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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i2.5>

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2022 40(2): 52-68

PUBLISHED:

08 June 2022

RECEIVED:

03 December 2021

ACCEPTED:

28 January 2022

A quasi-ethnographical exploration of how young learners establish their learning practices in their environmental space: The township community and their homes

Abstract

This paper explores how two selected learners establish their learning practices in their environmental space, that is, their township community and home space. The study combines the lenses of "Space" and "Learning" to capture their movement in and around the township showing how they inhabit space, how they interact with networks and processes in their environment, and how they ultimately transcend their spatial positioning. Methodologically, this quasi-ethnographic study, underpinned by an interpretivist metatheoretical framework, draws on my field notes, verbatim responses acquired through interviews with these children and their parents, observations of their neighbourhood and their homes, photographs and artefacts. These qualitative research tools helped to address the main research question: What is the nature of the learning practices of learners in the environmental space; that is: the space of the township community and home? The results show that these learners and their parents produce multiple and hybrid literacies and engage in rich educational practices despite the lived realities of the township space. Furthermore, it shows that learners develop a productive agency to counterpoise their spatial positioning enabling them to become co-constructors of their lived space.

Keywords: *Quasi-ethnography; learning practices; spatial positioning; human agency; educational practices; township space*

1. Introduction

The primary focus of this article is on the lived experiences of two children, Lebo and Shafiek (pseudonyms) in their environmental space; the township neighbourhood, and home space. I draw on the rich narrative accounts of these learners to address the question: *What is the nature of the learning practices of learners in the environmental space, in other words: the space of the township community and home?* These two learners find themselves in the same

Grade 6 primary school where they are often labelled by their teachers in deficit ways or in negative terms. According to Rodgers, Thambi and Shifana (2015), deficit discourses in classrooms and staffrooms are pervasive and dominant. Santoro (2013) asserts that teachers who know students as the deficit other, draw upon “negative stereotypes of students’ cultures ... [and] often focus on what they think students don’t know in comparison to students from the dominant culture” (Santoro, 2013: 315). This paper attempts to offer an alternative way of viewing township children, moving away from the deficit ways in which these subjects are portrayed in literature. As the lives of these two children unfold in this paper one gets to see that although they live in the same impoverished and marginalised township, a space consumed by social ills, they are involved in a myriad of real-world literacies and manage to live productive lives, which is contrary to how they are spatially positioned by their teachers. The emphasis of this paper is not about how children learn (cognitive and linguistic processes), neither is it about the practices of teachers or management. Instead, it focuses on social and cultural conditions external to the learner providing clarity on the role of social context in framing and informing their learning dispositions. In other words, I argue that the way they are positioned in the environmental space can be associated with how their learning practices are framed.

The paper is meant to complement an article by Fataar and Du Plooy (2012) by extending ones understanding of how learning happens in localised settings, more specifically by focusing on the township and home space. Fataar and Du Plooy (2012) focused on the relationship between social relations of learning constituted across multiple spatial domains including four learners’ learning navigations in various social spaces, revealing key dimensions of how children learn in compromised circumstances. These authors in their article broadly looked at key dimensions of children learning across multiple sites suggesting that “learning and literacy practices of school children are transacted across the various domains of their lives and that its insight into these multi-sited practices that allow a sharper appreciation of children’s school learning and literacy acquisition” (Fataar & Du Plooy, 2012: 12). Only focusing on one site, as I have done in this paper, allowed for greater depth. It afforded me the space to showcase these children’s lived realities by including their verbatim responses, extracts from my field notes and photographs of their home space.

Theoretically, I drew on Nespor’s (1997) categories of embeddedness, displacement and mobility as “analytical conveniences” that connote the relationship between children and their neighbourhoods. For Nespor (1997), “embedded children are embedded in neighbourhood routines and city-based activities, whereas displaced children move into an area and appear displaced thus feeling as if they belong to their former neighbourhoods. However, mobile children, move so often that they feel no real attachment to their neighbourhood” (Nespor: 1997: xvii). These categories are used in this paper to show the relationship these learners have with their neighbourhood, and the impact that has on their learning dispositions. In addition, these categories emphasise the relationships between the physical and the social dimensions of “lived space”. The notion of “lived space” shows how people are positioned in their social spaces, and how they navigate and ultimately transcend their spatial positioning. Fataar (2007; 2015) speaks about “lived space” as “townships on the move” when he attempts to capture a key aspect of the social dynamics of townships by emphasising the mobility of people in light of fluid and ephemeral circumstances (2007:6). He suggests that lived space throws the analytical spotlight on what people become when engaging their geographies, how they appropriate their space and invent new practice. Fataar’s recent work in his book titled: *Engaging schooling subjectivities across post-apartheid urban spaces* (Fataar, 2015) as well

