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Exploring the middle space for post-pandemic pedagogy in England

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Abstract

Since Autumn 2021, the rhetoric of ‘recovery’ in primary school teaching and learning has been prevalent, involving teachers paying attention to gaps in knowledge and skills, and adapting provision accordingly. In this paper, whilst not negating this activity, it is proposed that post-pandemic pedagogy should involve more than meeting academic requirements. Considering the value of aspects of the ‘suspended curriculum’ of March-May 2020, which included a more creative and democratic approach to learning, the discussion will consider how these might be brought into relation with the formal National Curriculum within a middle space to allow for recovery of not only formal learning, but also that which goes beyond to affect a learner’s sense of identity and responsibility. Hegel’s notion of ‘the unhappy consciousness’ provides a philosophical framework for this proposal, and examples from the classroom are provided.

Keywords

Covid-19 recovery curriculum; middle space; pedagogy; Hegel; unhappy consciousness.

Link to article

Introduction

Following the Covid-19 pandemic which included eighteen months of lockdown, school closures and global uncertainty (Cahoon *et al.*, 2021), and a subsequent period of academic recovery (Ofsted, 2021), educators in England now undertake teaching and learning tasks that no longer adhere to the consequences of the transmission of Covid-19. Similarly, they are subject to inspection criteria that make no reference to the impact of the pandemic on the development of children's knowledge and skills (Brooks and Perryman, 2023). As tests, targets, inspections and league tables are once again significant external drivers within the educational experience, it might be argued, however, that the residual effects of Covid-19 persist. Thus, the pressure to succeed presents a challenge when considering the impact of the pandemic on the personal development, mental health and well-being of both learners and teachers (Cowie and Myers, 2021).

In the light of this, the current discussion considers the importance of policy-makers, leaders and educators recognising the dimension of learning and teaching that exists beyond the measurable (Wills, 2020) in order that all involved in schooling might be attentive to the significance of children's experiences, and recognise these in relation to their current feelings, attitudes and behaviours. As a theoretical article, this piece proposes a holistic pedagogical perspective which places the individual needs of children at the centre to value learners as individuals with their own sense of identity, purpose, and possibility (de Souza, 2009). It explores how the primary school classroom might become a significant physical and conceptual space (Eaude, 2014), allowing them to reflect, question and comprehend this prominent period in their lives and also suggests that the opportunity might be provided for a more flexible and autonomous pedagogy that allows both academic and personal aspects to flourish (Pattison, 2022).

In this respect, a middle space approach is proposed. Whilst there is no attempt to negate the more performative educational activities and requirements incumbent on teachers and leaders today, it is also acknowledged how the holistic approach introduced above might relate dialectically with these in order to create a middle space within which new understandings and meanings might emerge. This idea is

philosophically underpinned by Hegel's notion of 'unhappy consciousness' (1977) and reinforced through the concept of the 'broken middle' (Rose, 1992), both of which recognise how each aspect of education is its own truth, but, as will be explored in due course, has more significance in the light of the other. The discussion also acknowledges the importance of the relationship between teaching and learning in pandemic times and now, and similarly recognises how each has significance for the other in authentic education. The article aims to inspire a nuanced perspective on teaching and learning, with examples shared, to offer a way forward for policy and practice in post-pandemic pedagogy.

Learning during the pandemic: An overview

It is generally acknowledged that the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic is wide-ranging and will be long-lasting (Ramchandani, 2020). In England, the global health crisis prompted a national lockdown starting suddenly in March 2020. During the first lockdown, from March until September 2020, schools were closed for most pupils, including those in Early Years, and the formal National Curriculum was suspended (Roberts, 2021). Schools responded in a variety of ways, from teaching formal lessons online to providing suggestions for creative learning activities to be undertaken at home. Groups such as UNICEF (2020) encouraged parents to utilise technology: for example, by continuing children's learning and development and ensuring a level of positive well-being. Furthermore, the Government ceased all routine inspections of Early Years settings, schools, colleges, and children's social care services. Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary for England at the time, stated in his speech to Parliament of March 18th, 2020:

Whether a parent or a teacher, I want people to know that their wellbeing and that of their children is the absolute priority for me and my department. We are completely committed to ensuring that every child receives the best education possible (Williamson, 2020).

