been used and adapted to different contexts. The final discussion addresses some of the aforementioned critiques and proposes future directions for Third Space theory in educational research.

By systematically reviewing the ways in which the Third Space has been used in empirical research, this paper contributes to contemporary discussions around education in multicultural settings in two ways. First I pull together an array of strategies that can be drawn upon by academics, policy makers and practitioners to expand their own repertoires of pedagogical approaches. Second, this paper makes an original contribution to the scholarship through its in-depth analysis of how the concept of the Third Space has been applied, highlighting where misinterpretations have taken place, and suggesting recommendations for future research that can support children's individual and collective identity development within the context of educational institutions.

Complexity reduction in educational policy

Due to increased, and more complex trends in international migration, it is ever more common that communities today are characterised by a growing 'diversification of diversity', in terms of a multiplicity of factors, including ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, social, economic backgrounds as well as routes of migration, education levels, status and rights (De Bock 2015; Sepulveda, Syrett, and Lyon 2011; Vertovec 2007, 2019). In contrast, neoliberal globalisation is bolstered by 'hegemonic, monocultural logic' (de Sousa Santos 2003, 240) where counter-hegemonic practices are trivialised or repressed, and therefore

policy makers tend to respond by attempting to simplify diversity through 'reduction' (Mayblin 2019).

This is certainly the case for education where policies lean towards pre-determined, universal goals and linear, one-dimensional, curricula (Lenz Taguchi 2010). On a global scale it can be seen that 'homogenization of educational forms and modalities . . . are very clearly evident within and between settings' (Apple, Ball, and Armando Gandin 2010, 8). Gough (2010) describes how 'educational policies and curriculum documents . . . function as homeostatic devices, regulating the diverse inputs of students and teachers by bringing them within closed circuits of corrective feedback in order to maintain stability and equilibrium' (51). To achieve this, education is mainly organised around 'outcomes' that are deemed important and curricula through which these outcomes are to be achieved (Osberg and Biesta 2008). This arrangement has become so pervasive that parents, teachers, policy makers and even students accept that, generally speaking, education is the transfer of pre-set learning goals from the educator to the learners.

On the one hand, Watkins (2011) conjectures 'complexity reduction is a necessary aspect of dealing with complex social systems' (846) and, indeed, it is difficult to imagine education as an entirely open system. Furthermore, Watkins (2011) argues that for equity to be achievable, there must be some forms of regulation. On the other hand, rigid parameters around curriculum content and standardised assessment can be seen as problematic as they delimit the possibilities of learning, thereby quashing the motivation for educators to encourage creativity or transformational forms of meanings (Tatham-Fashanu 2021). In addition, the 'pre-set goals' model of education raises significant questions around whose knowledge is valued and, by implication, whose knowledge is delegitimised (Ball 2013; Foucault 2010; MacNaughton 2005).

Ultimately, complexity reduction is neither inherently good, nor inherently bad – rather it is a question of what one wishes to achieve (Biesta 2010). If the sole purpose of education is academic achievement, then complexity reduction is a valuable means to plan, assess and monitor such outcomes. An alternative view of education might see its role as broader, supporting children to make sense of multiple, sometimes competing, discourses; to mediate these through a deeper understanding of the multidimensionality of various cultural contexts; to construct and reconstruct their own identities; and to build relationships with others by acknowledging and understanding the heterogeneity of identities that exist. Critical engagement with the pedagogical challenges of cultural diversity moves educational institutions towards being 'emancipatory, not discriminatory' (Ang 2010, 51). Third Space theory has been posited as a productive avenue for addressing these challenges, as I will now explain.

Third space theory

Postcolonial thinking deconstructs the colonial and neo-colonial logic of Eurocentrism and addresses the issues of power and inequality that such discourses entail (Karanja 2010). The influential post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha emphasises that 'culture' is a social construction, characterised by temporality, fluidity and agency. Thus, Bhabha rejects the essentialised view of 'cultures' as monolithic, fixed categories, arguing that:

all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation. . .hierarchical claims to an inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures and untenable (1994, 54–55)

Bhabha thus challenges the idea that communities are stable entities with clear boundaries and 'pure' cultures, and rather he focuses on the liminal spaces between different cultural discourses. Bhabha uses the term 'hybridity' to encapsulate how cultures exist in the 'beyond', 'a space of intervention in the here and now' (1994, 10). Bhabha calls this in between, hybrid space the Third Space, full of tensions, struggles and contestations between different cultural discourses. He argues that the Third Space is in a constant state of flux where people are 'free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous, Intertextual temporality of cultural difference' (1994, 55). By drawing attention to the temporal qualities of the Third Space, Bhabha argues that people are liberated from the constraints of restrictive constancies of national traditions, and, thus, the Third Space, 'transforms the meanings of the colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future' (1994, 55–56).