as Blommaert *et al.*'s (2006) work titled: *Peripheral normativity. The production of locality in a South African township school*, amongst others (Sibanda & Kajee, 2019; Strauss, 2019) explores the social dynamics of townships in South Africa. Fataar (2007:17; 2015) alludes to the fact that people who reside in townships are transient and desperate. He further alludes to the fact that even though conditions in townships might appear dismal, marked not only by poverty and unemployment but also by high crime levels and violence, their residence normally construct viable and productive livelihoods. They do this by becoming involved in various social, economic and religious activities, which render townships exciting and viable places in which to live (Fataar, 2007:13; 2015). For Blommaert *et al.* (2006:3), townships are peripheral communities isolated from inner cities and suburbs and plagued by a variety of social and economic difficulties, allowing one to view learning not as a uniform object, but as an ecologically and economically localised one. My interest in lived space, especially relating to the focus of this paper, lies in how the environment, more specifically the socio-spatial dynamics of the township and domestic space, in which these children live influences the way their learning practices are framed, informed and positioned.

Methodologically, this qualitative quasi-ethnographic study, underpinned by interpretivism, formed part of a larger ethnographic study, which focused on the learning practices of Grade 6 learners in an urban township school in the Western Cape. Henning (2004) and Creswell (2018), both view qualitative research as an in depth-inquiry, where the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting. Studying the participants in their natural setting, expressing their views about the setting in which they find themselves, ultimately places this study within an interpretivist research paradigm (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2018). The qualitative research design best suited to my study was ethnography. Ethnography, according to Silverman (2003:43), refers to the social scientific writing about a particular folk. There are different types of ethnography (see Creswell, 2018), I gravitated towards Clifford Geertz's (1988) approach to ethnography using thick descriptions to describe and analyse the learning practices of these two learners. I certainly cannot claim to have gone "native" as most ethnographers do when they study their subjects. I entered the township, moved with these learners across their living spaces, experienced their neighbourhood and homes as they would experience it but at the end of the day, I would leave the township to go back to my middle-class suburb, hence this is a quasi-ethnographic study.

One of the most valuable aspects of doing ethnographic work is its depth (Myers, 1999; Fetterman, 2020). I partially immersed myself in this environment and its surroundings by spending 10 months in the field. Through this prolonged engagement in the field, I gained an in-depth understanding of the people, different social spaces, and the context that surrounded these learners. Time spent in the field enabled me to be an outsider and an insider in this research process. It enabled me to question aspects of their daily living that would normally be taken for granted. I was able to manage the Hawthorne effect through prolonged time spent in the field – moving from outsider to insider one becomes part of the daily routine making it difficult for people to maintain a "change in their behaviour".

My field notes became a rich source of data; a place where I could journal my daily observations, my impressions of what I was observing, and the hunches and questions that emerged whilst collecting data. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005:137) "site-based fieldwork is the sine qua non, the essence, of any ethnography". The "unit of analysis" were two purposefully selected Grade 6 learners. The investigation included various qualitative

data collection instruments that comprised participant and non-participant observations, individual interviews with the selected learners, their parents/guardians, their teachers and school principal, including interviews with members of the broader community (police officers, community workers, social workers and church leaders). The latter gave authentic insight into the social-spatial dynamics of township living. I also took photographs and artefacts from these learners' environmental space, especially their home space to capture how they acquired their learning practices despite the constraints of this impoverished township. The use of method and data triangulation, member checking and participant review, were strategies I drew on to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. According to Krathwohl (1998) triangulation is the most common method used to ensure the validity (trustworthiness) in qualitative research. Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study according to the ethical standards of the university's Senate Committee. The Senate Research Committee approved the methodology and ethics of this research project (ethical clearance number 09/1/54).

Data were analysed inductively using a narrative approach where stories become the outcome of the research. The "storying and re-storying" of people's lives (Connely & Clandinin, 1999), or, the narrative, seemed the most appropriate means to relay the "lived experiences" of these young learners. Extracts from field notes and the verbatim responses of the research participants formed an integral part of the narrative. Themes that emerged that apply to understanding how these children's learning practices are framed, positioned and informed in their environmental space are, 1) How learners inhabit space, 2) how learners interact with networks and processes in their environmental space, and 3) how and on what basis learners engage their literate worlds to transcend their spatial positioning. From these descriptive themes the findings emerged. Before discussing these themes, it is perhaps fitting to speak about the township, Delft, to gain insight into the social-spatial dynamics of the area, followed by descriptions of each of these learners' lived realities in their domestic or home space.

