Childhoods in transition – mediating 'in between spaces'

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"…your quote…"

"With the rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the needs of refugee children have become more acute", Henrietta Fore (UNICEF) & Filippo Grandi (UN).

This special edition of *Interactions* was conceived before the COVID-19 crisis, and its articles all written during lockdown. Our interest in this topic naturally seemed to develop as a response to the refugee crisis across the EU, and related research into the lived-media experiences of unaccompanied refugee youth. While our zone of inquiry has broadened to consider children and young people operating 'in-between' states, across a range of contexts, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic for displaced children, across the world (see Beava 2020). Indeed, the first occurrence of the term 'social distancing' we could find, comes from a study describing the changing spatial conditions of children in care (Kernan 2010).

The lockdown has posed particular problems for children, who have been socially and educationally isolated, casing rising levels of anxiety and mental health issues. The domestic sphere has been reconfigured into a pedagogic one, as parents and carers have had to occupy their own 'in-between' space as 'home-schooling' became a social phenomenon.

However, sharp social and economic lines are drawn between those who can successfully facilitate a virtual education for their children, and those who cannot.

However, we would argue that these are 'third-spaces', and so it might be worthwhile to conceptualise what we mean by the 'in-between' transitional state. While we would not dismiss 'third spaces' out-of-hand, although we have some serious concerns about the value of such a term – as we shall see - it is in the transition children and young people make between spaces, that is of interest to us in the special edition of *Interactions*. For as Pacini-Ketchabaw notes, children's perceptions of time alters while passing through such transitional spaces: 'I often hear about the difficulties some children encounter when transitioning from one activity to another' (2013: 222). This collection then is a contribution to understanding kids of difficulties children and young people face, in their 'in-between' state.

Conceptualising the 'in-between'.

Education scholars, from Bhabha (1994) to Potter & McDougall (2017) have been interested in third spaces, particularly in education. As a term, is has gained a great deal of currency (if not value) in pedagogic literature: 'According to the teachers and students in our studies, such in-between spaces often emerge in places outside the formal classroom situation and seem to be valued by both parties' (Frelin & Grannäs 2010: 364).

So, it is important for us to be clear, that in conceptualising the 'in-between' space, that we are rejecting third spaces as a misguided attempt to break down an imagined binary

'barrier' between expert/practitioner and child/student; in short, 'third spaces' are transitional ones. Pedagogical third spaces are where traditional literacies are synthesized with students' lived literacies (Potter & McDougall 2017). For others, third spaces are 'dialogical' space, between the practitioner/expert and student dyad (Kind, et al 2007). For Hallman, 'It is important to note that "third space" is not something constructed, but is already present' (2020: 244). We are told (unhelpfully) that these spaces call into question the role of the teacher and student. However, as the COVID-19 crisis has brought into acute relief, third spaces still suggest a *present* lived space - one that many children do not have access to:

> Differences in access to online learning mean out-of-school rates for primary school children vary from as much as 86 per cent in countries with low levels of human development on the UN scale, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, to 20 per cent in countries with very high human development such as Europe, Australia and the US (Lockhart 2020: n.pag).

So, it does not help us that these conceived 'third spaces' are almost all situated in the privileged Western middle-class sphere; a constituency whose way-of-life is now under threat as mass unemployment and recession look increasingly likely, across the world. In the UK, The Children's Society, has found that:

> [B]etween 2013 and 2015, more than 50,000 individuals including child dependents were granted leave to remain in the UK along with an NRPF condition, which means they have no access to mainstream welfare support. Many families with NRPF [no

recourse to public funds] are living in abject poverty and inadequate accommodation. Many such families are forced to sofa-surf or live in overcrowded accommodation, which makes self-isolating extremely challenging and they are at an increased risk of either being evicted or falling ill (2020).

A third space then, suggests a safe place to 'land' for the child in transition, but we would argue that no such place exists, and childhood/adolescence is a continuum of transition. A 'third space' then is too narrower a term, particularly for displaced children, and further removes them from their crucial place is education research:

> If European's citizens had more connections to these stories of children losing parents, homes, and identities, perhaps they'd act more swiftly, opening more doors, demanding more social services to the vulnerable seeking asylum. Perhaps the average person doesn't see that when these children finally play games, cook food with volunteers, and share stories, they often talk of a deafening fear, a sense of inhumanity, unproductivity, of grave and traumatic uncertainty from day-long interrogations that lead to invalidation and confusion about when, where and how they'll achieve asylum anywhere (Challenger 2020: n.pag).

