ANNELI FRELIN AND JAN GRANNÄS

5. NAVIGATING MIDDLE GROUND

A Spatial Perspective on the Borderlands of Teacher-student Relationships in Secondary School

INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2000, § 28) not only states rights to education, but also that "[d]iscipline in schools should respect children's dignity. For children to benefit from education, schools must be run in an orderly way – without the use of violence". To this end, the benefits of positive teacher-student relationships are well established (see e.g. Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). For example, person-centered teacher variables were associated with positive student outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007), including the outcome of lifelong learning and citizenship (Doyle, 2009), student engagement (Margonis, 2004) and self-esteem (Pianta, 2006). Positive teacher-student relationships are especially important for students facing social borders in school, (Davidson, 1999), for minority students (Erickson, 1987) and for disadvantaged students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Moreover, teachers are central when it comes to creating favorable social relationships in the classroom, especially those associated with less violence and delinquency (Sprott, 2004) and better student behavior (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011).

Closeness is one of the features of a positive teacher-student relationship. The proximity between teachers and students has been shown to have a positive effect on student effort and confidence (see e.g. den Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2005), student resilience (Johnson, 2008) and students' subject-specific motivation (Davis, 2003; den Brok et al., 2005; Lingard, Hayes, & Mills, 2003). The relationships are negotiated by the behavior and verbal and non-verbal communication of students and teachers and are sometimes based on very subtle judgments on both parts (Davis, Gabelman, & Wingfield, 2011; Frelin, in press; Wubbels, den Brok, Veldman, & van Tartwijk, 2006).

The teacher-student relationship is a professional one, and while there is a need for teachers to have both professional closeness and professional distance (Frelin, 2008), there are limits to how close teachers and students can get without overstepping professional boundaries (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). These boundaries establish what is (in)appropriate in relationships (cf Austin, Bergum, Nuttgens, & Peternelj-Taylor, 2006). Boundaries can vary within and across cultures (Thayer-Bacon, 2008) and teachers who are aware of such variations may

affect the learning environment (den Brok, Wubbels, Veldman, & van Tartwijk, 2009; Ullucci, 2009). It is held that teachers need to maintain teacher-student relationships within a professional territory (cf Austin et al., 2006) in order to delimit the space in which the professional can maneuver, and work to create a middle ground between teachers and students, which is often necessary for education to occur (cf Woods, 1990). In this chapter we specifically use the term middle ground to denote the space in which it will be possible for individuals to emerge in ways that extend beyond the given teacher and student roles.

In their daily work, teachers are constantly faced with dilemmas, especially when striving for balance, for example between care and control (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Edling & Frelin, in press). These dilemmas can relate to issues of self-disclosure, where teachers want to be perceived as "real" (Aultman et al., 2009) or "human" (Frelin, 2010) in order to improve the learning environment for their students. To some extent, professional boundaries are also negotiated on a case-by-case basis. However, teachers express that getting "over-involved" affects their teaching capacity and life outside school in a negative way and threatens the maintenance of their teaching identity (Aultman et al., 2009). Dilemmas may entail the weighing of institutional boundaries against the welfare of a student (Aultman et al., 2009). Andrzejewski and Davis (2008) discussed the topic of teachers touching students and found that they were negotiating risks, viewing themselves as for example "the kind of teacher who takes risks to touch students because they viewed connecting with students as a responsibility and touch as a vital tool for making connections" (p. 786). The above referenced research contains streaks of spatiality.

The purpose of this chapter is to use spatial theories to explore how teachers and students in secondary education view and navigate middle ground for achieving positive and professional teacher-student relationships. How do teachers and students reason about the borderlands of teacher-student relationships and how do they navigate them? In the next section we turn to spatial theories.

SPATIAL DIMENSIONS IN SCHOOL LIFE

Spatial dimensions permeates our use of language and thinking (Edwards & Usher, 2003). Spatial theories are fruitful for understanding the factors that contribute to positive relational processes in the school context (cf Ferrare & Apple, 2010). In the following section, we present a comprehensive spatial perspective based on three forms of spatiality.

We argue that spatiality is an effective analytical tool for constructing a spatial perspective on everyday school activities. Three forms of spatiality are focused on: *physical space, social space* and *mental space* (Grannäs, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991; Mcgregor, 2004a). The three forms of spatiality are not and cannot be completely separated from each other, but are always dynamically related.