2. Social-spatial dynamics of Delft, Cape Town

It is 7.30 am and the township is abuzz with activity. It is a windy day, sections of the road are covered in white sand. Delft is known for being a very desolate and sandy area. Hawkers are packing out their goods for the day; the main road is lined with various container businesses owned mostly by "foreigners" from neighbouring African countries who moved to South Africa in search of a better life. This minority group owns most of the container-run businesses ranging from hair salons to spaza (house) shops. People are streaming in and out of the township, mainly being transported by mini-buses or taxis, as they are known here. I notice many school-going children, either waiting at various stops to be transported out of the township to schools in more affluent areas or walking to schools in and around the township. I travel down the main road noticing the free-standing homes built on sand, with no foundation, and much smaller than the home I left this morning to get here. One cannot escape the headlines of the 'The Daily Voice', a local newspaper, displayed on cardboard posters that encircle electric poles lining the streets. It tells of rape, murders, xenophobia violence, gang violence, drug-related stories, and the many other social ills that plague this area. It takes me quite a while to reach the school because of the amount of traffic on the main road but as I am driving I notice children streaming into the high school that is completely fenced in, with three or four security guards at the entrance of the school reminding me of a prison. I pass more container businesses and a few house shops and as I take the turn into the road where the school is situated I notice a community centre, a mosque, a church and houses smaller than

the ones further up the road. The houses, which are practically built on the doorstep of the school, remind me of the container businesses, small and boxed together. At different points along the school fence are packets containing chips and sweets, hanging on the fence like washing on a washing line. I later discover that these survivalist businesses are common to the area and are normally operated by unemployed parents who are trying to make a living for the day (extract taken from my daily journal).



Photo 1: The boxed businesses lining the streets of Delft

Photo 1 shows the boxed businesses that line the main street of Delft. Mostly Nigerians or Somalians own these businesses bringing their rich culture to this township. The opening extract in this section, from my field notes dated September 2008, provides insight into the socio-spatial dynamics of Delft, an urban township located in the Western Cape, initially planned as a “coloured” residential area. After 1994 the area, “was used as a tool for racial integration” (Millstein, 2007:35). This area was earmarked to accommodate 50% coloured and 50% black residents. The community of Delft are faced with harsh and violent crimes, gang-related violence spiked by drug use and gang wars (children playing on school grounds are often killed or seriously wounded in crossfires of gang wars), violent crimes perpetrated mostly against women and children, poverty and high rates of unemployment. The latter often result in young people roaming the streets, taking drugs and turning to gangs as a way out of poverty. Others become involved in unlawful ways of earning a living such as drug and alcohol trafficking (shebeens/taverns are lucrative businesses found on most streets). Lebo’s grandmother captures the essence of living in this township:

...it is really upsetting sometimes, really, because here just in this area it is mixed up, because there are coloured, black people, come together at the same time but the situation in this place is not good anyway. There is “tik” lots of drugs, lots of stuff happening.

For Shafiek's mother, living in constant fear is not a strange phenomenon given that crimes against children are rife in this area, as she puts it,

I'm constantly aware of where my children are. They only allowed to play in front [a small enclosed garden close to the front door] and next door by my sister.

The verbatim responses of Lebo's grandmother and Shafiek's mother, respectively, coupled with the description from my field notes tell a story of a township space that is deeply constraining and impoverished. Blommaert *et al.* (2006) viewed townships as "peripheral normativity"; peripheral communities isolated from inner cities and suburbs and plagued by a variety of social and economic difficulties. Fataar (2007), in his work "*townships on the move*", captured the dual workings of township spaces. On the one hand, townships appear dismal given the harsh realities and on the other, residents mainly construct viable and productive livelihoods. Fataar's work reveals that viewing township spaces in terms of "lived space" (Fataar, 2007; 2015); a means of how people live in sites or places, how they are wired into their geographies, and how they transcend their geographies. This concurs with Robert Helfenbein (2010), where geographical places cannot be viewed as static devoid of any activity, but they are "spaces that speak, spaces that leak and spaces of possibilities". A description of each child's social-spatial context follows, revealing their "lived realities" within their neighbourhood and home spaces. The data presentation section that follows provides an overview of how they inhabit space, how they navigate space and how they transcend their spatial positioning.

