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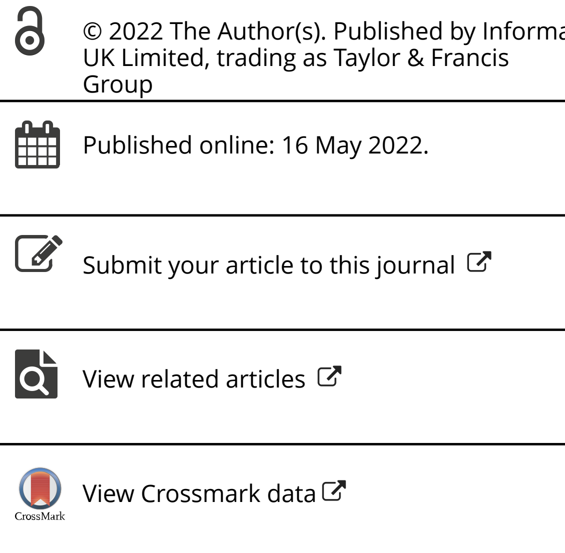

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A third space for inclusion: multilingual teaching assistants reporting on the use of their marginal position, translation and translanguaging to construct inclusive environments

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ABSTRACT

The discussion in this paper is based on an analysis of interviews with eight Multilingual Teaching Assistants (MTAs) employed in English schools to support students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to access the curriculum and pursue language learning. It focuses on descriptions of their roles and reflects on the pedagogies they apply and their interactions with students. The findings corroborate those from other studies, which demonstrate that MTAs assume multiple roles in schools while simultaneously maintaining a peripheral position. From this position, MTAs develop creative, individualised, and culturally relevant pedagogies (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger [2006]. "Teaching in the Margins: The Multifaceted Work and Struggles of Bilingual Paraeducators." Anthropology and Education Quarterly 37 (1): 62–82, 77). Using translanguaging in their communications with students, they describe how they develop positive personal interactions based on care, bridging home and school, and constructing pedagogical third spaces that challenge the power relations that force certain groups to marginalisation. The discussion concerns how such third spaces allow students to exercise a level of control and power, to collaborate with staff, and to co-construct hybrid cultures.The recognition and expansion of such places could be a project for inclusive education based on recognition and trust.

KEYWORDS

Third space; inclusion; teaching assistants; migrant; refugees

Introduction

This paper focuses on the role of Multilingual Teaching Assistants (MTAs) providing language and academic support to students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in English schools. The paper is based on analysing interviews with eight MTAs most of which were conducted in the context of a study that examined the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant students at three English secondary schools. All MTAs interviewed are employed in schools with a higher than average number of

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migrant and refugee students. The focus of the interviews was on the support MTAs offer specifically to migrant and refugee students, although the analysis in this paper will focus on the parts of the interviews covering more general issues with regard to their role and position in the school. The picture these MTAs describe does not deviate significantly from previous research, as MTAs are often marginalised within schools (Dávila 2018) and their role is poorly defined (Tucker 2009; Warren 2017). However, the focus of the analysis within this paper is on the construction and peculiarities of marginalised space, attempting to offer a description of its function within the classroom, and its implications for educational inclusion, particularly as experienced by students who are supported by MTAs. In doing so, the discussion will draw on theories of third space, and will attempt to describe those areas of MTAs' interactions with refugee students and pedagogical third spaces.

The role of multilingual teaching assistants

In several countries, including England (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021), Sweden (Skolverket 2013) and the USA (Wenger et al. 2004; Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006) MTAs occupy a significant role in supporting educational inclusion by catering for the needs of students whose home language is other than that spoken in their classes. England in particular has a long tradition of employing bilingual/multilingual teaching assistants, a practice which started on a voluntary basis and was systematised in the mid-1980s with the publication of the final report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups (Swann report) and the introduction of 'bilingual support' (Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003, 268). However, English MTAs, especially females, are not exempt from the international patterns observed (Mansaray 2012, 20; Henn et al. 2014); i.e. precarious employment conditions in 'low-status posts, with ill-defined job descriptions' (Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003, 106). Particularly with regard to the role of MTAs, the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities, and the limitations on the expectations they are expected to meet has been well documented (Baker 2014; Dávila and Bunar 2020; Lucero 2010; Tucker 2009).

