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Atmospheres, spaces and job crafting: home visits in Alternative Provision

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ABSTRACT
Neglected in policy and the public consciousness, Alternative Provision is the expanding putty of the education sector, working within the gaps left by other agencies to re-engage children. Yet to engage children, Alternative Provision must first engage families and home visits are crucial to this process. Often triggered by absences or safeguarding concerns, homes visits are inherently risky both to the safety of practitioners but also to the fragile trust that is built with families. Rather than being purely objective practices, home visits are deeply embodied, sensuous experiences: from the apprehension and neighbour-scrutiny of the doorstep to inside homes that are sometimes sealed, sometimes permeable, practitioners engage in 'way-finding' through room and histories, spaces of affective atmospheres made and unmade, crafted and destroyed through the interaction of people, artefacts and light. And here, improvising, practitioners craft their jobs as equally as they craft engagement.

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Introduction

As she stood on the doorstep, she ran through the protocols: she'd logged the time and address of the visit; she had the emergency number on speed-dial; the car was facing the quickest way out. It was fine she thought, telling the assembled children outside the garden gate that she was not from social services. The dog was barking as soon as she knocked and she heard it being scolded. Her heart was beating faster so she breathed deeply – she'd spoken to Simon's mum a couple of times before but it hadn't been easy and there was no reply to the text message she'd sent asking why he hadn't been attending. There was always a moment of silence between knocking and the door opening when someone would look through the spy-hole to see who it was. There it was. When she introduced herself, Simon's mum smiled and apologised for the dog then apologised again for not replying to the text – it had been one of those weeks. Invited in, she walked slowly down the hallway, feeling the friction of the floorboards, smelling the polish, squinting at the sun glinting from the mirror. No thanks, she did not want tea, she'd had water, and she sat where Simon's mum pointed. The dog was furiously scratching at the door and every so often Simon's mum growled a 'be quiet' in the dog's direction. She explained that she was worried about Simon as he had not been in school and they'd had no calls. He was having a bad week, his mum explained, had hardly left his bedroom. There had been a bad

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argument at the weekend with his dad. There were 'issues'. She could feel a sudden tension as Simon's mum looked round to see who had just walked in through the back door and frowned as the group moved silently past the living room door then stampeded upstairs. Uneasy, she strained to hear the muffled voices and timed how long it might take to get to the door. Are you sure you do not want a cup of tea, Simon's mum asked.[1]

The primary purpose of the Alternative Provision (AP) sector is to re-engage children with learning, children who have been excluded from mainstream settings or moved because schools cannot meet their specific needs. Yet while family engagement is crucial to this process, while a culture of shared responsibility between school and family is essential, traditional means of working with families often do not work in AP. With many children in AP excluded, families come to the setting hurt and angry at how their children have been treated, at how they have simultaneously been excluded by the bureaucracy of the process. Often, parents have difficult histories with education themselves, often they have complex lives, often they live within contexts of deprivation. Here, then, the potential of parents' evening are limited; parent teacher associations are ineffective; social events unproductive. And so, to engage families, to create an authentic collaboration where strategies for learning can be co-created, AP settings go to families themselves and this is the focus of this article, the first to explore homes visits in AP. But as well as exploring the interventions enacted within the homes, the aim of this research was also to focus on the experience of stepping foot into people's homes, sometimes uninvited. As such, it explores how the senses shape interaction, how atmospheres are created, destroyed and re-created as practitioners move through homes and through life histories, how spaces are experienced and represented within official reporting. It concludes by positioning the improvisational practice of home visits as a new form of job crafting adding not only a new external dimension to the literature but also identifying the presence of the sensuousness of work within the job crafting paradigm.

Alternative Provision in context

Neglected in the public consciousness and at a policy level, Alternative Provision is equally neglected in the academic literature compared to the volume of research on mainstream settings with some notable exceptions (e.g. Thomson and Pennacchia 2015; Mills and McGregor 2016; Johnston and Bradford 2019). Part of the issue is to do with the extreme diversity of the sector, not just in the UK but internationally. 'Wide-ranging and disparate' (Trotman, Enow, and Tucker 2019, 220), AP resists boundedness and international comparisons (Harper et al. 2011) and the UK provides the ideal example (Gutherson, Davies, and Daszkiewicz 2011): local council maintained, academies part of a multi-academy trust, privately owned, charity-run and those linked to further education and work-based learning organisations all exist in the same arena. Definitions are thus problematic and Gutherson et al. attempt a broad version: 'schools or programmes that are set up by local authorities, schools, community and voluntary organisations, or other entities, to serve young people whose needs are not being met and who, for a variety of reasons, are not succeeding in a traditional learning environment (p.11)'. However, as highlighted elsewhere (Page, 2020), defining AP in its broadest sense encompasses alternative schooling settings that are a matter of parental choice (and often fees) such as Montessori or Steiner schools (see Wiseman 2017) together with those that contain

children who have been excluded from mainstream settings, often with a complete lack of parental choice. Both types of AP may share similarities: their emphasis on innovation and non-standard curriculum (Sliwka and Yee 2015); the particular fostering of belonging and connectedness (Jalali and Morgan 2018), the emphasis on relationships (Malcolm 2018); the prioritisation of listening to parental views (McCluskey, Riddell, and Weedon 2015); the foregrounding of care to create safe spaces (O'Gorman, Salmon, and Murphy 2016). However, by focusing on the characteristics of settings within AP, the political is underplayed.