Lebo's social-spatial context

Lebo is an 11-year-old black girl who moved to Delft from Gugulethu when she was five years. Gugulethu is a black township in the Western Cape. Her home is on a narrow street in the newest part of Delft. The house is small and not more than 5x4 metres in size. There is only one entrance and a small window; thus, it is poorly ventilated. Lebo's grandmother, the only breadwinner and head of this household, refers to it as a "*poppiehuis*" (a doll house), since there is only one room and a small toilet, doubling as a bathroom. The room is divided into three small areas. Two bedrooms are divided by suitcases stacked to the ceiling acting as a make-shift partition. Some of these suitcases contain storybooks received from the grandmother's employers, and which they mostly escape to during weekends when the weather is bad and they are forced to remain indoors. A cabinet containing neatly stacked crockery is used to further partition this small space into a kitchen, which contains kitchen zinc. They have two second-hand refrigerators received from the grandmother's employers, and a portable television set which at the time of my visit was not working. The dressing table at the entrance, doubles as a desk for doing homework and a place to sit and eat. They normally sit on old paint buckets outside the house because of the limited space indoors. The walls are not plastered or painted, and the asbestos roofing is a health risk, especially to Lebo who suffers from asthma.



Photo 2: Lebo's home – one way in and one way out

Photo 2 shows the home space, which Lebo inhabits providing a visual representation of her spatial dynamics. This small yet comfortable house is home to 10 children: two older cousins, Lebo and her two younger siblings who came to live with the grandmother after her mother contracted HIV and could no longer care for them. In addition, there are 5 young children, three of Lebo's cousins whose parents died in a car accident, and two Muslim children from this neighbourhood, whose parents were jailed for selling drugs and they had nowhere else to live. Lebo describes what it is like living in this household:

We sleep and wake up at different times, starting at 5 o'clock. Some wake up at 6.30 and others later. We wash ourselves in a bucket, so we must wait. We take turns, two at a time, to wash because we can't all wash at the same time. Then we all eat porridge which granny makes. We all have our own cups and bowls. My cup no one uses only me. We got this from granny's white people, [referring to the old British employers for whom Lebo's granny has been working as a domestic worker for over 21 years].

How they live in this cramped space discloses why ownership of things would be important to Lebo. Besides ownership, religion also plays a big role in this extended family's lives. This is evident from the many religious artefacts around the room (see Photo 3), and the involvement of the family in the church and choir.



Photo 3: Religious posters in Lebo's home

The Muslim children are quite at home in this Christian household even though they are encouraged to practice their Muslim faith. The children find ways to keep busy even though space is limited. The harshness of growing up poor is evident in this household. They often take great pleasure in cutting out pictures from magazines on fashion, celebrities and fancy houses, and pasting these in books. These scrapbooks are then used as a basis for storytelling and for daydreaming about things they hope to own one day.

Lebo's grandmother places great value on education. The children are not allowed to play outside after school but complete homework and keep themselves busy with school-based activities, which the granny monitors after her long workday. She monitors their school progress, gets up early to accompany them to school to ensure their safety, yet she needs to travel in a different direction to get to her workplace.

Lebo's life is not confined to this working-class township. It is through strong friendships forged through social networks that came about because of her grandmother's work that she occupies multiple social spaces and takes on multiple identities. These multiple worlds that she moves in and out of having a profound impact on how her learning practices are shaped. As mentioned, Lebo's grandmother has been working for the same British Jewish family as a domestic worker for over 21 years. Lebo did not attend crèche or preschool. She accompanied her grandmother to work where she was exposed not only to middle-class practices but also English. Therefore, she spent most of her early childhood at her grandmother's workplace, as she puts it: "Lebo grew up playing with their children, and at the same time they helped with books and so on". It is through her ties with this Jewish, white family that Lebo forged other friendships. Her friendship with Jade, a 12-year-old British girl and her friendship with Emma, also 12 years old, who lives in the affluent and scenic area of Hout Bay in South Africa. Lebo's friendship with Jade gives her access to economic resources, and opportunities to travel. She disclosed during an interview that she would be visiting Jade in England later that year. On one of my visits to her home, Lebo showed me a package she received from Jade, containing

mostly stationery, a dictionary, and a calculator, which Lebo treats as her prized possession, not sharing it with the other children and packing it back into the package after she uses it (see Photo 4). She receives and sends letters to Jade by post or writes letters that the grandmother would take to work for her employer to send via email.