Generally, MTAs models of work follow the same patterns as those of teaching assistants who support teaching in many English classrooms and constitute about one quarter of all professionals employed in English schools (Webster, Blatchford, and Russell 2013). Similarly to teaching assistants, MTAs may be assigned by teachers with general classroom duties or with specific responsibilities for a child, subject area or age group(s) and they are often attached to educational units within schools, offering students out-of-classroom support (Tyrer et al. 2009, 9; Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003, 269). MTAs working in English and US schools often offer classroom-based, language-focused support to individuals or small groups of students, while in many schools (usually secondary schools) they work with students outside the classroom or within special departments that several schools have established with the mandate to implement educational programmes focused on language acquisition (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006). Generally, the evidence suggests teaching assistants (and by extension MTAs) play an increasingly significant role in the implementation of schools' inclusive education plans (Tucker 2009; Sharma and Salend 2016). However, concerns have been raised about the model of working exclusively being associated with students in need of support, pointing to the

potential risks of isolation of students from teachers as well as from their peers as potentially impacting negatively their learning and inclusion in the classroom (Blatchford et al. 2009; Sharma and Salend 2016). This issue will be addressed later in this paper.

Aside from the significance of the MTAs' role, the responsibilities assigned to them are increasing, as in some countries 'the work of paraeducators (the equivalent American term for TAs) has shifted from primarily to support or clerical tasks to greater instructional, diagnostic, and counselling responsibilities' (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 63; Slater and Gazeley 2019). However, this has not been accompanied by significant changes in teaching assistants' and MTAs' payment and status, neither in the opportunities for training and professional development, which in many countries are either not compulsory, or unavailable (Ashbaker and Morgan 2012; Webster, Blatchford, and Russell 2013; Butt 2018). For MTAs in particular, knowledge of the language spoken by some or most foreign pupils is often the primary qualification requested by schools (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021). This, together with the conditions described above might adequately explain the marginality of teaching assistants and MTAs' status in formal education, despite the significance of their contribution to educational inclusion and the complexity of their role (Dávila 2018, 9657; Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 62; Fritzsche and Kakos 2021, 461; Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003).

Interestingly, however, it is often this marginalised space that MTAs exploit to gain autonomy. Within this space, despite the ill-defined responsibilities and their lack of formal qualifications and training, MTAs construct and perform their roles across the blurred boundaries between teaching and assisting (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 72), often playing 'a pivotal role in the education language minority students' (63).

The role of multilingual teaching assistants: translation and translanguaging

As mentioned above, the most common reason for schools employing MTAs is to communicate with students, for whom the language of classroom instruction is not their main language. This suggests that their main responsibility is translation; this translation is not solely linguistic, as it also involves the interpretation of curricula, educational systems, and cultures (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021, 462). Their role and work in schools is therefore complex and multifaceted. Referring to findings from an earlier study by Lindberg and Hyltemstam conducted in Swedish schools, Dávila points out that 'in addition to providing language support, many bilingual classroom assistants are also heritage language (HL) teachers, coordinate and translate during parent–teacher meetings, and serve as parent–teacher liaisons' (2018, 956). Shaw also refers to this aspect of MTAs' role, describing them as parents' advocates (Shaw 2001; Cable 2003) and describing how they bridge communication between home and school and how they operate as cultural mediators (see e.g. Ernst-Slavit and Wenger [2006, 74]).

To comprehend the significance of the role of MTAs as interpreters and cultural mediators it is particularly important to acknowledge their cultural capital and the minority status of the students they support. As has already been observed in multiple studies, the cultural capital they bring to their role originates from life experiences and is of a 'similar status with their students (e.g. immigrants), […] comparable experiences (e.g. learning a second language), […] equivalent hardships (e.g. marginality) but also