In the UK in 2017-18 – the year of the most recent data (Department for Education 2020) – 7900 children were permanently excluded from mainstream schools and 410,800 received fixed term exclusions, many finding themselves within AP settings more closely defined by Taylor (2012, 4) as 'an organisation where pupils engage in timetabled, educational activities away from school and school staff'. As such, these moves are far from parental choice and, while the official data lists persistent disruptive behaviour as the primary cause, there has recently been concern that unexplained moves are a result of 'off-rolling', an attempt by schools to 'game' exam performance outcomes to boost league table position (see Coughlan 2019). In these AP settings, while the organisational forms are diverse, there is greater similarity in the characteristics of children who are excluded, the first of which concerns gender, with boys far more likely to be excluded internationally. The second characteristic concerns ethnicity with an overrepresentation of children of mixed white and Black Caribbean, Black Caribbean and children from indigenous groups in the UK (Department for Education 2020; Malcolm 2015), Australia (Mills and McGregor 2016) and New Zealand (Smith 2009); in the US, this is echoed in the overrepresentation of Latino and African American children. The third characteristic sees children with special educational needs and disabilities disproportionately represented internationally (Trotman, Enow, and Tucker 2019; McCluskey, Riddell, and Weedon 2015; Brown 2007; Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger 2007). The final characteristic concerns poverty, with poorer children again overrepresented within AP in the UK (Graham et al. 2019, Malcolm 2018), the US (Skiba and Knesting 2002) and Australia (McGregor and Mills 2012).

What is also consistent in the sector is extensive family engagement but here the academic literature lacks depth despite its importance being highlighted (Michael and Frederickson 2013; Menzies and Baars 2015; Ruzzi and Kraemer). Where it is discussed, the family is most frequently positioned as a paradox, as both the primary cause of children being excluded, a result of poor parenting or lack of boundaries, but also a primary factor in the potential for their children being re-engaged in education through collaborating with AP settings. Here, then, families are 'problems or partners' in Smith's (2009, 98) terms. The majority of families depicted in the literature are characterised as complex and challenging, affected by unemployment, family breakdown, mental ill health and substance abuse (Macleod et al. 2013). From the teacher's perspective, families were often resistant and non-compliant (McCarthy 2011), angry at the perception of their mistreatment by the education system (McDonald and Thomas 2003), a feeling of simultaneous exclusion with their child, raging at promises unkept and genuine choice withheld. But where settings prioritised engagement, families appreciated frequent and positive communication that built a trusting relationship (Mowat 2009) and maintained

the triad between family, referring/exceeding school and the AP setting (Äärelä, Määttä, and Uusiautti 2016).

In the first study to focus exclusively on family engagement within AP, (Page, 2020) found that AP settings shared a number of engagement mechanisms with mainstream schools: there was a prioritisation of minimising barriers and crafting a welcoming atmosphere (Baker et al. 2016); an emphasis on co-responsibility (Hill and Torres 2010); a drive to emphasise learning within the home (Goodall 2013); a focus on improving the relationship between the parent and child (Goodall and Montgomery 2014); a broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity (Auerbach 2009). However, with AP being primarily a transitory environment with children moving in and out for different periods of time, the extent to which longitudinal approaches to family engagement were effective was limited – practitioners within settings often had a limited time to build relationships that could re-engage children. Avoiding the discourse of families needing 'fixing' (Macfarlane 2009), they became the 'metaphorical expanding putty of the education sector' (Page, 2020) that filled the gaps left by other agencies whose work didn't fit together. Family engagement in AP was therefore a blend of the planned and the structural such as a family learning days, parents" breakfasts and library tours, together with the improvised pragmatism of micro-work outside of the settings and usually within homes. As such, engagement was enacted through six domains: behavioural, emotional, safeguarding, functional, pedagogic and capacity building. What was also apparent in Page's (2020) work was that the domains of family engagement were often enacted outside of the school, within homes. Here, the literature is completely silent and so, to inform the findings within this article, the next section will focus on the wider literature on home visits, beginning with mainstream schools but, more importantly for this context, the literature focusing on social workers.

