**School ethos and the spatial turn: ‘capacious’ approaches to research and practice**

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that specific spatial imaginaries are embedded in current debates about both school ethos and research methods. It takes the reader on a journey around an English multicultural primary school supported by the creative learning programme Creative Partnerships, exploring how creative arts practices (re)configured socio-spatial relations within the school community over a three-year period.

The paper proposes the metaphor of ‘capaciousness’ to illuminate aspects of research and practice in schools concerning space, learning and the significance of the connections of schools to other spaces, places and networks. Recognising these connections enables us to take account of issues of social justice particularly in relation to schools located in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. A spatial theorization of ethos also questions the concept of boundaries in case study research, and highlights the role of researcher interpretation in constituting what can be recognized as ‘creative’ school ethos.

**Keywords:** school ethos, spatial turn, creative arts, capacious

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*At the front entrance to the school a sign states ‘Delaunay is a happy place to be’, explaining underneath: ‘We enjoy ourselves / We share and play together as friends / We always tell an adult if we feel frightened or sad / We care for each other and our school / We try to use kind words / We respect the grown ups who looks after us and do as we are asked’.*

*Immediately inside the school building, the small entrance hall shows a map of the world on one wall, with photos of the children in the school linked with string to their countries of origin. More startlingly, another noticeboard displays children’s drawings from Delaunay’s partner school in the Lebanon, depicting bombed cities and tower blocks, planes dropping bombs on schools, guns and children crying.*

This paper explores what the ‘spatial turn’ might contribute to analyzing educational research and practice in relation to the concept of school ethos. Imagining a primary school as a ‘happy place to be’ evokes also a ‘safe’ space insulated from the inequalities of the wider society, and children’s worlds as small or even trivial, their problems always amenable to resolution by adults. It is a view that does not easily accommodate or address global injustices or the complex, painful and difficult lives represented by the children’s drawings from Lebanon. However, we aim to show how the school above, supported by creative arts pedagogies, worked towards what we describe as a more ‘capacious’ understanding of children’s home cultures and backgrounds. This in turn built links and connectivity between the school and its community in relevant and meaningful ways, exemplified above by the personalized global map rather than a commercially supplied and ready made multilingual ‘welcome’ sign. Its practices illuminate questions concerning space, learning and the significance of the connections of schools and the individuals interacting within them, to other spaces, places and networks.

The research described here was part of a larger project investigating the impact of the creative learning programme Creative Partnerships on school ethos (Bragg & Manchester 2011). School ‘ethos’ and associated concepts such as ‘climate’ or ‘culture’ have been significant points of reference in educational debates since the 1980s, although they remain ill-defined or perhaps conveniently vague terms. Nonetheless, they generally designate aspects of the school environment (conceived in more or less materialist ways) and relationships between those within it; as such, the concept of school ethos is the starting point for our discussion of the spatial imaginaries of the school within contemporary debates, which we pursue in the next two sections. We then consider what different notions of ethos imply for researching the concept, before returning to a more extended discussion of Delaunay school.

**The spatial imaginaries of school ethos 1: the school as citadel**

The notion of school ethos has long appealed to policy makers and politicians, most recently the UK Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government Education Minister Michael Gove who has repeatedly expressed the conviction that ‘for a school what matters is not its intake, but its ethos’ (Brogan, 2009). Conservative party documents and press statements by Gove and Prime Minister David Cameron convey a preference for a specific kind of school ethos: one that is military, religious, competitive and that enforces strict uniform policies of blazers, ties and ‘tucked-in shirts’ (exemplified by Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, London, one of England’s

most deprived boroughs[[1]](#endnote-1)). The government has also increased funding to Teach First, a programme in which graduates teach for two years in disadvantaged inner-city schools and receive ‘leadership’ training (e.g. in business management). Teach First’s own report on school ethos leans towards more corporate solutions (cf. Deal & Petersen, 1999), instancing with approval the use of mission statements, ‘motivational sayings’, flags, crests and slogans conveying values to which all can or must subscribe (Teach First, 2010: pp. 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 31, 33, 35, 38).