Physical Space

The analytical concept of physical space, the first aspect of the triad, highlights the dominant ways in which time and space are organized. We perceive space by seeing, smelling, hearing, moving and attending to everyday practices that shape patterns, routines and behaviors among people. The way we relate to time / space is crucially important to how education and learning take place and can take place. In this paper, we suggest an approach that is different from a Euclidian understanding of space; I do this in order to develop a theoretical framework against which different ways of organizing education and learning can be analyzed. In everyday life, we relate to spatiality with relatively few problems using a Euclidean starting point in which the room is considered a fixed container for human activity (Gruenewald, 2003; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Kostogriz, 2006). Transgressing the idea of space as a fixed container, and not reducing space to a point on a grid, opens up a different view on educational settings.

   The interaction in physical space, or rather the frequency of human behavior, creates meaning in that space. Actions are linked to the involved individual's construction of meaning in that particular space. It is not quite certain that the intended purpose for a school corridor when that corridor is designed, or for that matter the intent of school operations planning, coincides with the students' construction of meaning in the school.

   The school building forms a backdrop against which assumptions are expressed regarding how teaching and learning are organized and expected to take place. Gordon and Holland argue that: "The spaces of the schools reflect prevailing societal expectations of the education of children and the construction of citizenship" (Gordon & Holland, 2003, p. 28). Physical space in school consists of spatial practices that place work, play and leisure in pre-established classrooms, cafeterias, hallways, playgrounds etc. The school building as a physical space is regarded as a consequence of social practices and thus as a social construct. The physical space has a compelling but not predetermined character, which means that school buildings and their surroundings are mainly planned and built with a view to certain activities taking place there, but nevertheless allowing for some degree of flexibility. Such possibility, we argue, emerges from the social interaction that gives the physical space meaning. According to Biesta, we should understand the architectural room/space and the event in tandem, i.e. the physical space exists because of the occurring event. Biesta's theories about the architectural space contribute to an understanding of space that is neither objectivistic, where a room is seen as a fixed container in which human life unfolds, nor phenomenological, where the room is reduced to the subject's perception of the room (Biesta, 2006).

   The ways in which physical and social spaces are organized in school shape the routines and structures that produce particular social relations (Gordon & Holland, 2003; Mcgregor, 2004b; Thomson, 2007). For example, a school building consisting of rooms on several floors with corridors linked by staircases (physical space), where the different floors and corridors are only accessible to the group of teachers and students designated to be there (social space), is reminiscent of the

architecture and social interaction of prisons. Schools with such architecture, and with activities that are organized in such a way, thereby produce specific social relations that are not necessarily positive for teacher-student relationships or lead to good learning environments.

Mental Space

The second aspect of the triad refers to conceptualizing and conceptualizations linked to methods, planning, systems, strategies, discourses etc. The concept of mental space highlights the artifacts, symbols, signs and codes of meaning and knowledge systems that show the practices of power. Mental space can be understood through people's notions of schooling, its forms and contents, which structure ideas about teaching and learning in different educational ideologies (Gordon & Holland, 2003). School policy documents are societal expressions of expectations regarding the kind of citizens that schools set out to prepare for a future active citizenship (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). The ways in which education and schools in particular are imagined and conceived are directly related to the construction of the abstract teacher and also to the construction of the abstract student. All this has an impact on workplace philosophies, ideologies, practices and regimes.

Based on Gordon and Holland (2003), it can be stated that written policies and other directives contribute to the mental spaces that are constructed and maintained in the school context. Mental space is also the intersubjective creation of meaning in which the individual is related to both material and symbolic factors. From the perspective of teacher-student relationships, one example of such intersubjective meaning-making is the constantly emerging negotiations between teachers and students. The way in which an individual perceives the negotiations has implications for the following action, for example in the form of collaboration and/or resistance.

Social Space

The third aspect, social space, is the place where lived experience takes place and where meaning is created – both individually and communally (inter-subjectively). Social space is defined by lived experience and occurs in moments when everything comes together in interaction. The dynamics of the ongoing creation and recreation of social spaces are expressed through processes of differentiation, categorization and discrimination (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). The structuring ideas, the imaginary and the abstract all have an impact on social practices.