In short, the Third Space is a space of transformative potential where people are not restricted to adhering to one or other set of dominant values and traditions. Instead, the Third Space is inherently productive, and people, individually or collectively, can create their own identities, drawing on elements of different discourses that are 'appropriated, translated, rehistoricized (sic) and read anew' (Bhabha 1994, 55). As such, the Third Space recognises how people resist hegemonic narratives of dominant ideologies through a process of ongoing negotiation and transformation. Negotiation is not just compromise, as it is commonly understood to mean, rather negotiation is political and includes acts of subversion, transgression and resistance. In addition, the process of negotiation is ongoing, and each new situation that arises requires a fresh negotiation (1990, 1997). For Bhabha, the Third Space was about the creation of new, transgressive and potentially revolutionary meanings (MacDonald 2019).

Third space theory in education

An extensive body of research has appropriated Third Space theory to explore how it can be applied in educational contexts – so much so that Richardson Bruna (2009) refers to Third Space as a 'fetish' in education. A pivotal moment in the history of Third Space theory in education occurred when Gutiérrez and her colleagues used the concept in educational settings (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lo'pez, and Turner 1997; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejada 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995). Gutiérrez et al.'s earlier work highlighted the third space as a social space of resistance that can disrupt traditional hierarchies of power in the classroom (Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995).

In subsequent work, Gutiérrez et al. (1997) develop the Third Space as a new pedagogical orientation. Moving away from the radical resistance of their earlier work, the authors show how spaces of contestation and tension can be productive spaces of collaboration and learning. Following this, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) interpret Third Spaces as '*zones of development, thus expanding learning*' (286, italics in the original). In this work, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) recognise that learning communities are 'polycontextual, multi-voiced and multiscripted' (287), and that tensions between competing discourses are

potential sites for innovation. Thus, the authors conclude, 'a purposeful use of hybridity and diversity stimulates the transformation of activities into robust contexts of development' (1999, 287). Gutiérrez et al.'s (1999) work emphasises transformation in line with Bhabha's work but also adapts the Third Space to be 'purposeful' (287), used to facilitate development.

The next seminal development of Third Space in education occurred when Moje et al. (2004) applied the theory to scientific literacy learning in a two-way bilingual immersion school. In a similar trajectory to Gutiérrez, Moje et al. (2004) talk of 'constructing' and 'generating' a Third Space. However, Moje et al. (2004) draw a distinction between the postcolonial work of Bhabha (1994) and the 'more educationally and linguistically explicit' (43) work of Gutiérrez. For Moje and her colleagues, the Third Space emphasises mutual understanding rather than conflict and tension, thereby emphasising a space where different discourses are valued, and neither is privileged above the other. The authors acknowledge transformational Third Space practices where the curriculum can be reframed, however their focus remains throughout on finding ways to mediate target skills, such as, naming and classifying solids, liquids and gases through students' existing skills, like their ability to name and classify songs and genres. Moje et al. (2004) deviate from previous iterations of third space theory in education as they recommend teachers play an active role in third-space construction, suggesting that they need to listen carefully to the multiple funds of knowledge their students bring to the classroom and 'plan for the active construction of the Third Space' (65).

Critiques of third space in education

There are two main critiques laid against contemporary reformulations of Third Space theory in education research. The first, outlined by Richardson Bruna (2009), draws attention to how both Gutiérrez and Moje et al. reformulate the Third Space into something to be *achieved*. Doing so 're-centers the teacher and the school as the locus of epistemological authority and control' (Richardson Bruna 2009, 225). Richardson Bruna (2009) is concerned that attention is being directed towards how teachers can 'create', 'construct' or 'generate' the Third Space. Instead, Richardson Bruna (2009) suggests the focus should be on 'how students bring hybrid practices along and productively use them not only for enhancing their learning but also for influencing teaching as well' (227).

The second line of critique regarding modern adaptations of Third Space highlights how it has become frictionless and devoid of power relations (MacDonald 2019). Smagorinsky (2022) highlights how Moje et al.'s (2004) adaptation of Third Space has no acknowledgement of oppression, no resistance, and no room for questioning the dominance of established Western knowledge. Instead, Smagorinsky (2022) points out that in Moje et al.'s (2004) version of Third Space, student knowledge and institutional knowledge are both presented as valuable and able to coexist in dialogue with one another. Moje et al.'s (2004) article has been influential, as evidenced by its 788 citations (see Scopus database, September 2023), and as a result this more palatable, domesticated conception of Third Space has become commonplace among scholars in the field of education (Smagorinsky 2022), even though it lacks the transgressive, politically activist nature of Bhabha's original conceptualisation.

With this summary of the Third Space concept and the most significant developments of Bhabha's original model in mind, the next section considers the ways in which it has been operationalised in an important area of education.