Just as business and management thinking underwent what sociologist Paul du Gay (1996) terms a ‘turn to culture’ in the 1980s, so too policymakers and in particular the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movement have identified school ethos or culture as a contributor to organizational success, and therefore as an expedient solution to improving performance, although the existence and nature of the link is contested and far from proven (Goldstein & Woodhouse, 2010). A key question has been whether schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation might improve pupil and institutional outcomes by changing their ethos to resemble that of more successful institutions, even without changes to other factors such as pupil intake or quality of facilities. Teach First’s report is explicit about the potential fiscal advantages of a focus on ethos, which it claims can provide ‘huge benefits for very little financial cost, and thus offers a way of improving schools even in an era of austerity’ (Teach First 2010: 11).

However, these arguments are more than a symptom of the penetration of corporate values into education, and they appeal to more than self-interest: they speak to powerful spatial imaginaries of the inner city, reinforced by longstanding discourses of ‘child rescue’ (Swain, 2010) and invoke a reassuring vision of an ordered, controllable world. Teach First, for instance, notes that ‘Educational disadvantage in the UK is closely correlated with socio-economic status’, but continues:

For some pupils, their home life will provide them with an ethos and culture that values education and educational success but, for others, this isn’t the case. Therefore, in these circumstances, a school needs to create an ethos and culture that values education as the first step to addressing educational inequality

(Teach First, 2010:17)

This account of educational failure locates its causes within students’ benighted and chaotic home lives, in which material factors (lack of adequate housing, food, warmth and so on) are seen as less significant than ‘attitudes’ to learning. Schools, by contrast, are depicted as citadels or beacons of enlightenment, providing the route ‘up’ and away from such degradation for those who submit to their regime and authority. Moreover, ethos is treated as static, a controllable and manageable variable that an organisation ‘has’ and can manipulate, defined from the perspective and for the purposes of management. Deal and Peterson (1999), for instance, describe culture as ‘strong’ where it supports organisational aims, ‘toxic’ or ‘weak’ where it might thwart them and attribute it great power to shape the values, attitudes and conduct of those within it regardless of its or their circumstances. Ethos becomes an apparently ‘transcendental’ quality unrelated to material environments and considerations, static, easily controlled ‘from above’ and impermeable to unwelcome external influences.

**Spatial imaginaries of school ethos 2: schools as microcosms and ‘third spaces’**

The positions outlined above are much contested on moral, political and conceptual grounds. Thomson (2007a), for instance, points to their ‘deficit discourse’, or patronizing and pathologising representations of communities and families made poor, noting that ‘children and young people who live with poverty/inequality cannot leave these feelings and experiences at the school gate. They are inevitably *in* school’. Thrupp (2006) argues that schools – and ethos - cannot be evaluated without also attending to the wider social and economic structures within which they operate. A number of writers conceive ethos in more dynamic and contextual terms, as emerging from the interdependent and embodied affordances, practices, and values of human and other actors in the school (Donnelly, 2000; McLaughlin, 2005; Solvason, 2005). Rather than citadels standing apart from society, schools are seen as microcosms of the wider world, permeated and permeable; not an island, but a piece of the continent, as John Donne has it. They reflect and contain within themselves at least some of the contradictions and imperfections of the wider world.

The concept of ethos retains some appeal and currency within these perspectives. For some, the term captures the ‘(pre) conditions for learning’, attention to which stresses the importance of the emotional, social and relational aspects of education and can justify greater creativity in schools’ provision (Thomson, 2007b). Others have drawn attention to the idea of school ethos ‘*as* learning’, arguing that how the school is organized and run offers important lessons for young people about citizenship, the nature of society and their place and agency in it (McLaughlin, 2005). For instance, Gorard’s (2008) Europe-wide study of 13,000 fifteen year olds correlates students’ experiences of positive treatment, ‘voice’, diversity and more equal relationships, with a positive outlook on trust, civic values and a more developed sense of justice, and argues that these are as much a product of young people’s experiences in schools as of formal educational processes. Such positions tend to be advanced by advocates of reform towards more egalitarian, democratic, participatory and caring cultures in schools (e.g. Fielding, 2007).