The creative enterprise activities undertaken by many families were viewed at the time as valid lockdown learning experiences, and many parents appreciated the opportunity and space to engage in active learning with their children. Walks in nature, listening to music, cooking, painting, and digital art and music were some of the activities

undertaken by families in intergenerational iterations of what might previously be deemed as extra-curricular. Much was made of encouraging children's positive mental health and well-being, and a non-performative agenda for learning was welcomed by many, leading some teachers to consider the freedom for creativity offered by home learning as a positive aspect of lockdown pedagogy (Bubb and Jones, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that according to recent research, the uncertainty, anxiety, disruption to routine and 'social isolation from peers, teachers, extended family and community' of lockdown' (Man Ng and Ling Ng, 2022), induced a wave of effects on children's health and well-being that are evident still today. School closures, increased screen-time and lack of social and educational opportunities impacted children's development and mental health (Lua *et al.*, 2022) and often negative changes in behaviour were observed in those for whom a routine and peer engagement were essential (Buchanan *et al.*, 2022). Highlighted by López-Bueno *et al.* (2021: 2), having been 'temporarily deprived of institutional educational environments, social contact with peers and, possibly, adequate cognitive, affective and physical stimuli for their age', children were more susceptible to adiposity (or obesity), stress and an increase in poor eating habits.

According to Attanasio *et al.* (2020), there also became increasing evidence of a widening disparity in socio-emotional skills among British children, especially males, leading to them feel lonely, frustrated, irritable, and anxious, and more prone to argument and aggression than in previous times. As Holt and Murray (2021) indicate, this was in part in relation to socio-economic status; with the economic downturn causing job losses, financial strain and food insecurity, it was the most vulnerable and underprivileged groups that were impacted in this way. Therefore, whilst lockdown learning was beneficial to some, others experienced more negative effects of school closures.

In the light of this it might be argued that it was imperative that the period of 'recovery' which took place from Autumn 2021 following a second period of school closures, should address both this deficit and variation in opportunity, and attend to the concerns raised regarding children's development and well-being. Furthermore, in the light of suggestions made within published research (Bubb and Jones, 2020), this year of

recovery afforded the opportunity for Government ministers to reassess pedagogical priorities in schools in England. Reminiscent of the creative and democratic approach to education of Dewey (1938;1969), which prioritises the needs of the child and highlights how student interests should drive learning experiences, the research undertaken by Bubb and Jones (2020) highlighted how school leaders hoped for a post-pandemic pedagogy that would be more reflective of this open-ended and non-performative approach experienced during the first period of home learning.

Akin to the principles of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2021) policy for England and Wales which views children (up to five years of age) as unique individuals and co-constructors of their own knowledge through personal meaning within enabling environments, a template was already available for such a development in pedagogy and practice in the primary school. This framework allows for a pedagogy that is holistic and open-ended, directed towards the individuality of the learner, and where an awareness of learning facilitating children's construction of personal meaning-making exists in addition to agreed pre-determined knowledge. Creativity and play are embraced as children become absorbed in their own meaning-making through hands-on experience. Drawing on this framework would give more prominence in the wider school to outdoor learning, experimentation and increased student involvement, whilst also drawing on the benefits of the enhanced teacher-parent relationship. Furthermore, as highlighted by Bethune (2023), through a less linear approach to teaching and learning within schools that are recognised as places of self-discovery, wonder and awe, children might experience enhanced well-being, happiness, meaning and purpose.

However, following the publication of the guidance document *Education Recovery in Schools: Autumn 2021* (Ofsted, 2021), it became clear that the road back to the prior performative position in learning was re-opening. Whilst indicating that further school closures would be a last resort, it also asserted school attendance as compulsory. Any children needing to isolate should be offered a high standard of remote educational support, again with compulsory attendance where possible. The cycle of inspections resumed, and all secondary school pupils' test results were published at the end of that academic year. The document infers no re-evaluation of pedagogical priorities as suggested above (Bubb and Jones, 2020); rather, the principles outlined serve largely

to address gaps in children's knowledge and the need to 'catch up' on lost learning. In practice this means that teachers were tasked with identifying what had been taught and missed during school closures and to focus on the core subjects of literacy, language and mathematics for their catch-up work (Webster *et al.*, 2022).

As much as the research undertaken by Webster *et al.* (2022) focused on children with special educational needs, their article highlights the significance of the loss of learning on all children's development of knowledge and skills during the school closure periods, noting learners as generally being between three and fifteen months behind expected progress. Webster *et al.* (2022) relate the gap to the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on children from different socio-economic backgrounds as well as disability, including limited access to online learning, parental support and opportunities for social and physical development. Therefore, one premise of their argument is that importance should be placed on academic 'recovery' education, especially for those whose progress was least.