Methodology

In order to explore how Third Space theory has been conceptualised in research relating to children in multicultural settings, a systematic review of the literature was undertaken. This section presents (i) the eligibility criteria, (ii) the search strategy, including the consulted information sources, and (iii) the process of selecting eligible studies.

Eligibility criteria

The SPIDER approach (Sample/Phenomenon of Interest/Design/Evaluation/Research type) was adopted to retrieve and evaluate eligible studies (Cooke, Smith, and Booth 2012). The SPIDER approach was developed to assist in the selection of qualitative studies (Cooke, Smith, and Booth 2012) and as an alternative to the PICO (Population/Intervention/Comparison/Outcome) tool that is well established in reviews of quantitative studies. The SPIDER approach is specifically designed to assist in the selection of qualitative studies (Cooke, Smith, and Booth 2012). The SPIDER table below (Table 1) summarises the eligibility criteria that were used to select articles and is based on Cooke et al. (2012). 'I' denotes 'inclusion'. 'E' denotes 'exclusion':

The sample was restricted to articles that included children aged 4–12 as the research aim is to explore the use of Third Space theory in relation to children in formal educational settings (as distinct from teenagers and adults), thus using this age range allowed for the inclusion of articles based on research in primary/elementary school settings. It is appreciated that 4–12 is still a broad range and within that there will be variations in expectations placed on the children by school and society. That said, the articles included in this literature review spanned overlapping age ranges, so it would not have been possible to extract data pertaining to a narrower age range than this.

Third Space theory has been adopted in a broad range of research relating to children, notably, in children's literacies and in children's engagement with digital technologies but given that the focus of this paper is to examine how Third Space theory is applied in

Table 1. Spider criteria framework for article selection based on Cooke et al. (2012).

Sample	I: Children in Early Years and Primary School (aged 4–12) E: Adolescents (aged 13–18); adults I: Multilingual, multicultural, ethnically, and culturally diverse contexts E: monolingual, monocultural settings
Phenomenon of interest	I: Third Space theory in relation to children in multicultural educational settings E: Third Space theory in relation to other aspects of research with children, e.g., digital technologies, literacies.
Design	I: Empirical studies E: Meta-analyses, systematic reviews, theoretical papers, (quasi-) experiments
Evaluation	I: Conceptualisations of Third Space, application of Third Space theory E: Studies that mention Third Space, but did not use it as a theoretical lens
Research type	I: Qualitative E: Quantitative

multicultural settings, studies which were not primarily focused on this context were excluded.

The review included studies that used Third Space theory to understand or analyse findings. Studies that mentioned Third Space superficially but did not use Third Space as a theoretical lens were excluded.

Finally, a key focus of the review was the real-life application of Third Space theory in smaller, more detailed studies; this is not easily captured by quantitative studies that have larger data sets and try to identify broader patterns.

The search strategy

The search used four databases: Scopus, Pro-quest Educational Database, Emerald and Educational Research Abstracts. These were selected as they are the largest databases in social science and educational research. The search strategy was designed to locate studies that were conducted that involved children (4–12), either directly as participants, or indirectly as practitioners reflected on their work with children. The research took place in linguistically and culturally diverse pre-school or primary school settings, or their international equivalents. This criterion was identified during the eligible study selection phase (see below) by reading the abstract and/or site and participants information of each of the articles to ensure they stated explicitly that the children involved were bicultural or multicultural (see the [Table A1](#) in [appendix 1](#) for more details on the diverse nature of each of the settings in papers included in this literature review). The key component in all studies was the 'Third Space'. The search terms (thirdspace OR 'Third Space') were used in conjunction with child* and educationx. Studies that focused on teacher education, preservice education or higher education were then filtered out. An unavoidable limitation was that all the studies included were published in English as that is the language I speak.

Third Space theory is a relatively new theory that was coined in the early 1990s, thus studies from all dates were included, but only peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters from edited collections were included in the literature review. Aside from the peer-review criteria, no further assessment for rigour was conducted as it was perceived that a broad range of studies, including small scale research, were potentially pertinent to the literature review.