Thus, alongside an insistence on schools being in the world, these accounts often uphold a utopian or optimistic view of what schools might prefigure about how schools might ‘prefigure’ socially just practices and thereby bring a better society into existence in the future (Schostak and Goodson 2012). By contrast, whilst Gove has recently argued that military ethos instills ‘self-discipline and teamwork’[[2]](#footnote-1), on the whole those whose preferred ethos involves rigid intergenerational hierarchies and absolute adult authority are less than explicit about the kind of social world such structures might herald beyond the school.

In another relevant discussion, Thomson, Hall, Jones & Sefton Green (2012) explore how creative arts pedagogies create ‘third spaces’ in schools, capable of disrupting what they term the ‘default pedagogy’. The latter, they argue, has been ‘established in schools by a standards agenda that defines excellence in terms of progress against a limited set of measurable indicators’, and is dehumanizing because it ‘erodes the sociality of a school through processes which make people in them less important than data about them’ (p. 15). This has the effect of turning schools into ‘non-places’ (Auge 1995), decontextualising and separating schools, young people, parents and teachers from wider social practices. Maintaining sociality, creating ‘third spaces’ (Soja 1999) within schools, was important to the signature pedagogies they discuss.

**The spatial imaginaries of research: boundedness and limitlessness**

The arguments considered above have consequences for research approaches. Both politicians and management literature tend to ‘read off’ ethos from the official versions made available by the school and to imply that it is a neutral and objective quality that would be understood in the same way by different observers. The notion of school-as-citadel and as self-contained entity resonates with ideas of the ‘case study’ as a single instance whose boundaries both should and can be limited and made explicit (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2012). Those who challenge these metaphors, however, suggest that even in ‘describing’ a school’s ethos (for instance, as ‘disciplined’ or as ‘authoritarian’) an observer or researcher draws on particular interpretive and evaluative frameworks. Conceiving ethos as continually negotiated, emerging from everyday, shared processes of relationships and interactions and from material and social aspects of the environment, suggests the importance of researchers gathering ‘unofficial’ perspectives ‘from below’ and from ‘insiders’ seen as active agents. If understanding ethos requires some account of contextual and mediating factors, it raises the question of how far and how widely the researcher’s net should be cast to capture those that are pertinent. For instance, should analysis confine itself to individuals and groups within the school’s immediate orbit, or extend to educational policies; social, economic and cultural conditions; local, regional or national pressure groups and traditions; even to ‘forces’ such as capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism? What we take into account becomes here potentially limitless rather than contained; and it inevitably makes more explicit the kinds of theoretical, conceptual and ultimately political assumptions on which arguments about schools depend.

**Creative Partnerships and ‘capacious’ educational and research practices**

Creative Partnerships was the ‘flagship creative learning programme’ of the New Labour government, in England. Over its 2002-2011 lifespan, Creative Partnerships worked with just over 1 million children, and over 90,000 teachers in more than 8,000 projects in England, supporting schools to foster long term collaborations with artists and others in creative industries. Whilst a full account of its genesis is beyond the scope of this paper, Creative Partnerships can be situated between and amongst the ‘spatial imaginaries’ of the school discussed above. It was tasked to work specifically in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (reflecting age-old concerns with ‘failing’ inner-city schools and cultures), but in being funded mainly by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport rather than by the education department, it also spoke to a different image - of the vitality of urban cultures and the potential for inner city regeneration through the arts and creative industries. Its remit - which straddled ‘raising aspirations’, ‘engaging’ youth through the arts, contributing to school improvement and performance, ‘transforming learning’, developing new audiences for the arts, enhancing community cohesion and supporting local creative industries - involved goals that by no means smoothly cohered, particularly in a context of marketization and standards-driven change (Jones & Thomson, 2008). Nonetheless, in broad terms, Creative Partnerships set itself somewhat apart from the more traditionalist or corporate versions of school improvement in circulation: it operated as a ‘bottom-up’ initiative allowing for local autonomy and ‘vernacular’ appropriations, and emphasised ‘youth voice’ or agency and co-construction in much of its rhetoric and practice (Bragg & Manchester, 2012; Thomson, Jones, & Hall, 2009).