Photo 4: Gifts from England

Furthermore, her friendship with Emma, allows her to live a lifestyle, unlike the one she lives in the township. During our interview, Lebo expressed this lifestyle as follows:

I sleep in my own bedroom in my own bed. We plan to do things. We are throwing a party in the September holidays for fun. Then I will meet all their friends. We designed invitations on the computer, then print it or her daddy will email it. Her mommy showed us how to design invitations ... I like watching movies and like to go to the video shop. We just ask for the credit card and just say: "Can we have it?", Then they give it to us. When I'm there we can buy anything.

Owning a room and a bed thus expresses her need for ownership. The exposure to this middle-class lifestyle from a very early age came at some cost though. This is evident in the way she speaks about her mother tongue, Xhosa, which appears to add very little value to her life. She boldly expressed "my language is just something; like something I don't care about". She does however use multiple languages to navigate the physical spaces she occupies. At home, she speaks Xhosa, but only to her grandmother and with difficulty but she prefers to speak Afrikaans, the dominant language spoken in the community, as she puts it: "Afrikaans, the way I learnt to speak it was the happiest time for me because I can do it well and I can speak to all my friends [referring to her coloured friends at her school]". She speaks English with a European (white) accent which is evident in the tone of voice she uses when speaking English during our interviews.

It appears that Lebo's social-spatial context, illustrates a disconnection between Lebo and her environmental space. This shows in her attitude towards her home language, as well as in her movement from one social space into the next. The latter can be described as a form of class-hopping, evident from the movement between her working-class experiences in the township and her middle or upper-class experiences in more affluent social spaces. Furthermore, her interactions with Jade and Emma respectively, show how her learning practices are acquired, positioned and negotiated in the environmental space.

Shafiek's social-spatial context

Shafiek is a 12-year-old Muslim boy who lives with his parents and four other siblings, two older brothers and two younger sisters, in the older section of Delft. Both parents have some formal schooling, his father a welder, and his mother a housewife. Unlike Lebo's home, Shafiek lives in a free-standing house that consists of a lounge, two small bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, and a bathroom with a bath and toilet. Although the home has limited space for moving around, it is well kept and neat. The walls are covered in religious hangings such as the Arabic prayers and other Muslim pictures.

Shafiek, according to his mother, diligently attends Madrassa (Muslim school) every Friday. He gets to share what he learns from Muslim school with his Christian school friend, Angelo. Shafiek expresses this fascinating inter-religious mix in the following quote:

I was going to do my task on Moses. He saved the people from the evilness and cruelty of Pharaoh. I read about it from the Holy Qur'an. I went to the Imam and asked him questions on Moses. My friend Angelo tells me about the Christian religion. He shares with me the Christian version and I tell him about the Muslim version. I saw the movie of Moses. We have 12 commandments, but the Christian religion only has 10 commandments. We have the cartoon Christian version of Moses and the Muslim cartoon of Mohammed.

One could say that Shafiek and his family are not very mobile since most of their daily activities are confined to their home or interacting with the aunt and cousins who live in the house next door. Their movement is therefore restricted to this neighbourhood and visiting family in another township nearby, even though the family owns a car.

They certainly have acquired more material possessions than Lebo and her family, noted during my visit to their home. The lounge contains a TV, two video machines, and Shafiek's most prized possessions, his PlayStation with games neatly displayed on a shelf (see Photo 5), the family computer, and the stacks of National Geographic books that his father brings from his workplace. These possessions are relevant to how Shafiek acquires his learning practices in his environmental space, especially his keen interest in playing PlayStation from which he appears to benefit not only economically, but also educationally and socially. Economically, by selling cheats to the games to older men. These cheats are vital to "clock" the game. His mother proudly relayed the following:

He finishes tasks quickly; like the games I buy. There's many a big men, they come here, and ask him: "Shafiek, how do we get past this stage?". Then he must show them how. He even gets them cheats.

"Clocking" the game and doing it in the shortest time possible spills over into how he approaches most tasks. He states:

I'm a quick learner. If I play a game it's almost like within 20 minutes, I know everything about the game ...I just read the instructions; they show it on the game. I read and sometimes there's a word that I didn't see before then I look in the dictionary then I know what it means and I can move forward in the game.

These words benefit him educationally when engaging in classroom activities such as spelling, reading or doing assignments. Furthermore, Shafiek is also an avid reader. He enjoys the Encarta computer programme and the National Geographic second-hand magazines his father brings from work. Here he acquires knowledge about insects, planets, Greek and Egyptian mythology, amongst other things.