The process of selecting eligible studies

The above search strategy produced 864 articles and book chapters. The titles and abstracts of these were then scanned for relevance to the theme of the search, namely that of multicultural communities. As a result, for example, articles that primarily focussed on digital technology as a Third Space were rejected. Duplications across databases were also identified and removed at this point and as a result 89 sources were found to meet the initial selection criteria. The articles were then searched for the appearance of the term 'Third Space' and those that mentioned the theory in passing, rather than as a central theme, were excluded. In total, this search strategy generated 64 papers/book chapters. These were then reviewed to determine the age of the participants, in accordance with the eligibility criteria outlined in [Table 1](#). Studies that only looked at children above the

age of 12 or adults were disregarded. Finally, studies that took place outside educational institutions such as pre-schools, primary schools and elementary schools were removed. A total of 12 studies were found to have met all the eligibility criteria and constitute the data set on which further analysis was undertaken (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Data analysis

The articles were read in depth to understand the conceptualisation of the Third Space that each paper adopted. The contents of the articles were then coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021) to understand the different characteristics of the Third Space that each article described. I began by highlighting all words that referred to Third Space in the eligible articles. I then grouped similar descriptions of the Third Space together to form loose categories. I then reviewed the articles again and summarised actions and processes taking place in the articles and added these to the adjectives used to describe the Third Space, adding these into the tentative groups I had constructed. Next, through an iterative process of constant comparison between the categories I had constructed and the conceptualisations of the Third Space in the eligible articles, I solidified the categories into three umbrella categories: Transformative, Bridging and Complexity Reduction. The titles of the categories were selected as they refer to centrally organising concepts that draw all the codes together. However, as will be revealed in the conclusion, some studies straddle the boundary between categories.

A summary of the articles, research sites and participant characteristics can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

Transformative

In a previous article, I argued that different spaces in educational institutions inhibit or enable Third-Space creation (Tatham-Fashanu 2021). In this prior research, I presented a vignette that took place in the role play area of a classroom in a super-diverse school in England, at a time when children, aged four and five, were engaged in ‘choosing’: the children could choose where they wanted to be, who they wanted to be with and what they wanted to do. The child-initiated play that took place during such ‘choosing time’ frequently yielded rich moments of third-space creation, with new ideas and meanings produced by children in a transformative space at the nexus between children’s multiple funds of knowledge. The teachers’ presence tended to interrupt or inhibit the Third Space, and I recommended that, if teachers are to have a role in Third Space creation, it must be to facilitate, encourage or extend the Third Space that children create, for example, by dedicating more time, space and resources for children to engage in extended periods of free, child-led play (Tatham-Fashanu 2021). Ultimately, this prior research argues that the Third Space is complex and requires an appreciation of spontaneity and uncertainty. A teacher-produced ‘Third Space’ that is in line with predetermined learning trajectories is inherently reductive and skews that locus of control towards to curriculum, intended learning outcomes and teacher expectations – and as such can be seen as a ‘contradiction in terms’ of the core Third Space concept.

Yahya and Wood (2017) report on the findings from interviews and with nineteen immigrant mothers and their children, aged 5–7, living in Canada. The authors

describe how children can experience cultural dissonance between home (first space) and school (second space) cultures, and that discontinuity can lead to negative effects, such as identity confusion and feelings of marginality. Yahya and Wood (2017) argue that play can be utilised as a Third Space between home and school. In this sense, play allows children to explore possible selves and to produce creative forms of cultural identity that are different from their parents' identity and, thus, help them to navigate the culture of the second space. The interviews with the mothers and children revealed how teachers can implement strategies to support children utilising play as a bridge between home and school. Examples of this approach include encouraging children to bring familiar toys from home or supporting children to interact socially with others when they lacked the skills or confidence to do so. Yahya and Wood (2017) theorise play as a bridge between home and school contexts, however, the bridge does not simply integrate elements from different discourses: the bridge is a hybrid place that is created where 'children's funds of knowledge from the first and second spaces merge, fuse and form new knowledge' (2017, 316).

Though Yahya and Wood's (2017)'s research does not set out to challenge dominant hegemonic discourses present in the school setting, it is the creation of *new knowledge* that is key to understanding their conceptualisation of Third Space as transformative.

Piipponen and Karlsson (2021) investigate an intercultural 'Storycrafting' and drawing exchange between students in a primary school in Finland and Belgium. The activity consisted of each class telling the other a story, then the other class drawing pictures and adding details to the original story. The authors view the Third Space as more than just a subject being 'stuck between two cultures' (2021, 3), rather the research is underpinned by the premise that children are creators of culture. Piipponen and Karlsson (2021) emphasise the ongoing negotiation that took place within and between the two communities through processes such as imagining, and discussing, and they describe how the study reveals that 'over time the two communities grow together in the Third Space to form a shared narrative culture' (2021, 3). Crucially, the Storycrafting method opened up a Third Space where children could resist institutional, hegemonic narratives and develop their own student-led goals.

Valdez-Gainer and Gainer (2020) examined the attempts of the teacher and co-author (Nancy Valdez-Gainer) to avoid her second grade Spanish-English dual language class simply 'regurgitating' social justice curriculum units. Valdez-Gainer and Gainer (2020) explore how a drama-based, story-centred pedagogy can support a community of writers and possibly open up Third Spaces that enable students and teachers to become a community of practice, to develop collective agency and emphasise communal responsibility. The article describes how Nancy Valdez-Gainer selected a range of multicultural children's literature with themes of community organising and social activism. Following this, children were encouraged to connect these to their own lives and discuss what it means to feel responsibility to one's community. The children were then given the opportunity to tell their own stories and create group dramatisations of these stories. The authors reflect consciously on their own privilege and 'try to interrupt the mainstream hierarchies of whiteness and patriarchy' (2020, 933), thereby facilitating the use of the Third Space as a means to distribute expertise between teachers/researchers and the children.