As noted above, the research discussed here was part of a bigger project investigating the impact of the Creative Partnerships programme on school ethos (2009-10). It involved qualitative studies of five schools exemplifying good or interesting practice and built on research and analysis emerging from earlier Creative Partnerships research (Bragg, Manchester, & Faulkner, 2009; Thomson, et al., 2009). In line with the more emergent understandings of ethos and research practice discussed above, as far as possible we immersed ourselves in the research sites to gauge their cultures. Our methods echoed arts-based pedagogies in adopting a range of creative approaches, such as ‘mapping’ or producing cultural inventories of spaces in school; metaphorical thinking exercises (‘if your school were an animal…’); and photo voice activities. These were designed to elicit student and staff ‘voice’ in more accessible and engaging ways, but were also helpful in critically expanding imagined boundaries and taking account of the visual, auditory, representational and spatial aspects of school practices.

In this paper, we focus on one school, Delaunay, with which we engaged over three years and which therefore provided particularly rich data. We propose the metaphor of ‘capaciousness’ to provoke reflections on the ‘space-making’ aspects of its ethos and its reconfiguration of socio-spatial relations (McGregor, 2004). We understand ‘capaciousness’ at many different levels, including: allowing range and room for manoeuvre in learning, in roles, relationships and practices; expanding one’s sense of self and others; a porousness between school and community, self and other; increasing the capacity or capability of both teachers and students; being able to contain difficult emotions evoked by both learning and creativity, as suggested by psychoanalytic and other perspectives on learning (Bibby, 2010; Bion, 1962; Britzman, 1998) and finally, attention to space and the aesthetic in school environments, an area where Creative Partnerships has made particular contributions (Thomson et al, 2010). The notion of capaciousness draws particular attention to space in relation to social agency and material and social aspects of ethos. In place of static, immobile images of the school, it favours ‘an image of a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits ’(Lefebvre, 1991:93).

We have structured our arguments as a journey that maps trajectories through, from and into multiple ‘spaces’ of the school, interrogating the emerging pedagogical and other practices of the school that supported the assemblage of particularly ‘capacious’ or ‘third’ spaces and places of learning and disrupted 'default' pedagogies and practices. We draw on an emerging body of literature that suggests the role of context in the production of relations between cultures of childhood and adulthood (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010; Mannion, 2007; Nespor, 1997; Sheehy, 2004) and the effects of this on children’s power and agency. Our analysis therefore examines (power) relations in a spatial context taking the perspective that space cannot be separated from the social, is a product of interrelations and is always under construction (Massey, 2005). Drawing on Lefebvre’s (1991) critique of container-like perspectives on the material and social locations of everyday life, we pay attention to the flows of energy in and out of the school walls. Finally, we explore how we as researchers are deeply implicated, entangled and participating in the production and interpretation of the spaces of the school, in the stories we produce, and in the multiple trajectories of the research process (Pink, 2009).

**Invading the ‘happy place to be’**

The school we call Delaunay is a multicultural inner-city primary located near the centre of a medium sized town in the Midlands of the UK. It had a tradition of embedding creative arts practices in its work, having established relationships over five years and more with artists, some of whom were employed by the school rather than contracted in for specific projects. 230 pupils aged from 3 to 11 years of age attended the school at the time of our research and the school population was both diverse and highly transient, including children of overseas university students as well as local families living in conditions of poverty, and with over twenty different languages spoken by pupils. The school is situated in an area of early twentieth century terraced housing, tucked under a flyover, nestled between busy roads that lead to both the university and a university teaching hospital. It is boundaried by fences, and access is via a locked gate, features it shares with many primary schools due to child safety concerns, but which may place a literal and metaphorical barrier between a school and its surrounding community.

The story behind the entrance hall display described in the opening paragraphs of the paper, as told by the Deputy Head, reveals how external events intruded on and invaded the safety of the school. Following the events of 11th September 2001 and the substantial negativity in the media about religions and nationalities represented in the school, the Deputy Head recognised an increase in tensions in both the school and the local community. Mothers wearing hijab, for instance, would arrive at the school having been spat at on their way; some children appeared reluctant or even ashamed to talk about their countries of origin or their religion; and the educational attainment of some minority ethnic groups appeared to be adversely affected.