importantly of deep understanding of what it takes to be a language and culture learner' (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 78). This cultural capital allows them to offer appropriate student support for language learning, but equally importantly it allows them to effectively contribute to an ethos of equality, and to educational inclusion by legitimating students' home language and by supporting their socialisation into the school community (Baker 2014, 256). In that sense, the multifaceted translation they offer not only facilitates access and communication but also empowers (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021, 464). Therefore, the significance of their role should not be understood only in terms of their language skills, but also on the basis of their position, which makes it easier to empathise with students and to translate curricula and practices, 'incorporating culturally relevant pedagogies' (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 77). The function of the emotional aspects of the support they offer has been documented in several studies (see Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003, 273; Fritzsche and Kakos 2021, 459), which describe how intrinsic they are to shaping a classroom culture built on trust and care (Rueda, Monzo, and Higareda 2004). It is this culture, according to Ernst-Slavit and Wegner, that allows MTAs to provide 'a counterbalance to pervasive instructional practices that validate only mainstream students, values, and norms' (77), and has the power to exclude migrant and second-language students. The components of the emotional basis for the construction of a culture that promotes inclusion can be found in communications between the MTAs and students, who employ an 'interactionist style that is often characterised by the use of culturally-specific, […], verbal and non-verbal cues that signal closeness and endearment' (Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003, 273). In their study Martin-Jones and Saxena describe how MTAs draw 'on the resources in their verbal and non-verbal repertoires in subtle and complex ways as they negotiated their classroom relationships with the children and as they attempted to make links for them between home and school-based contexts for learning' (270).

Central to this communication connecting home and school is translanguaging; i.e. the 'deployment of speakers' [MTAs' and students' in this case] full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages' (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015, 281). As other studies have reported, translanguaging is commonplace in the communications of MTAs and their students, and is the condition that allows the development of fundamentally personalised pedagogies, since it 'is shaped and enacted differently in different contexts with different outcomes for different individuals' (Dávila and Bunar 2020, 114). As Garcia-Mateus and Palmer highlight, 'Scholars examining the practice of translanguaging have become increasingly convinced that students are more likely to experience academic success when presented with the opportunity to engage in this form of flexible bilingualism' (2017, 246).

Particularly relevant to this research is the pedagogical function of translanguaging as understood by Wei (2011), who points out that the development of a personalised pedagogy occupies a 'translanguaging space'. He describes this space as one defined by boundaries 'existing primarily in the mind of the individual who creates and occupies it', and constructed 'through a three-way dialectic between perceived, conceived and lived space'. The shaping of this space brings together 'different dimensions of [individuals'] personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance and making

it into a lived experience'. Wei attributes transformative properties to translanguaging, asserting that translanguaging space 'is not a space where different identities, values and practices simply co-exist, but combined together to generate new identities, values and practices'. Wei suggests the generative and transformative power of translanguaging spaces proceeds from the creativity and criticality they invite and generate. In the context of translanguaging, he identifies creativity

> as the ability to choose between following and flouting the rules and norms of behaviour, including the use of language. It is about pushing and breaking the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging.

Criticality meanwhile, 'refers to the ability to use available evidence appropriately, systematically and insightfully to inform considered views of cultural, social and linguistic phenomena, to question and problematize received wisdom, and to express views adequately through reasoned responses to situations' (Wei 2011, 1223).

In this study, I will interpret interviews with eight MTAs describing the process of constructing translanguaging spaces, identifying examples of criticality and creativity. Moreover, I will use the concept of 'third space' to examine the function of the translanguaging space within the classroom to argue that third, translanguaging spaces allow the manifestation of individualised pedagogies which do not require the segregation of individuals from their groups. I will now move on to a short discussion of the concept of pedagogical 'third space' before detailing the identity of the study and discussing the results.

Pedagogical third spaces

Central to the development of the concept of pedagogical third spaces has been the influence of Homi Bhabha, particularly his claims about the existence of liminal spaces, spaces 'in-between the designations of identity', 'passages' that 'prevent identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities' (Bhabha 1994, 4). 'Bhabha's metaphor invokes transition, transformation and productive instability […] [and a] consideration of space as material location, with spatial and temporal dimensions' (Gannon 2010, 21). Building upon this conceptualisation Edward Soja (1996) applies 'an intensely social vision of how space is produced and used' (Gannon, op. cit) and extends it further from Bhabba's spatial and temporal dimensions introducing third spaces as socially produced the function and description of which transcend the dichotomy between material forms and imaginary representations of them. Recognising fundamental similarities between Lefevre's suggestions about the function of 'lived spaces' (l'espace vécu), which lie beyond 'spatial practices' and 'representations of space' and Foucault's concept of 'other places' (des espaces autres), Soja points out that these other places 'are not just simply translatable as "other" but are "significantly different' spaces"' (Borch 2002, 113). Moreover, he builds on Foucault's 'heterotopology' when constructing the concept of 'Thirding' to describe how we examine such spaces. 'Thirdspace', as Soja says in his interview with Borch,