One Government strategy supporting 'recovery' education was and continues to be the National Tutoring Programme (DfE 2023: 8) which aims to 'provide subsidised tuition to support disadvantaged pupils in the subjects of English and/or Mathematics. According to the *Implementation and Process Evaluation* document (DfE, 2023) tutors, who are mainly qualified teachers, provide content in line with the gaps in each pupil's attainment and focus on the individual's learning needs. Evaluation data suggests a high rate of satisfaction on the part of school leaders who also 'perceived that the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) had positively impacted pupils' attainment, progress and confidence' (DfE, 2023: 50), and whilst less funding is available in the fourth year of the scheme, ending in 2024, it is acknowledged that tuition now serves to address the attainment gap further than the response to loss of learning induced by lockdown, to now support low-attaining pupils with or without disadvantage.

Yet, according to Webster *et al.* (2022), the NTP provision for children with special needs and disabilities has been less well received, and when asked for their views on aspects of this recovery strategy, only 4 per cent of special school and college leaders agreed that the NTP appropriately addressed their learners' needs. It might be argued then that the narrow focus on two curriculum areas, adopting a somewhat linear approach to learning within discrete subjects, is not relevant to all students, especially

those for whom a more holistic approach might be beneficial. It is also important to note that, with the NTP scheme drawing to a close in 2024 and schools operating, particularly in relation to the development of academic knowledge and skills, within a similar construct to that prior to the pandemic, this more formal, performative approach is now becoming prominent.

From a philosophical perspective, the positioning of the recovery curriculum against the open-ended and democratic nature of learning during the first lockdown effects a dualism here in which two pedagogical approaches appear to be at odds with each other. This reflects, for example, a report from Heller-Sahlgren (2018) cited in Clarke 2020: 263) that promotes the notion of ‘the achievement-wellbeing trade-off in education’, prevalent in discourse before the pandemic, in light of which policy-makers and subsequently school leaders and teachers must decide to prioritise either well-being or academic attainment. In a similar vein, the creative pedagogy of lockdown learning and the subsequent ‘recovery’ programme each has its own validity considered relevant in the light of children’s pandemic experiences. However, such a dualism is also problematic as the relation between the two is, as suggested above, imbalanced. Whilst the guidance for schools issued during the period of recovery does in part address the mental health and well-being of pupils, this in practice seems to be overshadowed by the requirement to meet inspection and performative criteria; yet on the other hand it might be argued that addressing the personal needs of learners risks limiting progress in attainment of knowledge and skills. As a result of this broken relation a tension emerges.

Therefore, in the light of the overview provided above, the current discussion now turns to considering an approach to teaching and learning that embraces the tension between the two within a dialectical relationship. It is not a both/and approach but one that deems the tension to be educative for a new perspective on pedagogy.

The middle space

As stated at the outset, as a discussion piece, the analysis of ideas undertaken here is not drawn from empirical research data, but rather has a philosophical basis. As a method for exploration, ‘conceptual analysis’ is used as a framework since, as Gatley (2023: 550) points out, such a task facilitates an interplay between ‘conceptual work

and real- world educational consequences’ that is imperative for curriculum planning and school development. This suggests that the concepts explored as justifiable truths are only provisional in the light of practice, promoting a dialectical approach to the consideration of the pedagogical priorities of this post-pandemic period. Arising from the dialectic is the notion of the middle space, which is explored here as a template for a new perspective on teaching and learning which embraces the interplay between the hallmarks of both lockdown learning and the more performative approach to which teaching has now returned.

When exploring a middle space approach, links are often drawn with third space theory. This has established some significance through the work of Homi Bhabha who, in his text *The Location of Culture* (2004), espouses a liminality in relation to the concepts of identity and culture. He suggests that understandings of identity and culture should be fluid rather than fixed – ‘transgressive and transitional’ (2004: 40). Here, new meanings emerge in a space beyond the immediate. Through this perspective, hegemonic attitudes towards colonialism, for example, are challenged, thus empowering and inspiring those who are deemed as ‘other.’ This idea has, of course, been critiqued, not least for the risk it poses to liminality – it is important to question whether the third space might become as fixed as the first and second spaces. This critique is no less relevant to the current discussion yet, as will be noted in due course, through the process of embracing tension in establishing the middle space, the risk of fixed knowledge is hopefully averted, and the continuousness of the educative process is protected.

The idea of a middle space here starts with the philosophy of Hegel. It is important to note that Hegel, through his text *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1830; 1977), has himself been accused of perpetuating a colonial stance, thus advocating racism through the exclusion of the ‘other’ from being (Fanon, 1952, cited in Ogungbure, 2018). Nevertheless, it is argued in the current discussion that the opposite is in fact the case, with the middle space disallowing the hegemony of either learning partner.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1830; 1977) the middle space idea is reflected in Hegel’s notion of the unhappy consciousness which involves the difficult relation of two partners – a master and slave. Independent consciousness, characterised by the master, is self-assured and desires autonomy. He holds his slave in subjection so that

the slave becomes his negation. Yet in his desire to establish his own truth, the slave attempts liberation from his master. In determining to know the truth of himself, he seeks to overcome the mastery which establishes his position as negative, thus preventing the master from establishing himself as an independent consciousness. Each seeks domination, and the 'death' or negation of the other. This results in a struggle that causes tension and pain.