The Deputy thought that international linking projects might help to support these students by raising awareness and understanding of other cultures in the school community. She therefore took opportunities offered by organisations such as the British Council to establish relationships with schools in Pakistan, the Lebanon and Spain. The first package sent by their partner school in the Lebanon had been so eagerly awaited that she opened it in front of the children and their teachers, pulling out one of the dramatic and violent images now on display in the entrance. As a result, the staff could not filter or censor the pictures instead they improvised a discussion about global (and local) issues such as war, racial disagreements and violence.

The work involved in ‘admitting’ the world beyond the school – or rather in admitting an image of that world as imperfect and unjust - and in building a nurturing environment in which children could explore some difficult issues was considerable and could feel risky; however, these issues are not absent from children’s existing lives in the way 'default' primary teaching practices too often imagine or pretend.

These practices in this school – such as the linked global map and these improvised discussions - supported the school community to understand the importance of their own context and its networks with other times, places and everyday routines (Nespor, 1997; Leander et al, 2010) – both real and imagined, local and global.

**Hybrid pedagogy: participatory/appropriated spaces and mobilities**

The school is single-storey with classrooms leading off small corridors and spaces, all connected to a central hall area. On an average day every inch of the indoor and outdoor space in the school is put to use. For instance, during a ‘walk and talk’ activity we conducted with a member of staff, we observed an artist and children playing with water pipes in the pre-school playground; a dance artist working with year 1 and year 5 children in the hall; a group of children and a teaching assistant cooking soup in one corridor; another group working in an ‘art space’ created in another corridor by adapting a storage cupboard. In a classroom another year 5 group were starting their day with a salsa class conducted in Spanish by their teacher, whilst in year 2 children were sitting on the carpet discussing the care of their class hamster who was pregnant again. Space here was appropriated, for a wider range of activities than is usual in many schools, where corridors, for example, are used for transit and deserted during lesson time. It also permitted both children and adults a wider range of mobilities through and in these spaces, for instance in enabling groups of children to work on their own or engage in ‘risky’ activities (cf Thomson et al 2012: 15). These all suggested ways of making space into sites of learning rather than non-spaces.

Adults in the school also, to some extent, appropriated the curriculum through designing an enquiry question to frame all their work: ‘How can we develop a creative curriculum that nurtures the skills and qualities we need to be active, responsible citizens who are agents of change within our local and global community?’ The resident artist educator employed by the school (interviewed in March 2010) argued that it represented ‘the school’s key commitments to developing global citizenship, social responsibility, creativity and collaborative learning,’ as well as its desire to ‘inspire children and teachers to be curious about the world, to discuss, debate, imagine possibilities and investigate the issues that matter to them … to explore with them how they might effect change in the world- the philosophy of taking action, being active citizens and seeing how small steps add together to create something bigger.’

The school enacted its principles through a term’s work on the theme of global citizenship, during which the artist-educator worked with all children in Year 1 and 2 classes (aged 5-6 and 6-7) and their teachers. Positioning the work within core curriculum objectives, and all staff and children as integral to its success, contrasts with less embedded arts practices where projects exist as one-offs or are conducted with subsets of students (Bragg et al 2009). In allowing the everyday practices, routines and values of the artist-educator to meet and merge with those of the teachers, the work supported the development of a 'third space' (Soja, 1999) of hybrid pedagogical practices (cf. Thomson et al, 2012). The adults involved encouraged the children to see each other as equally capable and as creative resources in a collaborative context. The projectbegan with both classes, their teachers and the artist spending a whole morning together in the central hall area of the school. Children were asked to bring food packaging and other ‘rubbish’ from home into school, including from their countries of origin. Their everyday lives were valued and seen as a resource, providing a starting point for the work, both materially - the objects they provided - and in terms of their existing knowledge and experiences, for instance by drawing on children’s personal knowledge of other cultures and countries. This porous approach acknowledges, values and makes connections between school and the other places and spaces in the children’s lives, unlike deficit discourses about children’s home cultures as anti-educational or otherwise lacking. Not only did these practices aim to ensure everyone felt involved and responsible, but also and more broadly, to acknowledge that learning is not contained in individual minds but rather distributed across persons, resources and places (Leander et al, 2010).