> includes both material and mental spaces, the real and the imagined, what I described as Firstspace and Secondspace; but also contains something more, something else that we can begin to understand only by widening the scope of our geographical imagination. (113)

It is apparent that Wei's understanding of translanguaging spaces is influenced by Soja (1996), in particular as regards the function of 'a three-way dialectic between perceived, conceived and lived space' as the fundamental constituting process of translanguaging (Wei 2011, 1223). Also evident is the relevance of: (a) Soja's attribution of transformative properties of this 'other' space as it informs Wei's explanation regarding similar properties of translanguaging; and (b) Soja's view expanding the limitations of one's imagination when examining the role of third space and associating Wei's translanguaging with creativity and criticality. It is therefore conceptually natural to view translanguaging space as a third space, a between space, beyond the confines of communication in a particular language, and the perceptions and meanings attributed to this communication by those participating in it. An additional dimension that is significant to the development of the concept of third space in a way that facilitates the analysis in this paper is the connection between third spaces and pedagogy.

Highlighting that 'contexts of development [and learning] can be characterized by their diverse, conflictual, and complex nature' Gutiérrez *et al.* conceptualise pedagogical third spaces as 'discursive spaces […] in which alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning' (1999, 287). As Cho points out 'in the field of education, the concept of third space has provided a conceptual framework that helps educators and researchers move away from a divisive paradigm of education towards an integrative approach' (2018, 277).

In the context of inclusive pedagogies, the integrative character of third spaces allows them to be the meeting points of real and imagined educational realities, and it is here that the opportunities for inclusion are located. As Souto-Manning and Lanza highlight,

> a third space perspective departs from the real lived realities of exclusion ingrained in […] schooling (first space). It also goes beyond imagining spaces for equity in education (second space). Third space is where real and imagined realities come together through a 'creative recombination and extension'; as such, it is a space for transformation. Pedagogical third spaces embrace the notion that these transformative spaces can be negotiated and fostered pedagogically. We thus see pedagogical third spaces as promising for interrupting 'an atmosphere of exclusion and overcoming deficits in the classroom'. (2019, 40)

Therefore, the operation and convergence of multiple, often conflictual realities is vital to the emergence of third spaces and their transformative power to manifest. These are the conditions set out in all learning environments: 'Our analysis of third spaces has shown that learning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscripted. Thus, conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning space' (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda 1999, 287).

Pedagogical third spaces are spaces of fusion, bringing together constantly emerging realities fed by diversity, by the meeting and exchanging of components that contribute to this diversity and the development of new learning pathways. They are liminal spaces, in-between and beyond established practices and pre-defined pedagogical goals. Being fundamentally educational, they are also transformative spaces making them heavily dependent on the exercise of criticality and creativity by those occupying them. In the context of language learning, and particularly in the case of pedagogies practicing translanguaging, Third spaces are hybrid spaces in which teachers and learners move beyond using one official or prevalent language to create a mode of learning that moves from and

towards diversity. Hybridity and diversity serve as the building blocks of these third spaces and lead to transformation, enriching learning, promoting participation, and connecting personal and institutional, home and school: 'We have conceptualized these improvisations as third spaces and argue that these learning zones are promoted and sustained by hybrid language and schooling practices that bridge home and school' (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda 1999, 288). This bridge leads to conditions in which 'teacher and student scripts – the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment – intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge'. According to Gutiérrez (2008, 152), this is the definition of a pedagogical third space. As Skerrett points out,

> this definition […] directly invokes foundational theories regarding the sociology of knowledge […]. These theories have critiqued hegemonic societal power structures in which dominant groups determine what will count as appropriate school knowledge and normalize a hierarchical pedagogical relationship between teachers and students. (2010, 67)

We can then conclude that translanguaging constructs pedagogical third spaces that are transformatively inclusive in three key interwoven ways: learning, participation and social interaction. The discussion in the remainder of the paper illustrates how the MTAs in this study experience the construction of this three-dimensional inclusive practice in a lived space that lies beyond the structural and conceived spatiality of their role.