Home visits

There is little literature on home school visits from educators and, where it does exist, it is almost entirely dominated by research in the US where home visits received specific funding during the Obama administration (Lin and Bates 2010), focused primarily on visits to families within areas of deprivation. Here, while initially some families felt intimidated and suspicious of the motives for home visits (Stetson et al. 2012), the outcomes were overwhelmingly positive (Henke 2011) with teachers developing a more sophisticated understanding of children's contexts (Byrd 2012; Baeder 2010; Stuht 2009; Lin, Lake, and Rice 2008) and noticing the positive impact it had on classroom behaviours (Meyer and Mann 2006; Wright et al. 2018). Visits resulted in the barriers between school and home being blurred (Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha 2001), partnerships built (Roggman et al. 2001) and they allowed teachers to access the valuable funds of knowledge (González, Moll, and Amanti 2006) to be found within the home (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 2005), especially for families outside of the white middle class upon whom patterns of school-home participation are based (Johnson 2014). In this way, gaining a greater insight into the communities where they work, home visits helped teachers to develop newfound understanding and empathy (McKnight et al. 2017), changing pre-existing beliefs that led to the integration of students' interests and culture and moderated disciplinary actions. However, what the education-based literature on home visits does not touch on is the actual experience of home visits, how it feels to go into someone else's home, that liminal space between the professional and the personal. For this,

I turn to alternative literature that focuses on the lived, affective experience of conducting home visits.

In a social work context, Ferguson begins by addressing the assumption that the home visit is an extension of the organisation with its concomitant policies, procedures and routines and argues that 'the home constitutes a sphere of practice and experience in its own right . . . a deeply embodied practice in which all the senses and emotions come into play and movement is central' (Ferguson 2018, 65). The home from this perspective is an exquisitely heterogeneous environment experienced through the entire sensorium (Bille 2015), a sensorium that is culturally-shaped and highlights the differences in power and status between social worker and client ever more starkly. From this perspective, homes are places of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009) made and unmade as social workers move through them, into the 'most intimate corners of [people's] lives and selves' (Ferguson 2010, 1103). While carrying risk in themselves – the unknown that lurks behind each door – homes are also a relief, Ferguson reminds us, after navigation of the 'threat on the street or the stairs of the high rise-block' (ibid, p1109). Here, with social workers occupying the dual role of 'professional' and 'guest' (Pink, Morgan, and Dainty 2015) home visits are not 'map reading' but 'way finding', a process of constant and improvised engagement through the 'reverberations' of the home (Bachelard 1969). As such, home visits are a matter of mobilities as social workers 'make' their practice within the home, crafting new responses to new interactions, acting within atmospheres very different to those found in the office, a making emerging more from 'knowledge, skill, intuition, ritual and courage than bureaucratic rules' (Ferguson 2018, 68). Social workers move from the professional security of the office, a place of collegiality and established patterns, to the terrain of their clients, and then into their clients homes, balancing the need for intrusion and thoroughness with the reactions from families as they move through different rooms, rooms that are usually only for the inhabitants, their private spaces, their established atmospheres. Atmospheres, in the home as elsewhere, are highly ambiguous, occupying the space between presence and absence, effecting a force without corporeality, simultaneously sensed and made by those within a given space – aesthetic crafting in Böhme's (1993) terms – generated by bodies in interaction such as social workers and families (Anderson 2009). Here then, are the 'spaces of representation' (Jeyasingham 2013, 1883) that capture the way that homes are experienced 'bodily and outside of verbal systems of representation' (ibid) that must be translated into 'representations of space', necessarily reductive, that capture geographies both within the home but also the wider geographies often characterised by criminality or deprivation.

Job crafting

This article also argues that, given the need for improvisation within home visits and the uniqueness of need within each family interaction that improvisation becomes central to how practitioners undertake their work to the extent that they engage in 'job crafting'. While traditional approaches to job design, Hackman and Oldham (1980), for example, focus on structural characteristics such as task variety, feedback and identity, they begin from a top-down perspective that fails to account for the socially constructed nature of work and the agentivity of employees in interpreting their roles. Workers will interpret their jobs in their own ways, emphasising those aspects which they consider meaningful.

This process can be understood as 'job crafting' (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001) and is the result of three main motivations: firstly, to assert or maintain control over their work; secondly, to 'create and sustain a positive sense of self in their own eyes and in the eyes of others (ibid, p183); thirdly, job crafting allows employees to maximise their connectedness to others. In subsequent studies, these initial motivations have been added to: Lazazzara, Tims, and De Gennaro (2020) argue that employees job craft to achieve a better work/life balance and integrate technology to increase efficiency; Bakker et al. (2020) suggest workers job craft to make their work more playful; Fong et al. (2020) detail how workers job craft to actively a avoid work. Regardless of the motivation, the end result is clear: job design must take account of the perspective of employees in how they shape their work. With improvisation so common during home visits and the needs to families so diverse, job crafting is therefore an essential element of the work of practitioners engaged with families outside of settings.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to gain the emic perspective – the 'insider's view of a particular group or community' (Savage 2006, 384) – from practitioners within Alternative Provision who work with the families of the children within their settings. With the AP sector hugely diverse and operating within a wide variety of organisational forms, purposive sampling was used to ensure that this variety was represented. Five settings were selected across the north of England that included primary and secondary phases, special education, Local Authority maintained and Academies (all are pseudonyms):

- Ash Grove Academy was a new AP school that was part of a regional Multi Academy Trust and supported children from primary to secondary
- Oakview was a secondary AP academy that was part of a Multi Academy Trust with settings across the north of England
- Templeton Academy was a specialist school for children with social, emotional and mental health needs from primary to secondary ages
- Broadtown was a small primary setting within a large city that specialised in temporary support for children who had been excluded
- Southfield was a secondary AP setting spread over two sites within a medium-sized city that had only just become 'academised' and move from under the authority of the local council