Bridging

In their article, Di Stefano and Camicia (2018) report on their observations of a social studies class in a dual language (Spanish and English), third grade classroom. The article describes how the students engaged in reflective tasks that explored themes of identity and belonging. Their teacher, Mrs Ramírez, adapted the core content of the curriculum and employed instructional strategies to mediate content interculturally, encourage student participation and support the students' learning. In their discussion, the authors state:

The dialogical approach of the teacher emphasised her creation of a Third Space where students could share their identities and discuss issues relevant to communities ranging from the local to the global to the glocal (Di Stefano and Camicia 20,018, 128)

From this quotation it can be seen that the objective of the social studies programme, and the Third Space within it, was to explore students' multiple identities and perspectives. It will also be noted that, on the one hand this sentiment echoes Bhabha's ideas but, on the other, the Third Space was created by Mrs Ramírez in order for the students and the teacher to enter into conversation with each other.

In their article, López-Robertson and Schramm-Pate (2013) explore how an 'emergent bilingual' girl, Gabriela, used personal stories to make connections between her life experiences and the literature she read in school. However, the article does not fully clarify who 'creates' the Third Space – it describes how the teacher, Mrs Pérez, created a Third Space in her second-grade language arts classroom (46), but then also says the Third Space 'is created by children who are enabled by educators to interact, inquire, seek, discover, and make meanings in and of texts that are multivoiced, personal and relevant' (47). Ultimately, the article defines the Third Space as:

An arena where their language, culture, ideas, opinions, and thoughts are not only valued but included in an engagement with official knowledge texts (53)

For López-Robertson and Schramm-Pate (2013), the Third Space is a space where children can merge their experiences from home with the US school's sanctioned curriculum – both of which are seen as valuable and important. Mrs Pérez's literature class enabled Gabriela to read in her home language, Spanish, and to tell her own stories in relation to the text, in doing so, facilitating the Third Space as a bridge between home and school life.

Karlsson et al. (2020) present data from four students (aged 8–11), newly arrived in Sweden, and their engagement in a translanguaging science classroom (TSC) where they could use Swedish and Arabic. The authors describe the TSC as a 'meeting space' between everyday discourse and academic discourse, in which students can relate, integrate and interweave science content with the students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this Third Space, negotiation occurs and allows the appropriation of scientific language and the relating of the scientific content to students' prior experience outside of school. Among their findings, the authors state that 'a TSC improves the probability that students understanding of the subject will increase' (Karlsson, Nygård Larsson, and Jakobsson 2020, 19) and 'this also seems to create a desire to continue learning' (2019, 19). In their research the dominant discourses presented in the science curriculum are uncontested and exist smoothly alongside the students' prior knowledge.

In 2009, Fitts examined the ways that fifth graders (10–11 years old) and their teachers constructed Third Spaces in a dual-language school. Fitts (2009) describes how the Third Space was mostly used as a bridge between school-based and home-based knowledge and discourses. Data collected from participant observation, audio recordings, interviews and the collection of artefacts centred around academic activities and Third Space creation. Using Moje et al.'s (2004) taxonomy for thinking about Third Space, Fitts (2009) identifies how the majority of classroom interactions were either a bridge between students' home community, popular culture and school discourses; or the Third Space was a navigational space where teachers assist students in applying their prior knowledge in order to succeed in mastering the practices and norms used in academic spaces. Fitts (2009) demonstrates that there were some examples of the Third Space being used as a transformational space, for example, code-switching in the classroom has the potential to be used as a means to enrich and enhance the bilingual and bicultural development of students.

Wiltse (2015) describes how Canadian Aboriginal students, aged 7 and 8, engaged in a literacy project at a Heritage Fair Programme that enabled them to merge their funds of knowledge with school literacies. The students participated in examining and documenting linguistic and cultural practices in their local communities and 'to create Third Spaces of enhanced literacy learning' (Wiltse 2015, 62). The article demonstrated how using out-of-school lives as a scaffold for literacy learning supported students who struggled with academic literacies. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that the project met the 'objective to improve literacy learning for Aboriginal students by merging the out of school resources of students with school literacies' (2015, 65). The article values students' funds of knowledge and supports their autonomy in selecting a topic of their choice to explore in depth, however, the expectations of academic literacy remain uncontested.