Each form of consciousness might be conceptualised here in terms of lockdown learning and the recovery curriculum, and the tension that results within this relation. The philosophical proposition provides a critique of the dualism that has been established during and since the period of educational recovery post-2021 and identifies the tension experienced by educators. As already stated, it seems that a performative pedagogy is currently taking the upper hand. Meanwhile, its negation can be illustrated for example by the several instances of industrial action undertaken in 2022 and 2023 which, as well as demanding increased pay for teachers and teaching assistants, also served to highlight how the current paradigm of schooling and inspection is perceived to increase teachers' workload and stress, affecting the well-being and retention of staff (Roberts, 2023). This in turn has a negative impact on learners and learning. Campaign groups such as 'More than a Score' continue to demand an end to compulsory testing in primary schools, citing the perceived negative impact this also has on children's well-being and the negligible effect that the data has on progression, parental views and school performance (More than a Score, 2023). Additionally, the tension becomes clear when schools are placing importance on the individual identities and rights of children through schemes such as SHINE (Thompson 2023) and Rights Respecting Schools (UNICEF, 2023) as well as celebrating diversity through Black History Month (Horrie and Hillman, 2022) and other projects.

Yet, returning to a philosophical position, Hegel argues that the struggle between two forms of consciousness involves not just the desired death of the other but the risk of each to his own life (Hegel, 1977). Neither the master nor the slave can exist without the relation that is to be overcome. Therefore, both person-centred and performative pedagogies require the other for their own significance. If each were to persist in the 'trial by death' which negates the truth of the other, and therefore does away with independent truth to pursue the death of other, would also be to admit to the untruth

of its own self. As the movement of negation continues, each comes to understand that in seeking the negation of the other they are in fact signalling their own negation since the self needs the other to survive. Therefore, each consciousness only has real meaning in relation to the other. Neither should have the upper hand. It is the negation of the other, and the subsequent realisation of the significance of the imbalanced relation that, according to Rose (1992), is educative.

This is educative as it disallows either from making any claim to authority or truth. As stated above, this relation ensures that there is no hierarchy. The unresolved tension between self and other indeed inspires a third way in learning. Rose identifies this as the broken middle and proposes that the broken middle of self and other might be illustrated as a Janus-face whose dual-directional view might be equated to the educative relation of double negation inspired by the unhappy consciousness. Rose continues to note that, in the broken relation, the master is an illusion exposed by his need for a slave. In his state of dependence on the master, the autonomy of the slave is also illusory. Yet when each recognises their own position of illusory being, this has educational value. Through this recognition, each perspective is able to re-imagine self in relation to the other and more easily to understand self-actualisation as a process of possibility rather than attaining an end point.

This philosophical proposition recognises the imbalance between the two pedagogical positions outlined here, but also accepts how each is constantly being reformed and re-imagined in the light of the other. Each learns of itself in a way that is unfixed and unstable as there is no space for domination or totality (Rose, 1996). It is in the middle space which is beyond both the individual paradigms *and* their relation that authentic learning might occur. Rose (1996: 72) describes this as *Bildung*: 'formation or education which is intrinsic to the phenomenological process'. Akin to what has been described here, it is a process of learning that embraces the relational partnership, but also recognises the space between and beyond. In her consideration of this, Wills (2020) posits that, for the curriculum and wider school life, as much as an end result is often required (through the meeting of learning objectives and attainment on tests) what has meaning for learners is beyond what they come to understand as fact, to draw on who they are as learners, and to recognise how education reflects their own experiences, thoughts, questions and responses to learning.

The middle space in the classroom

In summary, in a middle space approach for pedagogy, recovery needs to embrace the necessity of both the formal and informal aspects of education yet without unifying or compromising each position. It does not involve even meeting halfway, but rather engages with both forms of learning for a more flexible way of working in which one might be inspired by the other for the development of children's ways of being. This might lead to a more holistic approach within the primary school, dialectically related to the more formal aspects of learning, and one that might be more meaningful as the time of recovery comes to an end.