In addition to organisational spread, the research also aimed to investigate perspectives from all levels of institutional hierarchy, teaching and non-teaching, and so the 23 participants ranged from a Teaching Assistant to an Executive Principal and from teachers to pastoral, therapy and attendance practitioners. With gaining an emic perspective the driving intention, an interpretevist approach was adopted to capture the daily experience of working with families through semi-structured interviews. Despite the variety of organisational norms, process and procedures within the sample settings, data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006) set in at a relatively early stage and so it was unnecessary to recruit additional participants or additional settings. Each interview was recorded and transcribed in full before

open coding analysis (Corbin and Strauss 1998) to identify the initial categories and themes before selective coding occurred (Moghaddam 2006).

What was clear in the data was that the vast majority of accounts from practitioners who engaged in home visits concerned families with complex lives, mostly within areas of deprivation. While this is consistent with the existing literature – that children from poverty are over-represented within AP – it must be highlighted that home visits were predominantly enacted for children with the lowest attendance and where there were safeguarding concerns. As such, the data presented in this article is inevitably partial. Home visits were a matter of resource: where resource was low, particularly in the smaller settings, few home visits were possible and so they would be reserved for those families with the greatest need and would have a greater focus on safeguarding. In all of the settings, practitioners reported that austerity had led to massive funding reductions for local authorities who, in previous times, had conducted a far more extensive pattern of home visiting in association with educational settings. To add further difficulty, children remained within AP settings for longer that they previously had, especially those children with the most complex needs those children who, participants suggested, were less likely to be welcomed back into mainstream schools. As such, while the picture presented is necessarily partial, it remains representative of the nature of home visits across the settings.

Findings

Triggers and risks

Home visits in AP were found to be a matter of resource. While all settings engaged in the practice, the extent and depth of visits varied depending on the size and budget of the schools. In Ash Grove Academy, a primary and secondary AP within a large city Multi Academy Trust, there was a range of dedicated staff who spent a significant proportion of their time visiting children's homes. In Broadtown, a small primary ex-Pupil Referral Unit, with far fewer staff came far fewer visits, primarily conducted by the senior team when staffing and the onsite needs of the children allowed:

> Emma, Broadtown: We don't do loads because it's staffing, really, and because we're so small, you just have two staff off and then it means that another two have got to go and cover. We tend to do it if attendance is poor so if they're an absentee or if we've got one parent who suffers with depression we'll try and get there.

Attendance was a primary trigger for home visits across the settings. Often a pattern of poor attendance had begun in the referring schools and continued into AP. In the most severe cases, AP practitioners found themselves working with children who had not attended school for many months and home visits were essential to re-engaging them, particularly where children were experiencing mental health difficulties.

> David, Templeton: We have children who can't cope being around other children at particular points in their lives . . . [it] triggers them and it's a crisis so, for them, we would go out and do an intervention in the local community or where we can. So yes, if we can get into the homes, we get into the communities and into their families.

In addition to attendance, practitioners were highly vigilant within the settings and would conduct home visits in response to safeguarding concerns, suspicions raised from snippets of conversations and hunches:

> Liz, Oakview: They come in in the morning, we feed them, they have toast because some students have not eaten and you know the students straight away that haven't eaten. You have some students, particularly the older ones that come in, straight away you can tell they've been smoking weed so we've got those sorts of issues to contend with.

In other cases, home visits were a result of parents requesting support from settings, whether in terms of managing the challenging behaviour of their child, material deprivation that affected sending their child to school or being unable to leave the home themselves through illness. Regardless of the trigger, what was consistent was the value practitioners placed upon home visits. Home visits were an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the lives of the children they worked with, a chance to add contextual detail that enabled greater personalisation of pedagogy and behaviour management within school. With often troubled experiences of education themselves, many of the parents were anxious about coming into school settings; in their homes, however, much more relaxed, parents were often more willing to engage meaningfully with practitioners.

> Helena, Ash Grove: I think you get a much broader, rich, deeper kind of understanding of what may be going on for that family. And it's on their terms, it's in their environment, so in some respects it may be that in that situation they're more open to talking about it, talking about things.

Here, the relaxed nature of the home provided fertile ground for a collaborative approach to learning and development, one that was not always possible within the formalised confines of the school. Practitioners would take a prospectus for the local college and talk with parents about aspirations and continued education pathways, of jobs and training and apprenticeships. Other times they would engage in family learning, practitioners, children and parents/carers working through tasks together or discussing strategies for extending learning that children had particularly enjoyed. Southfield Academy were taking this further and had begun piloting home tutoring with teachers rather than specialists visiting homes to engage children in a pattern of non-attendance, those who had been 'lost in the system' in Nigel's words.