Kloetzer et al. (2022) review the strategies individual teachers employed to welcome mobile children, aged 8–12, in the context of public schools in Switzerland. Kloetzer et al. (2022) challenge the dominant deficit perspective of mobile students and encourage teachers to recognise and acknowledge the diverse languages, skills and capacities they possess. The authors argue that:

Studies suggest that in order to engage in school tasks, children need to make sense of the situation...sense-making can be supported by helping the children to create links across spheres of experience (2022, 478)

Within the context of public schools in Switzerland, it appears that appreciating students' prior knowledge and experience is quite a novel idea and teachers need to take the initiative to go beyond the prescribed educational policy to achieve this. That said, it is clear that the motivation for teachers to do so is to improve the children's educational attainment levels.

Complexity reduction

Among the articles examined, there were instances where authors claimed certain practices were transformative, yet it was difficult to understand how this was the case and, contrarily, appeared to reproduce dominant discourses.

Prasad's (2012) work took place in a culturally and linguistically diverse setting in a French-language elementary school in Canada. Prasad summarises four types of teaching activities that took place across the school (Prasad 2012, 203–204) that acknowledged students' multicultural and multilingual resources. These activities could potentially validate other perspectives and challenge traditional discourses, which would be in line with Bhabha's conceptualisation of the Third Space. However, in this 2012 article, Prasad's data focuses on the children's engagement in a choir where they learned French songs. Prasad states that the singing teacher seeks to 'foster students' pluralistic repertoires and inclusive identity formation' (Prasad 2012, 206), and whilst this may well be the case, Prasad then presents an example of how the children were taught a hymn about the Franco-Ontarian flag, 'Mon Beau Drapeau' (206–207). Thus, it is difficult to see how the children learning a pre-existing, monolingual song, particularly one with nationalist connotations, can be seen as a transformative practice in the Third Space.

Gallagher's (2016) research examines 'sharing time' interactions between Mrs Lake and her culturally and linguistically diverse kindergarten class (in the USA). The article is based on the premise that academic language is important for students' success in school and focuses on the role of the personal narrative genre as a Third Space in which young children are socialised into the academic register. Throughout the article, the teacher is in control, communicating clear expectations through prompts and feedback that yield 'language demands'. Twelve language demands on student narrators are listed, including 'recognise teacher intent in granting the floor and ending turn at talk' (388) and 'speak in complete sentences' (388). There are also four demands on peer interlocutors, including 'Bid for the floor using established classroom behaviour of hand-raising' (388). Of the 'sharing time' routine, Gallagher reports, 'The norms and expectations of sharing time established an orderly, rule-governed, routine event for practicing with language demands' (2016, 389). The article emphasises that:

Taking on the persona of a competent, participatory student is important in and of itself, as it allows students to display an identity that should lead to further success in school. (2016, 390)

Finally, the article praises Mrs Lake's verbal scaffolding that helped students to produce more 'target-like[results] than that which a student could produce alone' (390). Thus, it will be seen that in Gallagher's (2016) article, the Third Space is a mechanism for moving students from their starting points towards language demands that are the 'seeds of an academic register' (395). Gallagher (2016) may indeed be correct in her argument that students who comply appropriately with expectations of how to participate in an educational setting tend to have more academic success, however, this is a far cry from the transgressive forms of resistance that characterise Bhabha's Third Space concept. In Gallagher's approach children share their personal histories merely as a scaffold towards the uncontested goal of an academic register, the rules, routines and expectations of which are set by the dominant values of the educational institution, with a total absence of contributions from the children.

Table 2. Categories of processes that relate to different conceptualisations of the Third Space.

Transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Children liberated from national traditions ● Transformative ● Child-directed goals and outcomes ● Counter-hegemonic ● Marginalised voices are foregrounded ● Subversive and transgressive ● Potentially revolutionary ● New ● Continually negotiated and re-negotiated, flux ● Opportunities for children to create Third Space can be facilitated by teacher
Bridging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Third Space created by children, not teacher ● Both home and school discourses remain undisrupted, ● Different discourses meet somewhere in the middle ● Collaborative, co-constructed between teacher and student ● Frictionless ● A navigational space ● A 'conversation' between different discourses ● Mutual understanding
Complexity reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Third Space is created/produced/generated by teachers ● Hegemonic discourses and dominant narratives prevail ● Teacher-led activities, goals, expectations ● Narrow view of desirable behaviours ● Third Space akin to ZPD with pre-determined learning outcomes ● Rigid and restrictive

Discussion

This article has surveyed the existing empirical research that utilises Third Space theory in relation to research that included, children either as participants, or indirectly as teachers and practitioners were the participants, in multicultural pre-school or primary school settings. The features of different interpretations of Third Space were listed in [Table 2](#). Studies demonstrated that Third Space theory was used on a continuum from transformative and potentially revolutionary uses, to versions that promoted compliance with the cultural and academic expectations of the educational institutions. The following Venn diagram ([Figure 1](#)) represents how this continuum reaches from transformative, through bridging, to complexity reduction:

Only four of the articles analysed were based on a transformative understanding of the Third Space. In these studies, the teachers explored activities that facilitated students' autonomy, enabling students to resist hegemonic discourses and interrupt hierarchies of privileged knowledges. The teachers intentionally relinquished control and the act of stepping back allowed for *new* forms of knowledge to emerge. In the studies that presented a transformative Third Space, the teachers' goal was not to bring students towards a set of target skills mandated by a curriculum framework, but rather, the objective of these studies was to allow students the freedom to explore their own goals, to forge their own identities, and to create new ways of thinking and being.

The next group of articles fell under the classification of bridging. It is apparent that the works of Gutiérrez et al. (1995) and of Moje et al. (2004) have been influential in these articles' applications of Third Space theory in educational institutions. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), articles in the 'bridging' classification had elements of transformative practices, foregrounding marginalised voices and promoting student agency. However, the articles in this classification also sought to support students in achieving academic goals.

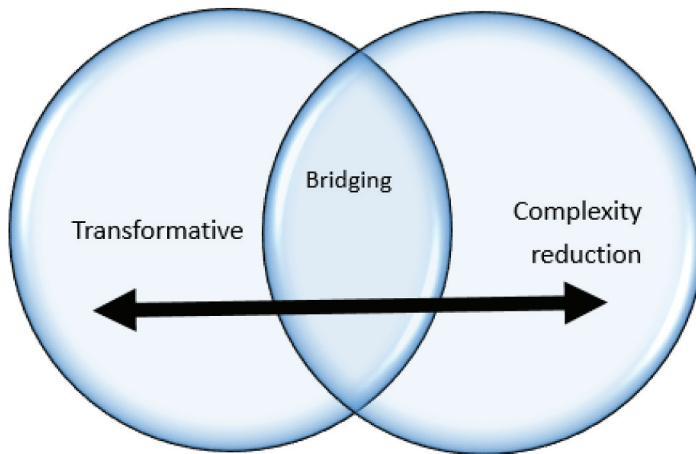


Figure 1. A venn diagram depicting different conceptualisations of Third Space theory.

The six articles that fell into the category of ‘bridging’ all presented insights into how students’ funds of knowledge and experiences from outside the classroom can be brought into conversation with academic skills and knowledge. The strategies outlined in these articles show how teachers actively create the Third Space for (or sometimes with) their students with the intention of helping students to understand the areas of overlap and contrast between their prior knowledge and experiences, and the officially sanctioned curriculum. The curriculum is presented as a passive framework and the goal of education is to support students to achieve the skills and knowledge outlined in it while simultaneously developing their own identities. There are no attempts to disrupt the academic discourses and the students are encouraged to merge, relate, integrate, interweave out-of-school and academic discourses in order to successfully negotiate the gaps between them.

Finally, the last group of articles are those classified in this research as ‘complexity reduction’. These articles also drew on ideas of Gutiérrez et al. (1995) and of Moje et al. (2004), however, the pendulum has swung so far from Bhabha’s original conceptualisation of Third Space theory that it is unrecognisable. The two articles in this category respect students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge, however, students are not invited to bring these out-of-school discourses into the frame. The examples given by the authors in these articles are based on narrow outcomes that are teacher-led and dominant cultural narratives are seen as a desirable. While the findings and recommendations of these articles may indeed be important in understanding strategies to support multilingual and multicultural learners, it is difficult to see how they can constitute ‘Third Space’ given that they lack any opportunities for disruption of dominant narratives or for the transformative creation of new knowledge by children.

Conclusions

As discussed earlier, complexity reduction in and of itself is not necessarily negative – particularly within educational contexts, it is a question of what one hopes to achieve. The articles examined in this literature review reveal there is a continuum between a) those that embrace complexity and facilitate children to create their own cultures, identities, narratives and goals; b) those that seek to integrate complexity with dominant discourses, such as predetermined academic goals, and c) those that acknowledge complexity exists but whose primary aim is to support children in mastering dominant discourses, such as predetermined academic goals. Nevertheless, all of the articles are valuable and present important insights into ways in which children can be supported in navigating the multiple, and sometimes competing, discourses that they encounter in multicultural educational environments.

Recommendations

This paper has analysed research that uses the Third Space in relation to multicultural, early childhood and primary educational settings. Research in this systematic literature review has revealed the Third Space can be utilised successfully to support the development of children's identities in educational settings where multiple, sometimes competing discourses co-exist. The work can be extended by conducting similar reviews with children below the age of 4 or adolescents in educational settings to see if similar themes arise. There is also a wealth of research conducted with children in after school clubs, homes and communities that could be beneficial in understanding how to support children to create the Third Space.