The children’s rubbish was then piled up on the hall floor and children were they were given time to explore it, noting how similar rubbish looked regardless of where it originated. The children were asked what they thought they might do with the rubbish and some suggested they might play with it, build with it, or jump on it. As the artist-educator observed, the creative work helped ‘slow everything down’, in contrast to the fast-paced nature of much of the students’ experience of school. All three artists at the school told us that Delaunay was unusual in demonstrating a commitment to creating space and time for possibility and the exploration of ideas and responses, a retreat from the normal time-space make up of schooling in the UK. The long term relationships that the school had built with artists may have been a major factor in its more expanded view of space/time possibilities.

Following these initial discussions, the children were then asked to sort the rubbish into groups of different materials, but were not told how they might do this. Thus some began to line up the rubbish, while others made hats and bangles from containers, for example. They were then asked to look at the different materials and consider which could be recycled, which led to discussions particularly about plastic recycling. The artist described such pedagogical encounters as interdependent, a ‘three-way partnership: not the teacher and the artist sitting down to discuss what they would do but the children reflecting and talking about what they wanted to do next too’. Subsequent ‘planning meetings’ took place at the beginning of every weekly session with the artist, during which time the children were encouraged to talk about and reflect on what they had done the previous week. ‘We sometimes spent half a session doing that but the stuff we were getting from the children was so rich, and then you can plan something in genuine response to that’ (artist). Both the artist and the teachers claimed that ‘everybody had an equal voice’, which they put down to a ‘willingness to listen to each other’: we also noted their high expectations of children’s contribution to the creative process.

The artist and teachers used a spatial analogy of ‘going on a journey’, travelling alongside and being curious about ‘where the children would go’ as they explored and moved through space-time at their own pace and following their own interests. This felt very different from the hierarchical organization of space in modern schooling, in which the focus on attainment and assessment separates individuals from each other, measuring their distance from a baseline, and organizing them in relation to particular levels (Paechter, 2004).

**Containing spaces**

In mapping the school we noted that the central hall area was a multipurpose space utilized for a range of activities during each school day. Later on in our research, the school invested a considerable sum of money in floor-to-ceiling black-out curtains encircling the entire hall. When drawn, these curtains created a very different kind of space to that of classrooms, or indeed to the hall without them – one that was dark, shut out the daylight, muffled the noise of other classrooms, and seemed to encourage focus. The artists using it also created rituals for moving the children from the (more rigid) classroom space to the studio space. For instance, a dance artist began his work by lining the children up outside the hall. Standing very straight and moving gracefully, he led the children into and around the space. The researcher, in amidst the children, felt a change in herself and in others around her as they were led into the space and continued to follow his movements in a warm up.

Nespor (1997) suggests that schools tend to abstract children from social space but also from their own bodies; however, the children appeared able to inhabit this new space ‘bodily’ in a way that might have felt uncomfortable in the classroom – for instance, in one session working in groups to make collaborative sculptures with their bodies. The different involvement of the children’s bodies in this space, away from the classroom but central to the school, seemed to offer expanded possibilities of identity for both the children and the adults working with them. Yet the hall studio space also appeared able to ‘contain’ the difficult emotions and issues potentially released through creative arts practices; its central location conveying symbolically and literally that children engaging their bodies, cultures and experiences would not be abandoned after doing so, but would be returned back to – and held within - the familiarity and safety right at the heart of the school. As the ‘junk’ project above continued, children developed an interest in the effects of rubbish on wildlife. The teachers agreed to screen a TV news feature that the artist had found about the threat posed by rubbish to albatross colonies and other wildlife on the remote Pacific atoll of Midway, which included some disturbing images of animals choking on plastic. The artist saw this as an issue of trust, commenting, ‘I loved that the teacher trusted the children enough to show them things that are potentially quite disturbing and challenging.’ However, she also pointed out that it was important that these images were shown to the children ‘in a very nurturing context’ – a containing space - in which the teacher led a discussion about the children’s responses, focusing on how they felt about the images and, importantly, what action they might want to take in response to them. Bibby, drawing on psycho-analytic approaches, describes the technical-rationalist dream of a ‘knowable, measurable, controllable approach to teaching and learning’ (Bibby, 2009), which we might describe as containment in a negative sense of enclosure, exclusion and constriction. As the artist suggested, there was a belief in Delaunay ‘that we shouldn’t shield children from this and that the world is more frightening if you don’t discuss things’. Such work requires ‘containment’ *’* in the more positive sense described by psychoanalytical theory, of holding overwhelming emotions such as distress so that they become manageable*.*  This was particularly marked in relation to the hall/studio space: symbolically, difficult feelings, doubt and uncertainty were ‘held’ at the centre of the school, acknowledging children’s need for support as well as their agency.