Yet settings were well aware that the practice of home visits potentially carried risks and there were detailed procedures in place: the timings and locations of visits were meticulously recorded; many practitioners went in pairs; cars were parked facing the quickest way out of an area; emergency numbers were set on speed-dial. Here was the territory of intuition, of hunches, that dictated how home visits should be conducted:

> Florence, Southfield: Sometimes we're unsure, then it will be like 'there's something about this family that I'm feeling a bit wonky about, can somebody come with me?' Then we'll go, we'll go together, we'll team up with somebody, we'll go together.

> Raj, Broadtown: Sometimes you do feel a bit, you know, anxious. What's going to be inside that house? What's happening? You know, there could be things going on but if they see us out there, with our [school identification] badges, they will know it's school so they could just say, "be quiet."

Part of the planning for visits was also a matter of geography: practitioners discussed in detail the characteristics of certain areas, its notoriety for drugs, crime and violence, sometimes in terms of the concentration of different ethnic groups, regularly in terms of poverty. Then, there were those areas of less deprivation, the 'good estates' and the areas of affluence with the motif of expensive cars and immaculate gardens. Home visits in certain areas always required pairs, never solo visits; certain streets were to be avoided once it got dark; certain postcodes were a matter of gang territoriality; certain areas were well known for generational worklessness; certain areas had imposing iron gates to prevent visitors. In these accounts, these geographies of notoriety, participants talked in tacit ways, drawing on community knowledge that was woven into the fabric of the regions they worked in.

> Simone, Oakview: I know the area so there's streets I wouldn't go on past six o'clock at night. There's some streets I wouldn't drive onto before nine o'clock in the morning

The notion of 'certain areas' was imbued with professional experience of the complexities and difficulties the families who lived within them faced. But what was most noticeable was that these characteristics were mostly attached to the contexts, not the families, avoiding the ascription of 'problem families' found in other accounts of family engagement in mainstream settings (Smith 2009) in need of 'fixing' (Macfarlane 2009). As discussed above, the resource that allowed home visits was reserved for those families most in need and practitioners had a detailed knowledge of the family histories. These were the families most affected by structural economic inequalities and had felt the impact of austerity keenly. Practitioners told of the industries and businesses that had closed in the areas, of 100s of families suddenly without work. They told of the rise in poor health – both physical and mental – that forced families to suddenly take on caring responsibilities. They told of the impact of exclusions with parents forced to give up work to look after their child. They told of migrant families who had been without support.

Within homes

The vast majority of families welcomed – or at least allowed – practitioners to visit their homes with accounts of doorstep confrontation relatively infrequent. There were stories of being refused entry, of being sworn at, narratives of parents whose anxiety was so acute that they would only communicate by text message and the families who were suspected drug dealers who were, it was rumoured, hiding their illicit trade behind reinforced doors. But in the majority of cases visits were accommodated. Entry was often facilitated by the reiteration of what practitioners were not: they were not social workers, they were not at homes to judge and they had no power to take away children. Once this difference was firmly established, both the home and the families' lives became open:

> Michelle, Southfield: Usually, once they realise you're not a social worker, they are absolutely fine with you, and they just tell you everything, and their life story, and you can see straight away why there is an issue.

The doorstep was therefore crucial, serving as both a boundary and a barrier. Many practitioners talked about the front garden (where there was one) as a prophetic proxy for what was behind the front door, the examples of detritus strewn across un-cut grass, of gates hanging off hinges or, less often, immaculately manicured gardens behind imposing

wrought iron gates. There were Bentleys parked incongruously on otherwise impoverished roads, there were the faces of neighbours surveilling them through open windows, there were strangers asking if they were bailiffs or social services, there were groups of teenagers circling the gate as they knocked, there were horses in gardens, there were dogs barking furiously behind doors.

Waiting on the doorstep was the chief moment of anxiety for those who conducted home visits, those peaks of uncertainty between knocking and the door opening. But the street-facing side was not the only significant side: doors were potential exits if visits became volatile and many practitioners spoke about ensuring they sat near to the door, just in case a speedy exit was required to avoid the worst case scenario described by Paul from Templeton Academy:

> I know the areas within our trust and outside the trust, where people have gone through the door and they've locked the door behind and refused to let them out.

But while the door created an almost impenetrable barrier for some, with parents who had not left their house for years because of acute anxiety, and for those who sought to hide the interior for reasons that could only be speculated upon by practitioners, in many other cases houses were permeable, with little separation between the street and homes.

> Paul, Templeton: In the kitchen is a fellow, I don't know who he is . . . I've been informed that he's potentially a drug dealer and there's people coming in and out the house and there's no function of a home. It's not like you go in, you close the door . . . it's almost like an extension of the street, people are coming in, people are going out. There's people all over the house, there's adolescents running about all over, all sorts of people.

> Roger, Ash Grove: The doors are wide open, there's people walking in and out the house, you haven't got a clue who they are, and there's people upstairs, there's people coming downstairs, people don't talk, they shout, there's people coming in with kids and this is me putting two and two together.