Social space can also be understood in terms of a differentiated space (third space) that allows for the emergence of unique subjectivities, in contrast to the pre-given notion of the abstract teacher and abstract student (mental space).

In school as a social practice, various policies regulate the activities and people by so-called "time-space-trajectories", of which the school timetable is perhaps the

most vivid example (Giddens, 1984; Thomson, 2007). This routinization of the social space is described by Gordon and Holland (2003) as a means of limiting students' opportunities to make decisions in everyday practices, and the expected "time-space-trajectories" are described as expressions of power relations in school activities. The schedule profoundly regulates the everyday life of school practice. There is, for example a difference between how students and teachers interact during lessons and breaks.

To sum up, as Kostogriz and Peeler (2007) suggest: "the production of teacher workplaces embodies a close association with how professional space is perceived as a set of appropriate practices and professional attributes; how the representations of professional knowledge and professionalism are constructed and standardized by educational authorities and bureaucrats; how this space is lived in the daily reality of local, routine and situated events of the classroom and how the local is informed by the life of teachers outside the classrooms and staffrooms" (p. 108).

Consequences for Teachers' Work

We argue that the temporal structuring of schooling (consequences of the administration of time) both restrains and facilitates teachers' work of creating and sustaining educational relationships with students (Frelin & Grannäs, 2010). By attending to the time-space dimension, the power dimensions in teacher-student relations that influence the form and results of the negotiations are brought to the fore (Carlgren, 1997). While the physical space has a bearing on how school is organized and controlled (Biesta, 2006), this organization of time is often taken for granted, despite its central significance for and influence on the school activities. Order and control become central parts of school, because teachers and students (who) are expected to be in a particular place (where) at a particular time (when) to pursue a given education (what).

However, teachers cannot take this order for granted, since it is more or less under constant negotiation with students. Negotiations can either take the form of open conflicts between teachers and students, or be very subtle, such as when students display boredom or worry and the teacher changes her or his teaching accordingly (Frelin, 2013). Basic and explicit rules may be set in advance, although the social complexity of the educational practice make it necessary to negotiate and renegotiate rules, given that every action is unique (Carlgren, 1997; Grannäs, 2011). Informal situations and places within schools often have a greater degree of unpredictability and can offer alternative opportunities for negotiation (Frelin & Grannäs, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Although prior research sought both students' and teachers' views on professional boundaries, combining them has been less common. An exploratory combined case study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Stake, 2006) was conducted in which data was drawn from two qualitative studies inquiring into teacher-student interaction.

The methods of data collection included interviews and observations and the two studies were conducted separately. One of the case studies, conducted by Frelin, covered the teachers' perspectives and the other, by Grannäs, those of the students. Combining teachers' and students' points of view is less common and offers scope for exploration. The data for the two studies consisted of in all interviews with 23 students and five teachers. Frelin interviewed experienced teachers in secondary and upper secondary schools in order to inquire into relational professionality. All the teachers were interviewed twice, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. They were also observed for one or two lessons following the first interview. During the interviews, the teachers were asked to tell stories from their everyday practice and were repeatedly asked to provide arguments for their various actions in relation to students. In the interviews conducted by Grannäs, the participating young people were aged between 16 and 19 years. The overarching theme for the interviews considered students' experiences of democratic fostering, which were in turn backed up by sub-themes focusing on students' learning experiences in school and experiences of relationships in school.

   Both data sets contained many accounts of how educational teacher-student relationships were built and sustained, but also damaged and even ruined, from two different points of view. These were reanalyzed for the purpose of exploration of the boundaries of relationships. The interviews were coded using the software AtlasTi. Initially, all accounts pertaining to building and sustaining of positive teacher-student relationship were sorted. These were analyzed from a spatial theoretical perspective (Gordon & Holland, 2003; Gordon et al., 2000) where the concepts of *physical, mental* and *social* space guided the process (Grannäs, 2011). The exploratory nature of the this small qualitative study marks a preliminary mapping of the area of study as one mean for guiding further analyses using this perspective.

NAVIGATING MIDDLE GROUND IN SCHOOL

In this section, we present results on how teachers and students reason about the physical, mental and social borderlands of teacher-student relationships and how they try to navigate them. The teachers' and students' accounts are presented separately.