**Letting the inside out: Constructing spaces of participation beyond the school gates**

So far we have mapped the permeability of the school in terms the points of flow and trajectories of people, knowledge and resources *into* school, how its practices drew on resources beyond the school gates. This capacious response had important effects on the spaces of participation nurtured in the school and the encounters between children and adults in these spaces. Returning for a moment to the high fences around the school’s perimeter, we might note that in this school, there are water pipes, saucepans and other devices suspended from them: symbolically, these embody the kind of porousness we have been discussing, making use of the fences for something other than keeping-out and turning them into border spaces of play and learning.

However, the geographer Mike Kesby (2005; 2007) has questioned the mobility of environments and ‘spaces’ of participation and empowerment if they are produced only within local and specific sites that are intensively supported and resourced. He considers how ‘empowerment’ can transfer beyond one arena of participation (such as the school) and towards a ‘second moment of empowerment’ [2007:13]. Stevenson (2007) too has argued for a more critical, action-orientated approach to environmental education work that is firmly located in the world and supports children to feel competent to act on choices, engage in and analyse various forms of political participation.

Accordingly, the paper now follows the children and adults as they themselves journeyed beyond the school walls. Trips outside school took place frequently throughout the term’s work on the ‘junk’ project, of a kind that other schools often avoid on health and safety grounds. Both classes explored the immediate area around school, walking along the canal towpath and noticing the rubbish and other detritus washed up there, the back views of houses, as well as graffiti and other features of their urban environment; they also went regularly to a local park and other nearby industrial and residential areas, walking alongside busy roads and past areas of urban degradation and regeneration. When out of school the children and adults were able to discuss what they saw, take photographs and (re)-consider their local area from different perspectives: children became fascinated by canal boats and the backs of houses, the animals that lived around school, as well as the evident rubbish and general decay. In this way they began to locate their learning in spaces beyond the school environment, widening the possibilities of what learning might be and mean, and developing a (political and aesthetic) sense of the community that surrounded their school.

As a consequence of their learning journey, Year 2 became particularly concerned about packaging and visited a local supermarket with the aim of engaging critically with staff there about over-packaging and overuse of plastic bags. However, the children found that staff and customers were interested in talking to them about what they were doing, and listened to their ideas about environmental issues. Although the visit did not turn into the ‘challenging’ encounter that adults had envisaged, it provided the children with an opportunity to discuss their ideas with unfamiliar adults in a different space, constructing notions of who and what might be included in the school community, and provided a public – and relatively rare - space where children and adults could enter into dialogue.

Children were also linked in with professionals and others conducting environmental work globally. For instance, the news item described above mentioned that scientists and conservationists on Midway had found a small plastic toy warrior amongst the rubbish. This seized the children’s imagination. Through the toy they began imaginatively to connect their own cultures and interests with this very different place in the world, and a global concern. They wondered about the child or children who might have lost it, had someone dropped it from a boat? Had a child in another country lost it on a beach? Could the toy be a serial killer, mistaken for food by an animal which then suffocated, died and decomposed so that the toy could float away and kill another animal? (Simpson, Qureshi and Sagoo, 2012). As well as sparking various individual writing projects, the whole class worked collaboratively to produce a stop-frame animation which was entered into a local authority competition, receiving a runners up award.

Towards the end of this project, a gathering was arranged in a nearby park for all the children involved in a local schools network to share their work on this and related topics. The Year 2 children decided to use this occasion to ‘protest’ about the environmental impact of plastic bags and designed their own artifacts such as placards, banners and eco-bags, with the artist encouraging the children to consider how best to convey information for maximum impact.