Here, houses were mobile places. For practitioners who sought to be mobile themselves, to move around the house to establish need, this mobility got in the way and proved potentially risky. Then, when they sat down to talk to parents, their immobility clashed with the stream of extended family and neighbours who would move through the house. In permeable homes, atmospheres were in constant flux which made deep engagement much more difficult.

Inside homes, practitioners began their microwork, moving the focus from the child's learning to the support needs of the family, the contextual barriers to education. And here, the material deprivation of many of the families engaged with AP was clear, as it was throughout the literature (Graham et al, 2019, McGregor and Mills (2012).

> Pete, Templeton: I was walking through the house, there was no carpet, there was cat and dog faeces all over the floor as well. There was no rubbish bins, it was just all piled up on the side, there was probably a month's worth of washing that was just . . . you know it had been left a long time because it was all just crusty.

> Beth, Broadtown: I've seen faeces from dogs all over. I've seen walls which are just coming down, no food in the kitchen, no food anywhere in the house, empty pots which just have mould growing in, dogs that just look like they haven't been fed, piles of rubbish just mounting up in back gardens, alcohol, cigarettes accessible to children.

But, although less common given the over-representation of children in complex environments, there were the homes on the 'good estates' and those in the suburbs:

> Pete, Oakview: I've been to some lovely houses, really nice, four-bedroom detached houses, nice cars and maybe it's because boundaries aren't in place for them or they've just not had the time from parents, or there's been a bereavement of a parent at an early age and it's just not been managed properly and it's just manifested into a nightmare.

Then, there were the challenging behaviours, from families as well as children. There were blazing arguments, there was surreptitious filming on a mobile phone, adult couples heavy petting during the meeting, children refusing to come out from under their beds or threatening harm from the snake in their hands.

Home visits were fragile and constantly at risk of damaging hard-won trust. But, the fragility was managed in the little things, in how practitioners accepted or declined a cup of tea; it was in how they tried to mirror the behaviours of the parents or how they managed the mobility of visits to see as much of the house as possible; it was how they nonchalantly talked about the horse in the back garden as though it was perfectly natural. It was how they avoided making notes with families where social workers were heavily involved to avoid the association. It was how they used subtle questioning to establish who the strangers were who wandered through the house, finding out whether they really were 'uncles'. It was about accepting that the atmospheres, environments and histories they encountered were ultimately normal for the families they worked with and so maintaining equanimity was essential:

> Fiona, Southfield Academy: You could have a parent or a child disclosing something to you and you can't recoil and be horrified about it, you've just got to sit there and let them spill whatever it may be and you don't know when they're going to tell you something that turns out to be significant.

Successfully managing fragility meant that histories of poor educational experiences within families could be mitigated to allow practitioners to engage in the microwork so essential to family engagement. And central to managing fragility was intuition, feelings and sensing.

> Helena, Ash Grove: It's those subtleties, it's that non-verbal sometimes, it's that holistic assessment of what's going on around you, what does the house look like, what's the home like, getting that basic understanding of their environment, how they're living, and then picking up on those little subtleties that may come out in conversation or just that you sense more than anything.

Just as the home visits by social workers in Ferguson's (2010, 2018) research engaged in crafting their practice, constantly improvising depending on what they encountered, so did the AP practitioners in this research. While practitioners were driven by a commitment to the child, to their development and learning, the deprivation they encountered often meant prioritising the needs of the family before any consideration of education. It meant crafting responses to what they encountered within homes, tailoring microwork to the heterogeneous needs of the family through the domains of family engagement (Page, 2020). Within the functional domain, practitioners would help parents to fill out forms to claim travel benefits for their child to attend school, escort parents confined to the home by anxiety to school meetings, register children of recent

immigrants with the NHS or help to clean kitchens. Within the behavioural domain they might help parents to establish boundaries or model behaviour management techniques and reward schemes, or challenge parents' own behaviour and set out expectations. In the emotional domain they would provide a listening ear and comfort to families who recounted – quite openly – experiences of abuse, addiction and mental ill health, sign-posting and arranging appointments with counselling services. The pedagogic domain was expressed through sharing learning particularly enjoyed by their child and how it could be extended within the home, or co-creating new learning opportunities arising from the interests of the family. The capacity building domain existed within practitioners providing detailed explanations of educational processes, of parental rights within the exclusion process, and accompanying them to meetings with the referring school and providing advocacy. Finally, in the safeguarding domain, they would wrestle with what was safe enough: without the powers of social workers yet able to refer to them, knowing all the while the implications of referral and the damage it could have on their own engagement as well as the limitations of social services, practitioners would do what they could to support parents in addressing safeguarding concerns themselves.

More than just crafting interactions and approaches, practitioners in this study engaged in job-crafting, where workers 'craft their jobs by changing cognitive, task, and/or relational boundaries' (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001, 179). Family engagement, therefore, was a parameter, a broad outline of their work that was crafted according to whatever they found within homes, a result of the 'detective' work all practitioners employed:

> Roger, Ash Grove: Then you start building up not only a physical picture, you start identifying who's in the house, who may not be in the house, is the house chaotic, are there people coming in and out of this house and you think, well they're not family members, who are they? You start building up little bits of information, it's almost like a jigsaw, you realise that there's a picture there but you're not quite sure what it is and you start putting the pieces together and you slowly put the pieces together and that's how you come, hopefully, to somewhat of an informed opinion as to what's going on.