The Teachers

To varying degrees, all five teachers actively worked towards attaining closeness in relationships with students by various means, one of which was casual chats in informal places like the corridor. The space available for such casual interaction varied depending on the larger context in which teachers and students were situated (Frelin & Grannäs, 2010). In the Swedish context, students are less monitored (there are for example no hall passes) but are expected to take responsibility for being in the right place at the right time in school. The breaks are also longer.

For example: Adrian, a secondary school Math/Science teacher, intently interacted with his students in the corridor with a view to building such relationships.

> I feel that it is so important, being out in the corridor. I know that they appreciate it. Because I hear it too: Adrian, he is the one who comes out here, he is the one who talks [to us]. And they appreciate it. I feel, I think that it is a big and important thing that I have to do.

The informal chats took place between students and teachers in the corridor, and were viewed as emerging *social spaces* or practices of informal interaction. In actual fact, students and teachers were only meant to interact in the classroom and only in relation to the content that the students were expected to learn. The corridor thus functioned as a *borderland* in relation to the intended learning processes. This was because it was a space that both students and teachers inhabited, and because the social space was less regulated than that during lessons. In these borderlands Adrian had an opportunity to negotiate *middle ground.* This may have contributed to the closeness of the teacher-student relationship, which might in turn be positive for education.

However, as he remarked, in his work in the corridors he had become more cautious about respecting students' *physical space*. Earlier, he used to put his hand on a student's shoulder, but at times had felt students' reactions to this and reflected that he was not always comfortable with being touched. As a result he decided to be careful. He said that when he had come to know the students well and whether or not they were comfortable with being touched, he considered reciprocating.

Gunilla worked with students who were not eligible for upper secondary school because they had not met the requirements necessary for passing the core subjects. She highlighted the advantages of the very small school in which she worked. The school had only 10 students and was located in an ordinary house in a residential area. The fact that the house was not originally built for schooling allowed for displacement in relation to the *physical space* that the students perceived, many of whom were burdened with previous negative experiences of school. This alteration in terms of physical space facilitated conditions for creating middle ground and allowed for the creation of social spaces that were conducive to positive relationships and learning.

In this school house, the teachers and students had a joint coffee area in the kitchen. In Gunilla's experience, if she and a student met over a cup of coffee during the break it became easier to deal with any problems that arose in the lesson that followed. In Swedish schools the coffee break is part of the daily rhythm, although the joint coffee area is also a borderland where teachers have an opportunity to step back from the expected routines and conceptions of how teachers should act. Gunilla remarked that:

> … the tension is reduced if it is the same person that just popped in and … had a cup of coffee with them. It doesn't get so noticeable, it becomes more

> relaxed, this atmosphere. This is, I guess, something one can create thanks to the proximity, open doors and what not.

At times teachers feel the need to stand back in order to keep a professional distance. For example, Gunilla also struggled to stay within a professional space, which was difficult when she saw that parents neglected their sons and daughters and she had to refrain from acting as a parent in their place. She said that: "We become almost like their parents somewhere in the end, we try not to be but sometimes one becomes that". Stepping into this middle ground between teacher, student and parent can thus involve risks of treading outside a professional space, thus muddling the relationship.

The Students

The students emphasized how important it was for teachers to maintain the right distance for the task in hand in their relationships with students. Several of the young people believed that an important approach of the "good teacher" was the ability to see, hear and speak with the youth in a way that felt genuine. That is, although they appreciated closeness, they were very sensitive to teachers who tried to relate to them outside the professional space. However, examples were given of teachers who were good at managing this balancing act between being personal but not private, and also between being a grown-up but still friendly. The student Jonathan, aged 19, said: "It is about meeting half way /.../ in a way that does not feel phoney".

Meeting half way, we argue, is a good metaphor for describing important relational dimensions in everyday school activities. Meeting half way means creating middle ground without overstepping the professional boundaries. From a democratic viewpoint, and one based on fundamental human rights, this interaction is worth highlighting because it demonstrates the value of both parties recognizing each other, and avoids a view of the student as only an object to fill with knowledge (UNICEF, 2000). It is precisely by meeting half way that the parties create middle ground.