A conception of 'third spaces' closes-off such conversations; while such spaces suggest a closed-loop, the transitional/'in-between' space suggests a more open loop. Here, Frelin & Grannäs' description is more useful: 'We argue that these significant inter-subjective spaces of negotiation prove to be of significance for all three functions of education, namely

qualification, socialization, and subjectification, although they are impossible to plan or predict' (Frelin & Grannäs 2010: 366).

Children in Transition.

For this special edition of *Interactions*, we present contributions, from a range of international scholars, all of whom explore and map the 'in between' spaces children and youth negotiate in their everyday lived media experiences. These articles all present studies which demonstrate how (social) media and digital technology is used/deployed in these spaces - as tools of negotiation and transaction. For this special edition, we hope that we have collectively said something about how these 'hypervisual' (Livingstone et al 2017) relationships are influenced or changed because of social platforms and digital technologies.

To date, discussions on the relationship between children & youth and (social) media have predominantly focused on issues involving online safety, self-image, media use and media literacy in 'third spaces' (e.g. Canty et al 2016; Hoge & Bickham 2017; Livingstone et al, 2017; Nikken & Schols, 2015; Potter & McDougall 2017). However, less attention has been cast on the mediated experiences of children and youth in our conceived 'in between' spaces. As we shall see, these 'in between' spaces can be both physical (e.g. migrating from one country to another), and more intangible or abstract, such as re-negotiating gender. **Christopher Pullen** and **Ieuan Franklin's** article, examines the 'undocuqueer' activist moment in the United States, while **Hans-Peter Gungar** and **Stinne Krogager's** piece sketches out the complex ways in which Danish teens use social media tools to negotiate their own intimate boundaries.

These contributions demonstrate perfectly, that childhood and adolescence are transitional states, which, for many, are often contradictory and difficult. Research shows that children and teenagers have a fluid and interdependent relationship with both the world around them and the technologies they are using (Rooney, 2012). The work of Turkle (2011) and latterly Sefton-Green and Livingstone (2017) highlights, for instance, that young people often turn to the online world as it has "intense individual meanings" (p. 245) for them, away from the school and the home. To that end, we present **Laurie Dempsey's** study into how teenagers use technology in the 'in-between space betwixt childhood and adulthood. This important work has a corollary in **Helen Davies'** piece about how Welsh teenagers use media as they make the shift from primary to secondary educational spaces.

As both contributions explore, these moment of transition are where new identities constantly re-negotiated. As one study found, teenagers use selfies as tools for both confirming heteronormativity and for renegotiating and mocking gender norms (Forsman, 2017). In this issue of Interactions, **Maggie Grant** and **Karen Lury's** article extends allied work on the visual aspects of social media, by describing the role of digital media in the adoption process, and how such texts can be curated as part of the projected future of the adopted child.

Finally we return to the 'in between spaces' of migrating youth, as social media is seen to play a vital role for maintaining social links with friends and families, and with new acquaintances in the receiving societies (Kutscher & Kress, 2018). **Julianna Doretto's** closing contribution concurs, as she takes a closer look at how the voices of migrant children in Brazil are represented. Her term, 'webdispora' perhaps offers us a new way of

conceptualising transitional states, which is distinct enough from 'third spaces' to move us into new areas.

The Japanese use the term 'Ma' to describe such in-between spaces; Ma is an empty space which can be filled with any possibility. For Ross, '[o]ne thing is certain, the space between us-including the relationships between researchers and subjects, between students and teachers, and between members of one culture or nation and another-is first and foremost one of partial and negotiated meaning' (Ross 2002: 411).

We hope the, that this special edition of Interactions offers some new insights in exploring the transitional states of children and young people. In a post-COVID the distinctions between the traditional conceptions of domestic and educational spaces have become blurred, and have at times overlapped with more socially organised spaces. At the very least we hope that we have problematised myopic conceptions of 'third spaces' and shown them for what they are: outdated and privileged terms, which no longer reflect the lived-experiences of children and young people (if they ever did). Finally, we hope that scholars from a wide-range of fields will find inspiration in these pages, and ways to operationalise their own research in 'in-between' spaces.

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