Practitioners in AP were rarely given detailed contextual information about the children and their families when they arrived, either from the referring school or social services. And while inductions were detailed and probing, there was quite simply no substitute for home visits in terms of building a picture of need and determining the work to be done. As such, there was no job description that could encompass the extreme variety of need that practitioners encountered, no role design that could embrace showing teenage parents how to clean thoroughly together with talking a child with a knife out from under their bed or helping a parent who had not left their house for 2 years to attend a doctor's appointment. Sometimes, then, job crafting was immediate, it was improvisational and reacted to support needs that could not wait; other times, practitioners left the homes, they consulted with line managers, peers and external agencies to craft strategies that provided longer term, capacity building, support approaches. What was evident in all settings was that this job crafting was not only accepted by senior leaders but actively encouraged with job descriptions fluid and continually changing.

Discussion

Work in people's home – as Ferguson (2018) rightly points out for social workers – should not be seen as an extension of work within the primary organisation: the home 'constitutes a sphere of practice and experience in its own right . . . . Home visiting is shown to be a deeply embodied practice in which all the senses and emotions come into play and movement is central' (ibid, p67). Home visits are deeply unpredictable, places of potential risk but also potential breakthrough, requiring work that is founded upon intuition and feelings as much as protocols and procedures.

Essential to understanding home visits by AP practitioners is space and geography and how they create an embodied experience. Central here is Lefebvre (1991) and the three-way dialectic for understanding space. Of primary significance for this study are 'spaces of representation', lived space that 'refers to the ways that space is experienced directly, bodily and outside of verbal systems of representation' (Jeyasingham 2013, 1884). Upon entering homes, practitioners walk into 'affective atmospheres' that shape their experience of the lives of families, atmospheres acting as 'the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another . . . ' (Anderson 2009, 79). Neither objective or purely subjective, atmospheres emerge from artefacts within homes, from the toys and pets, from the bare mattress and the curtain-less window, from the darkness of an unpayable electricity bill and a TV on full volume. Yet atmospheres are also a product of people, of the families and the visitors, formed and deformed by the interactions between not only the AP practitioner and the family but the atmospheric flux of the permeable house, of the neighbours, the cousins and the suspected drug dealer. Atmospheres are forms of sensual enclosure, the sensorium providing understanding for practitioners as equally as cognition, an enclosure that provides insight into the lives of the families they work with and shape the microwork so essential to children's re-engagement. But more than family-focused understanding, affective atmospheres were essential to the safety of practitioners, their actions informed by feelings, hunches and intuition, informing when to enter, where to sit, what to say, where to go and when to leave. Here, atmospheres are 'the haze, the mediums or the elements through which perception, and hence human action and understanding, takes place' (Bille 2015, 56). But this is not to say that practitioners only experienced atmospheres – they also participated in their formation. Through posture and mobility, through the crafting of interactions, through the expression of interest in artefacts, through the distancing from social workers, practitioners shaped the atmosphere within homes, able to transform the discomfort of first visits into warmth, and electric tension into open engagement. Through skilled transmogrification, the management of atmospheres was crucial to successful engagement.

Outside of the home, on the drive back to the school setting, within the office where reporting on the visit is completed, within meetings with line managers, chats with peers and in supervision sessions, practitioners then engage in a second of Lefebvre's categories, 'representations of space' – the ways in which space is consciously conceived and articulated. Here, the 'way finding' (Urry 2007) of the home visit (as opposed to map-reading) is rendered and translated into reports available to a range of teams within settings to inform practice, to shape pastoral interventions and pedagogy alike. Here, the

experience of the home visits, the details of interactions, issues, solutions and actions are documented and, while the embodied sensuousness is not included, while the accounts of atmospheres are omitted, they are essential to perception and understanding of the needs of children and their families. And the sensuousness of way finding is not only physical, it is not only about mobilities throughout the home; hugely important to successful home visits is historical way finding, how practitioners explored family histories, narratives that were often painful for parents. Historical way finding was about negotiating fragility, of seeking to understand without prying, to colour a narrative without offending, to provide context without pushing too far. Yet while historical way finding held as much potential to fracture engagement just as surely as the visit itself fractured routines and perceived space, it was evident that the majority of parents were incredibly open about the complexities of their lives. It was an openness which, when skilfully managed, created new atmospheres that built rather than fractured trust and solidified fragility. Carefully spun atmospheres could transform a combative interaction into a productive opportunity. And then, in addition to the representations emerging from way finding within homes, there is a second form of representation that exists outside of formal reporting that creeps through informal organisational discourses, settling into the tacit geographical knowledge that informs the work of practitioners in AP. The area surrounding the school was conceived and codified into geographies of notoriety variously characterised by drugs use, gang activity, police raids and extreme deprivation. These geographies became informal organisational knowledge, map-making activity that provided topography to be read by staff new to an area to both forecast the experience within homes and to provide intelligence to inform safety protocols.