On the day of the gathering, the researcher joined them as they marched along a very visible route, alongside a main road on their way to the event. The children spontaneously and enthusiastically invented their own chants and songs, with adults acting primarily as documenters and as guardians in getting children across roads and to the right place. Traffic stopped to let the children cross roads and some sounded their horns in support, children were asked questions or waved at people on buses and bikes, golfers and other people in the park, determined that others should know what they thought, and demonstrating they understood forms of protest that the adults had not formally ‘taught’ them about during the project. The researcher and school staff were moved by and talked together about the children’s responses, which evoked some familiar and emotionally resonant cultural and historical traditions of protest. We were struck by the way that the pedagogies here were committed to broadening the children’s horizons, linking local and global, connecting the children to wider political and social movements whilst still encouraging children to consider them from their own perspectives, and doing so in order to position them as able to effect change. As Facer (2008:10) suggests, there was a recognition that:

children’s agency was produced in the world not so much by the capacity of individuals to separate themselves from the world and to act in isolation, but by their capacity to connect with the world, to depend upon it, to network with it in order to be able to effect change.

Through their interaction in a number of public spaces external to school the children learnt about a range of different forms of protest – starting with the small-scale approach of talking to local people (eg in the supermarket), using media (such as their stop frame animation) to get ideas across and finally creating their own artefacts of protest which were then taken to local streets and discussed with other children and adults. The school’s relationship to the political, social and global world extended the networks with which children were encouraged to connect and the roles that they played in this world. The school also recognized that young people, just as adults, are involved in everyday political acts, such that youth voice activities were not separated from children’s everyday lives and cultures, but were integrated into classroom and school activities. There was a clear understanding that children need care and support, as well as responsibility and opportunities to develop agency.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have discussed some of the spatial imaginaries that we identified at work in debates about school ethos. We noted how contemporary conservative discourses about schools as citadels also point towards a confined ‘case study’ or positivist research methodology. We have argued that understanding schools more dynamically, as microcosms of the wider society and / or as potentially creating ‘third spaces’, produces more socially just educational practices. However, it also requires more challenging and theorized research methods and accounts, highlighting the role of the researcher in making meaning. We have substantiated our argument by considering the approaches developed by a school working within the Creative Partnerships programme, committed to rather different understandings not only of school ethos, but also of the contribution to learning that can be made by all members of a school’s imagined community. Adopting the metaphor of ‘capaciousness’ to describe these approaches draws attention to space and the aesthetic; foregrounds porousness in relations between the research space, ourselves and others and how such permeability enables agency and citizenship; emphasises the containment or making-safe of difficult emotions; involves an expanded sense of self and others; takes account of our own emplacement in the social, sensory and material places and spaces that we encounter; and allows room for manoeuvre in roles and relationships. The metaphor of capaciousness posits an opening out of schools, a recognition of the flows of energy in and out of school and how these can be imagined and mobilised through different approaches to space/time and through hybrid pedagogical practices. We suggest that schools like the one described in this paper offer children (and adults in the school) opportunities to develop a range of different identities and to 'succeed' in many different ways, becoming a myriad of different kinds of people, recognising their interdependence in an increasingly complex world.

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See eg: Mason, Rowena. "Rid schools of anti–risk culture, says Cameron; T CAMPAIGN KEEP THE FLAME ALIVE." *Daily Telegraph* [London, England] 13 Aug. 2012: 10. *Newspapers*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. Winnett, Robert. "I want more faith schools, says Cameron." *Daily Telegraph* [London, England] 26 Jan. 2010: 005. *Newspapers*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. "Education: Speed read." *Guardian* [London, England] 14 Feb. 2012: 37. *Newspapers*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. "A WHITE KNIGHT WHO CAN SAVE SCHOOLS." *Sunday Times* [London, England] 2 Oct. 2011: 28. *Newspapers*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. "Tucking in shirts is the best way to get children to pull their socks up, says Cameron." *Times* [London, England] 21 Nov. 2007: 30. *Newspapers*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. ‘Military in schools project gets £2m boost’ BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-20642796> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)