Photo 5: Shafiek's Play Station games

Socially, the things he engages with; playing games and reading magazines or just by reading information on the family computer enable him to share what he knows with others. According to him his cousins often come to him for information, as expressed as follows:

If they [referring to his cousins who live next door to him] see a lizard they come and ask me questions about it. Then I can answer them so if they say “What kind of lizard is that?” then I say “a chameleon because it changes colours so that it keeps away predators”.

His interest span issues on planets and global warming which he mostly gets from the National Geographic magazines. Furthermore, he does not only learn, and finish tasks quickly, but also learns through trial and error and by observing his older brothers. Learning how to use the family computer, doing what he describes as “catching on nonsense, and then afterwards I think and try to fix it” shows how he learns. Because Shafiek’s movement is restricted to the township, moving from home to school or from home to Madrassa, only being allowed to play in the vicinity of his home, his social interactions appear largely family based. I later discovered that his grandfather who lives next door with his aunt is often tasked to help with assignments. His mother is instrumental in acquiring games which are quite expensive. Shafiek’s mother, similar to Lebo’s grandmother, values education, as she puts it “my mother was also strict on us regarding our schoolwork, and I think I’m the same. I get it

from her". Taking Shafiek to the library, assisting with gathering information for assignments, and constantly "staying on" him, checking that he did his schoolwork and regularly attending parent meetings to discuss his progress, bears evidence of her commitment to his progress in school, in her words,

I was very, you see I always help my children with their schoolwork, even him...I'm very much interested in what they do so if he comes and tells me he is interested in welding, then I will get books on it like I did with all the others.

These forms of parent involvement, like staying on children, monitoring school progress, assisting with school activities, offering up a time to take them to school and the library, providing access to educational resources, are often not recognised as parental involvement in schools.

In brief, the confinement to his environmental space means that he lives in these spaces routinely. The intensity of his engagement with this popular culture appears greater than his engagement with school-based activities. Prensky (2001) observed that children who are exposed to such games and who he labelled "Digital Natives"

receives information really fast, and like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer graphics to text, thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards, and in most cases, prefer games to school work (Prensky, 2001:3).

Shafiek can be described as a "Digital Native", as is evident from his mother and his descriptions of how he engages with games, especially the time he takes to "clock" a game. Furthermore, his access to various commodities, as outlined in this section, feed into how he acquires his learning practices, and more importantly into how his learning practices are negotiated within his environmental space.

The complexities of township living and how these two children engage within the confinements of the social spaces they occupy have been outlined. The next section discusses the themes that emanated from the analysis of the data.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Spatial positioning- relationship between children and their neighbourhoods

Nespor's (1997) categories of embeddedness, displacement and mobility, describing the relationship between children and their neighbourhoods, are used here to understand how they inhabit their environmental space.

Lebo, for example, is seen as a mobile student, although she lives in the township, she criss-crosses the city landscape over weekends and holidays to more affluent areas. She frequently does what Fataar (2010) describes as "space hopping" or as I prefer "class hopping". In Nespor's (1997) description, Lebo can be viewed as being "spatially dislocated". The apparent detachment and disaffection that she displays towards her culture and language is a manifestation of her spatial dislocation. Soudien (2007:83) terms this detachment as a form of alienation, as he puts it: "alienation often happens in young people's quest to be normal and fit in". Lebo displays a form of alienation by adopting a middle-class persona – especially when she speaks with a "white accent" and how she speaks Afrikaans when she is in the township. Soudien (2007) however points out that:

young people can emerge from ambivalence with a heightened sense of awareness – they take nothing for granted mainly because they are both insiders and outsiders of the multiple worlds they inhabit. (Soudien, 2007:84).

Lebo's exposure to the multiple worlds that she inhabits, their attitudes, beliefs and ways of doing, especially her exposure to a middle and upper-class environment, influences the way her learning practices are informed in her environmental space.

Shafiek, can be described as being physically embedded in the township and home space. We see this in the routine nature in which he lives in these social spaces, moving from home to school and from home to Madrassa. Although he is physically embedded, he appears to be conceptually mobile despite interaction with his popular culture. Nesor (1997) speaks about young people's involvement in their popular culture as "kids-based funds of knowledge" which kids draw on to make sense of their environment. For Nesor (1997:122), these "kids-based funds of knowledge" are made up of "heterogeneous networks of people (adults and peers), and things (representations and technologies)". Recent work by Moje (2004) concurs by noting:

it is important to acknowledge the many different funds of knowledge such as homes, peer groups and other systems and networks of relationships that shape the oral and written text young people make meaning of and produce as they move from classroom to classroom and from home to peer group, to school, or to community (Moje, 2004:38).