But the impact of visits by a representative of an external agency on families should not be underestimated. Homes are ordinarily places of 'spatial practice' (Lefebvre 1991), 'perceived space' that is largely unthought (Jeyasingham 2013) and given little attention because of its familiarity. As such, homes are filled with 'mundane improvisations' (Pink et al. 2015) that become embedded within habitual movement and cognition. Atmospheres from this point of view are similarly routine, emerging from the interaction between people and materials, families and artefacts. The arrival of someone from a school, someone with the power to make referrals to social workers or the police, is hugely disruptive. Routines are shattered, particularly from unannounced visits heralded by neighbours collecting around the visitor waiting on the steps, neighbourhood children asking if they were bailiffs or social services. The atmosphere of the familiar is unmade with the arrival of the visitor, the materiality of homes becomes starkly revealed as families experience a sudden re-awareness of their homes. New atmospheres emerge with someone new within the home, and the new atmospheres are themselves made and unmade throughout the visit. And this is the essence of the fragility of home visits and the skill of practitioners. Within a context of strained engagement with education, home visits – while aimed at re-engaging children through micro-work with families – are potentially highly disruptive. That they are generally highly effective despite the risks, is a product not only of crafting atmospheres but crafting the micro-work that removes the barriers to engagement.

From the sensual understanding of the lives of children and their families, practitioners crafted their work to meet the highly heterogeneous needs within homes. But this was a form of artisanship that does not sit within the traditional forms of job crafting presented in the literature. In its original conception, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001)

suggested that there are three motivations for job crafting: firstly for employees to maintain control over their work, to change the nature and scope of tasks to suit their own preferences; secondly, is the identity work of job crafting, to create a 'positive sense of self' in their own eyes and within the eyes of others, to achieve a greater meaning within their work; finally, to achieve a greater sense of connectedness with others, to enhance sociality within work environments and prioritise the interpersonal. While this triumvirate has been added to with categories such as achieving a better work-life balance or integrating technology to increase efficiency (Lazazzara, Tims, and De Gennaro 2020), none adequately capture the crafting of practitioners in this study. In this context, the motivation was primarily extrinsic and pro-social and focused on the needs of the families. As such it was externalised. This is not to say that crafting did not create a greater sense of meaning for practitioners – their accounts are full of the meaningfulness of their work. Instead, it was far more goal-oriented with the ultimate aim being to meaningfully engage with families to improve the life chances of children. Yet there was a further difference in this data from traditional conceptualisations of job crafting: in this study, job crafting was an act of co-creation with families contributing equally. This was not a matter of saviours swooping in to rescue helpless families; instead, solutions were a matter of co-responsibility, the nature of the engagement work was determined *with* families and arising from a depth of interaction that signified real engagement.

Furthermore, while job crafting concerns the moves initiated by employees to change the nature and parameters of their work, in AP, crafting appeared to be actively encouraged. There was an understanding from senior leaders that practitioners needed freedom from formal job descriptions to do the work that needed to be done, the work that was not being done by any other agency, the work between the gaps of multi-agency positioning. What is also missing from the job crafting literature is the body, the idea that the changes individuals make to the nature of their work is shaped by the sensorium, it is actively moulded as a result of the sensuous experience of being within homes, of being enveloped by the atmospheres that children live within, atmospheres that can prevent engagement with education. From this perspective, crafting is not solely an intellectual pursuit, it is a product of atmospheres, the senses and mobilities.

Conclusion

For children and families that are disengaged from education, home visits are perhaps the most effective intervention there is. But they are not interventions of threat or coercion, they are, in AP, an authentic means of fostering a co-created approach to re-engagement, a practice of building joint responsibility for the learning of children. But this research has highlighted that home visits, by being deeply embodied, sensuous experiences, are shaped at least as much by subjectivity as objectivity. Strategies implemented, solutions crafted, relationships forged, are shaped by atmospheres as much as intellectual cognition, impressions and feelings as much as positivistic observation. As such, home visits hold the potential to be deeply disruptive of home-life, to shatter already fragile engagement and exacerbate the damage caused by exclusions. This research is partial, it represents the emic perspective of participants rather than families themselves and that must remain a caveat. It is also too easy to slip into a saviour narrative, to ignore the funds of knowledge within families and communities that are essential to re-engagement. For

the most part, the practitioners in this research avoided this paradigm – families were the solution rather than the problem; the problem was located within contexts, within the extremes of deprivation that families often found themselves situated within. Home visits were an illumination, they slipped through barriers created by poverty or mental ill health or life histories and focused on solutions co-created with families who (almost) all wanted their children to achieve to their full potential. That each of the settings achieved successes, that attendance and engagement rose for the majority of the children in their settings, is testament to the importance of family engagement, proof of how essential a culture of shared responsibility is to the educational success of children. And within that, while more research is required, home visits play a crucial role.

Note

1. This is a fictionalised account based on the data collected and is intended to provide an introductory representation of the experience of practitioners conducting home visits and to foreshadow the key elements of the article to come.

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