In another example, Linda described events where teachers – in an effort to preserve the homogeneous group order – chose not to meet half way, but instead excluded individuals who did not fit into the existing norms. In contrast, Linda said this about a teacher at the school:

> I had a teacher who taught the subject of Swedish language and who was great. He was quite young and a very educated person for his age. It felt like he knew everything. I looked up to him, very much. We got along very well and you could sit and talk to him during the breaks. Since there were no others to talk to.

Here, Linda talks about approach in which the teacher established middle ground and facilitated a genuine encounter between him and Linda.

The students also gave examples of teacher traits and approaches, including humor, openness and interest in the individual student. Based on these experiences, it could be said that from the students' perspective, teachers need to develop an approach that matches what a student values and thinks is important: that students perceive the teacher as fair, interested and caring. It is important for students to be viewed and acknowledged as unique individuals and not just as abstract beings. Part of what we from a spatial perspective term mental space is students' expectations of what a teacher or student 'is' and 'should be' shape the conditions for interaction between students and teachers. For Victoria, this was an important approach.

> There is one that I've had since seventh grade when he was my mentor. He was great, he was always kind and he helped me with the test … he would always come and ask me how I was. If one is about to lower the test scores he helped all the time to improve the results and did not give up. He is very kind and now, though he is not my mentor, he sits down and asks how things are going. He helps a lot of people.

Students described places outside the classroom, such as dining halls, corridors and areas where they spent much of their break time, as important for informal interactions with teachers, which in turn contributed to closeness in relationships. This suggests that the professional space of teachers may stretch way beyond the classroom.

In the young people's stories about their experiences of different teachers, a recurring theme was identified when they talked about what characterized a "good teacher". Several of the interviewees thought that it was important for the teacher to take the time to get to know the student as an individual. Taking the time to get to know the student is also a form of recognition, in that the teacher shows an interest in the unique individual. This also means that the teacher needs to take the risk to deflect from the given and expected roles in everyday practices in school.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Achieving education that is humane is a worthy cause, and knowledge about how to create middle ground and educational relationships with all students is vital for successful teaching. Using both teachers' and students' accounts, together with a spatial perspective, this study adds to the field by exploring examples of how, where and when such educational relationships are achieved. Teachers having difficulties relating to students are widely reported (e.g. Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). The results of this study are of value for teachers, and for future research into professional teacher-student relationships, for example when developing measures in research such as comparative studies. It can be argued that the borderlands constitute so called *absent presences*, that is, important features for educational processes that have become obscured in the managerial discourse aiming at standardization and efficiency (cf. Frelin & Grannäs, in press).

Highlighting the significance of the borderlands can support the important work that teachers do, often at a personal cost.

It is common in Swedish schools to have at least 10 minutes between classes and thereby allow some space for teachers to socialize and talk with students. We argue that the physical and temporal structuring of schooling is of major importance, because it impacts on the spaces for relational practices, which require an openness and accessibility in the sense that the physical locales are organized in ways that allow for it (cf Brown, 2012). The mission and approach of teachers also facilitates meeting half way and constructing middle ground (cf Frelin, 2013; Grannäs, 2011). The Swedish teaching assignment, regulated through the policy documents, requires a professional closeness and not only professional distance (cf Frelin, 2008). The teaching assignment is based on the idea (mental space) that young people are capable of taking responsibility. In the Education Act it is stated that students have a legal right to influence their conditions in school (SFS, 2010:800), an Act that rests upon the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In our studies, it appears that beliefs (mental space) about good schools (the abstract school) are based on fundamental human rights and the notion of the capable student (the abstract student) (Gordon & Lahelma, 2000; Grannäs, 2011). Conceptions of what constitutes good, high quality teaching are largely consistent with how the physical space, i.e. school buildings, is built and organized. Our results also show that teachers together with their students intersubjectively create meaning, and that such meaning is not always directly related to teaching and subject matter related issues, but may have significance for them in the end (Frelin & Grannäs, 2010; Jan Grannäs & Frelin, 2010). This chapter has presented spatial theories and illustrated how they can deepen our understanding of how teachers and students in secondary education view and navigate middle ground in order to achieve positive and professional teacher-student relationships in the borderlands of school.

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