The present study

The interviews with the MTAs analysed in this paper were directly and indirectly related to a study that examined the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant students at three English secondary schools. Three of the interviews were conducted in the context of a study that also included interviews with other members of staff holding either management positions in schools or otherwise directly involved in educational programmes designed specifically to promote the inclusion of refugee and migrant students. The majority of these members of staff, including most of the MTAs in this study are attached to English as Additional Language (EAL) departments. These departments are common in secondary schools in England, offering educational programmes for language learning and academic support. However, they often operate as hubs for pastoral support to migrant and refugee students, and for communication between school and home (Kakos and Sharma-Brymer 2018; Koehler et al. 2018). The MTAs in this study participate in the delivery of such programmes, with the majority also offering classroom support to students with EAL.

Five further interviews were organised after the end of the project to enrich the data on the particular role of the MTAs. Two of the three MTAs work in Primary schools and are not attached to an EAL department but offer only classroom support, working closely with students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). These five interviews were conducted in collaboration with another researcher who was conducting a study on the role of Teaching Assistants in general. Relevant findings from that study appear elsewhere (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021).

All the schools in this study are inner-city schools in Northern England with a higher than average percentage of students with EAL.

The documentary method (Bohnsack 2003; Nohl 2006) was applied in the analysis of the interviews. Based on Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, this method aims to identify and reconstruct patterns of orientation and implicit knowledge. In this instance, the analysis sought to describe patterns concerning MTA's perceptions of their roles and implicit knowledge concerning the pedagogies they develop and implement. The process of identification and description of these patters followed a shift of focus from 'what' MTAs describe to 'how' they build their descriptions and from 'formulating' to 'reflecting' interpretations (Nohl 2010, 204). The process facilitated an inherent and implicit juxtaposition of the MTA's habitual actions and atheoretical knowledge with that of teaching and management staff. This juxtaposition occurred consistently in the interviews with MTAs especially when referring to their knowledge and skills which they attribute to their personal experiences rather than to any form of training. This implicit comparison was illustrated with greater clarity in the comparative analysis stage (Nohl 2010, 204) and which in this case involved the comparison of the MTA's descriptions of actions and methods with those by other members of staff in a select number of interviews. This is one of the reasons that the analysis undertaken will incidentally refer to interviews with students and other staff members involved in the original research. However, evidence from these interviews will not be discussed systematically here, as the focus was not on the role of MTAs.

Analysis

The analysis has followed two directions: The first examined MTA's descriptions of the structural, physical and pedagogical spatiality of their role. The second focused on descriptions of their work and their interactions with students, paying particular attention to the practice of translanguaging. The discussion here aims to reveal how the properties of MTA's role, although – or perhaps because – it is perceived as marginal offers the opportunity to MTAs to construct a pedagogical third space which, although peripheral, would also be remarkably and fundamentally inclusive.

Working at the fringes

It has already been mentioned that the majority of the MTAs interviewed are attached to the EAL departments at their schools. In all cases, all but one of these departments are located inside the main school building, but none are in a central location. In the school hosting the highest number of EAL students, the EAL department occupies two rooms at the end of the corridor on the top floor of the school building. Another is in the wing of the building and is not accessible from the school's main entrance. One of the EAL departments is located in a temporary building outside the school's main building, which it shares with the 'Inclusion Unit', an educational unit for students with Special Educational Needs. These spaces are rarely visited by members of staff or students not attached to the department, and are the natural working spaces for the majority of the MTAs in the study.

When describing their roles, the MTAs illustrated their physical marginality. Especially those MTAs who offer classroom support refer to their classroom role as on the fringes of classroom interactions, focusing only on particular students and operations. One participant described it as ‘a bridge between the teacher and these students’. Her description is not only indicative of the marginality of the space her role occupies, but also of its peculiarity, as it appears not to be occupied by other (non-exceptional) students. The limited space assigned to this role is also evident, as it is designed to serve a very particular purpose, which is based on and reinforces the differences in pedagogic significance between her role and that of the teacher. This is associated with, and translates to a power difference, which becomes more apparent in the MTA’s view of the position of the teacher defining their role. Eleni, a trilingual Teaching Assistant seems to draw great satisfaction from her role, but when asked about her relationships with teachers she comments:

> Eleni: Now there are individuals, so I am not generalizing here, there are individuals that think … that at the end of the day you are a teaching assistant … .