In addition, this literature review looks at how the third space has been conceptualised within each of the studies, however, a much-needed extension of this literature review would be to look at the specific processes that facilitate the construction of the Third Space. Such a review would illuminate the roles of the teachers and children, and the spatial and temporal conditions that generate and sustain third-space production.

Future studies that extend the existing field of research are welcome as communities, and therefore schools, are increasingly diverse, and therefore such studies will deepen our understanding of how students can be supported to create the Third Space in educational settings. It is recommended that further studies use the Third Space as a conceptual lens for understanding the ways in which multiple complex discourses can be fused to create new understandings, new knowledge and new identities. In education, the Third Space can enable the development of identities and agency (Sjödín 2022). That said, Shumar (2010) cautions against the reification and commodification of the ideas of Bhabha and encourages those who draw upon Third Space theory to pay attention to 'the ways that inequality and difference are maintained in order to accord privilege to some groups and disadvantage to others' (Shumar 2010, 504). This is especially important now, as the paradox between standardisation of education and the super-diverse make up of many communities calls for a reinvigoration of 'the transgressive and transformative spirit of Bhabha's original conceptualisation of "Third Space"' (MacDonald 2019). Therefore, if authors are to invoke the Third Space concept as part of their analysis, it is recommended they consider:

- (1) Who is creating the third space? Can the third space be created by teachers (Richardson Bruna 2009)? Or is it more accurate to argue that the teachers are planning activities which facilitate third space creation by the students?
- (2) What is the purpose of the Third Space? If it is unidirectional and purely a means of helping students to master skills that are currently beyond their repertoires, then perhaps a more appropriate learning theory, such as Zones of Proximal Development, would be more fitting?
- (3) What spaces does the Third Space bridge? I have previously been argued (Tatham-Fashanu 2021) that it is an oversimplification to think of the Third Space as a singular bridge between an individual, their home and their school contexts. Rather it is suggested that researchers consider the Third Space as a network of multiple bridges between different people, operating on multiple levels.
- (4) Finally, authors are urged to pay particular attention to the themes of oppression and resistance (Smagorinsky 2022). The Third Space should be a space that enables students to establish their own identities, resisting the restrictions of existing cultural identities and to develop new knowledge and understanding beyond the predetermined outcomes prescribed by a curriculum.

It is clear from this literature review that the radical resistance that characterises Bhabha's work has been tamed somewhat, but, at the very least, the founding principles of negotiation, transformation and liberation from tradition that characterise Bhabha's Third Space should be retained as they are in Gutiérrez' applications of Third Space to educational contexts. If these principles are lost, then the appropriateness of using the term Third Space is questionable.

Bhabha's Third Space liberates people from the dominance of restrictive traditions, focusing on the liminal spaces beyond hegemonic narratives where new, transformative forms of knowledge are created. These themes are compatible with a broader view of education that supports children in mediating the different discourses they encounter, to develop their own sense of identity and to transform pre-existing, dominant, discourses into fluid spaces of hybridity where meanings are constantly challenged and renegotiated. It is inevitable that theories are adapted and modified over time and this literature review has demonstrated there are many valuable strategies that can be used to support children with development of academic skills while simultaneously supporting their agency and identity formation.

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Appendix 1.**Table A1.** A summary of the articles, research sites and participant characteristics.

	Source	Children ages	Participants	Context
1	Di Stefano and Camicia (2018)	8–9	Latinx in USA	Dual language, third grade classroom
2	Fitts (2009)	10–11	Latinx in USA	Dual language elementary school
3	Gallagher (2016)	5–6	Culturally and linguistically diverse community in USA	Kindergarten
4	Karlsson et al. (2020)	8–11	Arabic speaking children in Sweden	Science class in school
5	López-Robertson and Schramm-Pate (2013)	7–8	Latinx in USA	Bilingual language arts elementary classroom
6	Kloetzer et al. (2021)	8–12	Migrant children	Switzerland
7	Prasad (2012)	4–12	Allophone children in French Language schools, Canada	Elementary school
8	Piipponen & Karlsson (2021)	10–11	School B – culturally and linguistically diverse; school F–Finnish	Storycrafting cultural exchange between a class in Finland and one in Belgium
9	Tatham-Fashanu (2021)	4–6	Culturally and linguistically diverse in UK	Different spaces within a primary school
10	Valdez-Gainer and Gainer (2020)	7–8	second-grade dual language students (Spanish-English) in the USA	Children’s storytelling and dramatisation
11	Wiltse (2015)	7–8	Canadian Aboriginal in Canada	Heritage Fair Programme at Wolfwood School, operated by the local First Nations Band
12	Yahya and Wood (2017)	5–7	Culturally and linguistically diverse in Canada	Home and school contexts