It is clear from the narratives that Shafiek's involvement in his popular culture appears to shape his learning practices in this constrained and volatile space.

3.2 Navigating their spatial positioning by drawing on various social networks

Lebo is an insider and an outsider of the multiple worlds in which she engages. Through friendships, she generates wider social networks and contacts that benefit her economically and culturally. Devine (2009) advocates that friendships do not only provide a sense of inclusion but also a sense of belonging. For Bourdieu (1986, in Devine, 2009:528), "children accumulate social capital through unceasing effort at sociability, in which recognition is affirmed and reaffirmed". Lebo, however, needs to keep two identities in tandem to be affirmed and recognised within her friendship circles. Her strategic readings of particular spaces drive her to adopt particular identities relevant to the space that she is in. This is evident when she adopts a "coloured" identity in the township, a coping strategy necessary to navigate and manoeuvre in this racially hostile environment. Yosso (2005:28) uses the notion "navigational capital, – part of what he calls 'community cultural wealth'" which is often experienced in low-income communities, where children read their physical spaces and adopt "navigational skills which help them to manoeuvre" through fragile social spaces. Similarly, her adoption of a middle-class "white" persona – partaking in middle-class practices in more affluent areas, "centres on minimizing embodied aspects of cultural differences related to accent, dress or diet", which Devine (2009:528) refers to as "self-monitoring".

Shafiek, through his engagement with his popular culture, using the computer and playing PlayStation games, forges lasting networks and interconnections that play a crucial role in the shaping of his learning practices in this confined space. Nesor (1997:171) asserts that "everyday life is made up of a variety of networks" or "webs of associations". In Shafiek's case, three social networks converge to shape his learning dispositions and inform his learning

practices: family-based networks, peer-based networks and commodity-based networks. This proves that children are not only involved in networks composed of humans or animate entities but also connected to inanimate or non-human elements, crucial in understanding how they make sense of their complex worlds (Nespor, 1997). Shafiek's keen interest in PlayStation and reading of the Encarta computer software are examples of his interconnection with the inanimate world around him.

A common factor that applies to both research subjects, and that appears fundamental to their engagement with their literate worlds, is the role of parents/guardians. Parental involvement warrants a discussion since "parents from low-income families are looked down upon and therefore their voices are not heard (Kralovec & Buell, 2000:79; Sibanda & Kajee, 2019). They are often described negatively as being "uncaring, uninvolved and unconcerned" when it came to their children's learning (Crompton-Lilly, 2003:60). Felix *et al.* (2008:11) note that the deficit discourse often used to describe township parents could "powerfully position these parents in particular ways, which serve to produce and reproduce inequalities". Township parents were often described by teachers as unable to possess the material and mental resources to help their children. My research in the homes of these children provides evidence to the contrary.

Lebo's grandmother provides the pathway for her to network across class and global lines by acting as the go-between, between Lebo, the middle-class family, and Lebo and her friendship with Jade in England. Her resilience to work beyond retirement age as a domestic worker so that she could provide for this family not only connects Lebo to the multiple worlds she occupies but also proves that she cares. Similarly, Shafiek's parents are involved in shaping his learning disposition, especially his mother who acts as an "instrumentalist" providing the space, time and resources for him to engage with his popular culture. Lebo's grandmother and Shafiek's mother do not only provide what Yosso (2005:28) calls "aspirational capital" – "resilience or ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future". They "stay on" their children by monitoring homework, providing access to material resources and engage their children in school-based activities.

Even though these two children are from the same neighbourhood, how they inhabit their neighbourhood is different. The discussion thus reveals how they inhabit space and engage with multiple social networks, with the help of their parents/guardians, which in turn helps them navigate their spatial positioning. In the final section of this discussion, I turn to how Lebo and Shafiek manage to transcend their spatial positioning, by becoming co-constructors of space.