Contradictory to this image of the MTA as a secondary role is the significance of the role as seen by the MTAs themselves, especially when considering the diversity and complexity of their tasks and the responsibilities they are called to respond to. This complexity does not only refer to the academic side of their role, but also to the pastoral support they offer. Indicative of this is the description of the system that Eleni developed in order to support the new students with EAL in their schools:

> Eleni: We can actually make that child feel comfortable … […] I will make sure that all their peers will know the child’s name when they arrive. I will make sure that I have a buddy ready for that child, so that when they arrive, this will be your buddy for the first few days … and you can do things together, they will show you around … and if you don’t understand anything you can ask. So things like that, […] Or they can be asked to bring their favourite thing to school or go through a … period when they are part of a small group, just to see how we do lunchtimes … or just having a walk in the school. … So those first weeks are kind of … like a welcoming environment and attitude towards that child.

Svetlana, a trained biologist and MTA in a primary school offers one-to-one classroom support to Key Stage 1 students (4-6 years old) with EAL, and also works with small groups outside the classroom and develops individualised educational programmes for students of all ages. Thus, she has very good knowledge of the educational needs of the students she supports and has been praised numerous times for her programmes by parents and her school’s senior management team. However, she explains how she hesitates to approach and advise teachers directly, even on pedagogical strategies for students she knows very well, always waiting for teaches to instigate such discussions. She explains:

> Svetlana: I think we’ve got really highly qualified teachers and they know … well they’ve got lots of strategies how to teach our EAL children, how to write, how to read […] What I do is very basic and it’s … it’s just help for children who are completely new to English […] and then my role stops actually to be honest.

The good relationships Rabia, who is from Iran and has been working as an MTA for 4 years, has established with teachers in the school seem to be based on the reception of this

power difference and the acceptance of her role as peripheral. Her description is reminiscent of 'turn-taking' processes, as described by Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003).

> Rabia: [I have a good relationship] Because I obey the rule and I respect the teacher. [...] . I should not interrupt her. Because I obey the rules, I think the teacher doesn't have any problem with me.

Generally, the MTAs' interviews affirmed the evidence in the literature that suggested they fill 'multiple official and unofficial roles within the school, while simultaneously feeling peripheral to curricular planning and pedagogy' (Dávila 2018, 964). As Ernst-Slavit and Wenger observe, instead of being recognised, MTAs become 'hidden teachers,' working with students who [are] often overlooked by certified teachers and administrators' (2006, 78).

However, as Lucero (2010) has shown, operating in a marginal space such as this has advantages. In her study, she showed how a bilingual teaching assistant used the space effectively to create innovative educational programmes. In this study, Svetlana explains that teachers approach her occasionally to discuss the progress of some of the students, but she is unsure of their level of understanding concerning her work with students:

> Svetlana: (Laughing). I don't think that it's necessary [for teachers to know the details of her work with the students]. You know, as long as this helps them in their teaching and helps the students.

The interview with Svetlana's line manager verified the effectiveness and significance of Svetlana's work. It seems, therefore, that the space MTAs operate in is a space of perceived physical and structural marginality. It is also a space of transition for those students who are benefitting from MTA's work, and a space of incidental autonomy, common to many peripheral and liminal spaces. In the second part of the discussion, I will evaluate the MTAs' descriptions of the performances of their roles, to understand how they use their autonomy and marginality. By doing so I will also attempt to show that in order to understand the work of the MTAs with their students we should not focus on the material and mental dimensions of the space within which they operate, but look at the function of the lived space they choose to construct.