According to the research methodology indicated above, Gatley (2023) states how the theory presented here might be made manifest in the primary school classroom. This includes a suggestion of how the middle space might be identified and utilised in practice. One example is through considering the value of narrative as a transitional object within the middle space. Mortensen (2003: 133), positing the middle space as a means of 'forming and shaping consciousness,' suggests that narratives of any kind mediate between a learner's acquired knowledge of the world, that is, formal learning, and their own identity, explored through open-ended and creative approaches to learning. He argues that through engaging with narratives, such as a poem, play, story or historical account, learners might learn how to explore and reconsider the structures of the world for themselves.

This was evidenced in a music class for children aged 10-11, undertaken by the current author who is a teacher in a primary school. Permission to retell this scenario has been given by the headteacher, parents and children. During Black History Month (October 2021) the children learnt and performed the song *Blackbird*, written and performed by Paul McCartney of The Beatles. They sang, played instruments and appraised the song's structure, all of which fulfilled the governmental requirements for the lesson (DfE, 2013). The children were keen to understand the meaning of the song; therefore, the teacher allowed them to engage in an extended conversation about the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter and aspects of racism. It was evident that through this conversation some children were affected emotionally by the subject matter; therefore the teacher gave them the opportunity to respond to how they were feeling and what they were thinking. Some children drew pictures, some wrote a

poem, and some wrote a short personal reflection or story. In almost each piece, the children made it clear that they believed that racist behaviour should be tackled for the future well-being of all, and that people should be educated to make moral choices.

Similarly, during a session, again led by the current author, based on the water cycle and planned from the Government guidelines for Geography (DfE, 2013) children aged 8-9 first explored the different aspects of the water cycle from the perspective of what is termed 'physical geography'. Using diagrams and a mixture of writing tasks, the children then re-presented the cycle in their own terms. Following the lesson, one child highlighted that the water cycle is a way of recycling. This led to a subsequent discussion about their use of water and how they might not consider it precious as it is always there. Other children then reacted to this, making links to their Catholic Religious Education, and remembering the topic of 'Feed the hungry; give water to those who thirst'. From this, the class were able make connections as well as critically consider and reconsider their own actions.

The notion of the middle space in these examples might be considered as a safe space in which the children, inspired by their formal learning, were able to explore and even reassess their own positions towards others and the world, resulting in their taking responsibility. Eaude (2014) considers the subsequent conceptual space formed within the classroom as a 'hospitable space'. It is in this space that children can feel comfortable to be creative and take risks in learning, with adults providing the environment in which their play, thinking and exploration is not dictated by structures or curricula that demand conformity and academic attainment. Whilst Eaude's thesis mostly positions the idea of space *against* a performative paradigm of teaching and learning (2014), in the current discussion the space provides the locus for learning which is inspired by performative structures, but within the space beyond, encourages children to lead on from this based on their own ideas and responses.

This is underlined in the work of Marian de Souza who in various publications (2004, 2009, 2012) argues that for personal learning children should be given opportunities for connectedness not only with self, but others, the world and the transcendent. Such education is not just for the benefit of the individual, or even the school, but for the child's relationship with the dimension beyond. Jaqueline Watson similarly explains how reflexive engagement with 'other' inspires the creation of a middle space and

suggests this can include 'a special source of truth' (Watson 2013: 127). Within the space a learner's existential identity might be recognised and re-formed. In turn this provides a locus for listening, encounter and ultimately ethical engagement with 'other'.

Conclusion

In the light of the overview of teaching and learning experienced during and since the pandemic, it is suggested here that for the development of children's well-being, personal development and exploration of their relation to the world and others, a middle space approach to pedagogy is appropriate moving forward into a post-pandemic era. Leading to a more holistic approach to learning, as promoted by Dewey in the previous century, and identifying the value of experiences such as those described here, a middle space approach would acknowledge the value of both the academic and the personal, and the role of the individual in moving forward the agenda for teaching and learning. In a middle space approach, hierarchy is provisional, meaning that within the context of the expectations of Government and teachers, children can bring themselves and their own feelings and experiences to the learning situation so that it might be personally relevant, have impact and an ongoing engagement with learning. Also, as suggested in the introduction, schools currently might adopt a middle space approach to encourage children to reflect on their pandemic experiences, make sense of them and consider new ways forward in their behaviours and actions.

Considering the theoretical aspect of this article, empirical research is required to provide an evidence base for this approach and to assess the views of policy-makers, school leaders and educationalists in relation to the implementation of ideas. Continuous professional development is also required in order to allow practitioners to understand and engage with the ideas set out here, so to highlight the importance of accepting both aspects of pedagogy, but also the added importance of their uncomfortable relationship (Rose, 1992) and the value that this might have to the lives of individual learners as well as the environments beyond.

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