3.3 Transcending their spatial positioning

Lebo and Shafiek's ability to personally, individually and agentially attract social networks contributes to how they transcend their spatial positioning. Lebo's interaction with various networks and connections enable her to engage in a variety of practices in her environmental space. She actively engages in new spatial terrains exposing her to a rich context full of interaction and stimulation. Her assimilation into a middle-class culture – intercultural experiences positively create aspirations for mobility as well as provide her with a broader perspective on life. She gets to experience the city rich in recreational areas (beaches, shops, etc.) and cultural areas (museums, art, etc.), including the township, which could be a source of enrichment – being exposed to "street sweepers, shopkeepers, food stall vendors, loiterers, friends, and local personalities can be a rich source of enrichment" (Karlsson, 2009:116). She uses her linguistic and communication skills (being trilingual – Xhosa, Afrikaans and English) or what Yosso (2005:76) refers to as linguistic capital to navigate different social domains.

Shafiek's interactions with various networks related to his popular culture, the way he learns, his keen observational skills shape his learning disposition. In addition, he engages conceptually and strategically with a variety of learning resources, which enhances his knowledgeability – his interest in Greek and Roman mythology, religion (Christian and Muslim), the planets, insects, amongst other things, in turn translates into hybrid social practices. Even though he is physically confined to his environmental space, conceptually he manages to make sense of a global world through various interconnections and social networks. He has access to what Yosso (2005) terms “familial capital” (strong kinship ties which inform emotional, moral and occupational consciousness), and “social capital” (social networks, contacts, and community resources). These forms of “community cultural wealth” as suggested by Yosso (2005:28) can be used to acknowledge individual agency within constraining spaces.

Fataar (2010), in support of Lefebvre (1991/1997), and Massey's (1994) conceptualisation of “lived space” notes that “there exists a productive relationship between ‘lived space’ and human agency”. For Fataar (2010:4), “human action is constructed out of the dynamic interaction with the physical attributes of the environment”. This relationship between “lived space” and human agency is expanded on by Nesor (1997:119), the notion of “bodies in space” as he explains:

bodies are inscribed with complex social markers, like gender, race and social class... Economic and political forces, along with organisational fields, shape the bodies, instil in them certain dispositions, and most important, situate them inflows of activities that move them physically in certain ways and connect them to distant activities spread across space and time (Nesor, 1997:119).

This recursive relationship between the “body and space” is crucial to the lived realities of children who inhabit impoverished and marginalised spaces and is made “visible through the body that is rendered as a visual display or text readable to an outsider gaze” (ibid).

Lebo and Shafiek manage to position themselves parallel to their spatial positioning living their spaces incongruently, but the way this happens differs. For Lebo it is by keeping two identities in tandem and by engaging in socio-cultural activities, and for Shafiek it is by engaging with people (animate world) and the inanimate world. Both these young people, therefore, manage to transcend their spatial positioning by becoming co-constructors of space.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate how young learners establish their learning practices in their environmental space: the township community and their homes. It attempted to capture the intricate sociological processes that constitute these learners' learning approaches. The focus was on their spatial positioning within what could be described as a harsh and impoverished environmental space, how they manoeuvre through these spaces, and how they surpass their spatial positioning.

The findings reveal a number of interesting facts about these children in their environmental space: 1) each of them, based on their spatial positioning and their relationship to their neighbourhood spaces create their own spaces of learning; 2) they manage to forge lasting networks and interconnections that play a crucial role in navigating their spatial positioning; 3) their parents/guardians, who are often viewed in literature as being uninvolved in their schooling, play an instrumental role in forging these social networks and interconnections allowing them to engage with their literate worlds; and 4) they individually and agentially, through their engagement with rich educational practices in their environment space, become

co-constructors of space. In other words, the construction of their own learning spaces, which is informed by the wide range of networks, connections, and interactions with people and things, goes beyond the boundaries of formal schooling.

Further study is required to explore how teachers can tap into the rich educational practices these children engage with in the environmental space, drawing on what Moll *et al.* (1992) refer to as “funds of knowledge” or what Fataar and Du Plooy (2012) call “out-of-school educational affordances”, which often goes unrecognised inside the classrooms they inhabit. There exists a need for teachers to “know” the learners they teach. I recommend that teachers adopt qualitative approaches to gain insight into their learners’ lives; getting to know these children, their lived realities, family dynamics, and the multiple worlds they navigate daily. “Knowing” their learners will have a profound effect on the pedagogical and teaching styles they adopt inside the classroom space. Reinstating home visits is one way of getting to know the socio-spatial dynamics of these children and their families and how to teach to the rich diversity of learners. It opens possibilities that there exists a link between the various social spaces children inhabit. It certainly opens new ways in which schooling for all children, regardless of race, class and gender, can be reimaged.

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