Developing and performing a hybrid role: translating, translanguaging and constructing a third space

One of the main roles that MTAs perform is that of the linguistic and cultural translator. MTAs report that they invest the majority of their time in the classroom, translating and interpreting teachers' instructions for students but also interpreting the curriculum and the educational system in ways that correspond to students' previous educational experiences. Outside the classroom, one significant feature of their role is to explain both their role, and the school's expectations of students' parents. Sabi, who is originally from Iraq, describes how she advises and guides students and parents using her language skills, her knowledge of the English educational system and of the system in Iraq:

> Sabi: You see, I know [what] they do not understand [about the system] and when they say "I don't understand", I can ask them about their systems [the systems in the countries that

> they come from] and you know, many are similar to Iraq, I mean in countries in the Middle East at least, and then I can explain to them the differences [from the systems in their own country] and the English name of everything, and then it becomes much easier for them. For a while we discuss like this […] explaining the equivalent of everything to the system in [their] home [country].

The process of the complex and multifaceted translation evident in the above quote involves a movement back and forth between different systems. It requires students' (and parents' when the communication is with them) active engagement, explaining what they are unable to comprehend but also what they share with MTAs their past experience, and what they are familiar with. It requires that MTAs respond to questions, provide information and also interpret questions and judge what the students might not be aware they do not know. They do all this while improving their understanding of students' backgrounds and while comparing and evaluating systems. The translation service they provide therefore is a process that 'allows students to take an active part in the cultural translation and to act as experts for their own experiences'. Importantly, in this process 'schools' routines (not only in the field of inclusion) are irritated and confronted with new meanings' (Fritzsche and Kakos 2021, 464).

Overall, MTAs' multileveled and complex translations proceed from criticality and creativity. They offer ample opportunities for MTAs to use 'available evidence appropriately, systematically and insightfully to inform considered views of cultural, social and linguistic phenomena, to question and problematize received wisdom, and to express views adequately through reasoned responses to situations' (Wei 2011, 1223). Crucially, the responsibility for this creative and critical process is shared by students, and MTAs are conscious of that. Myriam, who was one of the two MTAs in this study and worked in a primary school explained that speaking to students in their own language while helping them to speak English leads to the development of a 'secret code' with a vocabulary drawn from both languages. They use this code most often when Myriam seeks to explain (and translate) the English educational system:

> Myriam: 'We have our moments you know, we have a laugh. […] They get more comfortable when they realise that not everything is perfect here. In Syria for example, they [students of the same age] are far more advanced in Maths than here, you know.

Translanguaging is a very significant element of communication, and the development of their 'secret code', and it is the basis for the implementation of their (translanguaging) pedagogy. MTAs seem to choose this methodology not due to special training or because they are instructed to do so, but because they are aware of its effectiveness and appeal to students from their personal experiences. Building on her experiences Myriam communicates with her students in a mixed use of Arabic and English and supports them in using translanguaging for the development of personal dictionaries. The principle of her method, as she explains, is to facilitate communication:

> Myriam: "I ask them to use these orange books, and I note down [in them] all the Arabic words that we use […]. I don't want to interrupt them when they speak […] I think that it is important that they speak. […] It was the same with my daughter, she was very quiet and because she

> could speak a bit of English they [teachers] thought that she was shy … but […] in fact she was not confident, she just didn't have the vocabulary for everything that she wanted to say."

The reference to personal experiences when explaining the use of translanguaging, when justifying their pedagogical goals and when describing their practices is common among the MTAs interviewed here. These experiences enable them to understand students' needs as they often relate to their own position as language learners:

> Eleni: I definitely relate to them and I just want to help them. […]. So [I] indirectly check on things that we think they do know [..]. I casually play with them and find out how far on they are [in language learning].. And then work on strategies with teachers [to] support them.

In line with Eleni's description, Dora, the bilingual teaching assistant, described in a study by Lucero (2010), attributes her ability to offer effective support, partially to her position, which allows her to draw on 'her social and professional networks as well as her personal experience as an immigrant and a learner of English as a second language to meet the goals of the biliteracy program' she has developed (Lucero 2010, 137).

From such a position, MTAs are able to provide their students with a safe space, enabling them to discuss sensitive issues in the language that they prefer (García-Mateus and Palmer 2017, 249) transforming relationships between students, teachers, and the curriculum (Wei 2011). Importantly, they create bridges between home and school, for both themselves and their students. Their pedagogy informs the space in which their personal experiences are being developed into professional tools, attracting students' personal experiences and co-constructing new pedagogical spaces through 'creative recombination and extension' (Soja 1996, 6). These occur between and beyond the 'real' pedagogical spaces assigned to MTAs to perform their roles, and the perceptions (MTAs' or other members of staff) of these spaces. They are lived spaces that challenge traditional institutional definitions of curriculum, the teacher and the learner contest the hierarchical relationships of those occupying them.

The significance of such spaces for vulnerable students, including migrants and refugees is not justified in purely linguistic terms. Allowing translation and negotiation to occur they function as third spaces, enabling students to exercise a level of control and power, to collaborate with staff and co-construct hybrid cultures. They are spaces of transformation, with the potential to challenge 'the power relations and processes by which certain groups are socially, economically and politically marginalised' (Souto-Manning and Lanza 2019, 39) and offer students an opportunity to participate actively and consciously in the development of the pedagogy applied to support their learning. This is particularly important for students from nondominant communities, and for the development of practices and programmes 'based on boundary crossing, and intercultural exchange in which difference is celebrated without being romanticized' (Gutiérrez 2008, 149).

Conclusions

Operating within a structural, pedagogical and often physical marginalised space, MTAs appear to enjoy an autonomy not purposefully built into their roles, but rather developed naturally on the fringes of the schools' operations. From within these roles, MTAs engage in direct and exclusive interactions with students who are often vulnerable or at a risk of social marginalisation. According to the MTAs in this study, this exclusivity, together

with the familiarity with students' personal and academic experiences allows them to achieve an in-depth understanding of student's history, and to develop relationships with them based on trust and care (Rueda, Monzo, and Higareda 2004) that go beyond offering of language and academic support. From within these relationships, MTAs are in a position to provide 'a counterbalance to pervasive instructional practices that validate only mainstream students, values, and norms' (Ernst-Slavit and Wenger 2006, 77), which normally have the power to exclude migrant and second-language students.

The support they offer invites students' active participation leading to the development of pedagogies based on hybridity, criticality and creativity. These are pedagogies entangled in personal interactions between MTAs and students and find expression in their communications as characterised by translanguaging. In such a way, MTAs' pedagogies empower students from nondominant groups 'by legitimating students' home language, by supporting their socialisation into the community of the school' (Baker 2014, 256) and by allowing them to develop 'a sense of agency and control in their learning environment' (Stokes and Aaltonen 2021, 1).

These participatory pedagogies and collaborations with students take place within 'discursive spaces […] in which alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning' (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda 1999, 287). These are pedagogical third spaces that unite 'different dimensions of [individuals'] personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance and making it into a lived experience' (Wei 2011, 1223).

Whether schools are able to recognise the pedagogical significance and the transformative potentials of these spaces and whether the empowerment that students and staff experience is sustainable or not are questions which have been outside the scope of this study. However, MTA's descriptions of their position suggest that schools do not always have a complete understanding of the function and value of these pedagogical spaces and it is doubtful whether they are in position to sustain the benefits that these generate. References to the roles of the MTAs in interviews with other staff indicate that the value that it is often attributed to these roles is vaguely attached to the ability of the MTAs to make students feel welcome and to the facilitation of the communication between students and teachers. Consequently, their role is associated to a transition period. The teachers' medium – and long-term efforts for inclusion seem to concentrate in bringing students out of the exclusivity of their interaction with the MTAs. The prospect is disturbingly close to the reference by Slee and Allan to the operation of powerful discourses that establish hierarchies of who is to be included at the centre of which one can recognise 'particular forms of knowledge that construct the world' (2001, 179). Referencing Armstrong (2000) Slee and Allan point out that 'inclusive education for many has simply meant that people have altered their geography without being reflexive about the integrity and implications of the knowledge' (ibid).

Rather than abandoning these spaces to avoid exclusivity and isolation (Blatchford et al. 2009; Sharma and Salend 2016), the project of inclusive education could nurture the questioning of the predefined hierarchies of knowledge which render these spaces

exclusive and educationally inapt and seek the full recognition of their function and their expansion. In practice, this would mean the adaptation of flexible, inclusive pedagogies, which legitimise and build upon students' experiences and backgrounds (linguistic, cultural or other). It would also mean understanding inclusive education as aiming to 'open up possibilities for recognition, not only in terms of respect or rights, but also concerning foundational friendships, trust among partners and sources of esteem' (Felder 2018, 68).

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