

Towards an education in the minor key: The Third Space as a horizon for a pedagogy of hybridization and subjectivation

Enrico Ieroncic*

Università degli Studi di Verona (Italy)

Submitted: February 2, 2026 – Accepted: June 4, 2026 – Published: September 15, 2026

Verso un'educazione in tonalità minore. Il 'terzo spazio' come orizzonte per una pedagogia dell'ibridazione e della soggettivazione

This paper reframes the pedagogies in the field of cultural diversity by transcending the logic of a “major key” education, which is the transmission of authorized knowledge, in favor of an education “in a minor key” that values processes and relations. Homi Bhabha's Third Space is reinterpreted as a metaphorical locus of agency and performance. The analysis focuses on how Third Space can address key features of a pedagogy that is not based on the reproduction of canonical knowledge, but on its co-creation through the active participation of students. Third Space is not an interstice but a site of resistance where students are able to “give an account of oneself”, formulating their own distinct subjectivities beyond hegemonic narratives. This process of subjectivation is manifested through hybridization, a performative act that challenges predefined categories. In this context, hybridization is not a simple fusion, but a “creolization”, a process that celebrates opacity and complexity, refusing the obligation of transparency. The dialogue between these authors is an example of what Gloria Anzaldúa terms “new mestiza consciousness”, a concrete outcome. This consciousness goes beyond a mere border identity but translates into an awareness that develops within Third Space, capable of inhabiting contradictions and drawing strength from them to create new forms of knowledge. The paper concludes that Third Space is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical horizon for an education that promotes the autonomy, resistance, and capacity of students to forge plural identities in a globalized world.

Questo articolo ridefinisce le pedagogie nel campo della diversità culturale trascendendo la logica di un'istruzione “in chiave maggiore”, ovvero la trasmissione di conoscenze autorizzate, a favore di un'istruzione “in chiave minore” che valorizza i processi e le relazioni. Il Terzo Spazio di Homi Bhabha viene reinterpretato come luogo metaforico di azione e performance. L'analisi si concentra su come il Terzo Spazio possa affrontare le caratteristiche chiave di una pedagogia che non si basa sulla riproduzione del sapere canonico, ma sulla sua co-creazione attraverso la partecipazione attiva degli studenti. Il Terzo Spazio non è un interstizio, ma un luogo di resistenza dove gli studenti sono in grado di “dare conto di se stessi”, formulando le proprie soggettività distinte al di là delle narrazioni egemoniche. Questo processo di soggettivazione si manifesta attraverso l'ibridazione, un atto performativo che sfida le categorie predefinite. In questo contesto, l'ibridazione non è una semplice fusione, ma una “creolizzazione”, un processo che celebra l'opacità e la complessità, rifiutando l'obbligo della trasparenza. Il dialogo tra questi autori è un esempio di ciò che Gloria Anzaldúa definisce “nuova coscienza mestiza”, un risultato concreto. Questa coscienza va oltre la semplice identità di confine, ma si traduce in una consapevolezza che si sviluppa all'interno del Terzo Spazio, capace di abitare le contraddizioni e trarne forza per creare nuove forme di conoscenza. Il documento conclude che il Terzo Spazio non è solo un concetto teorico, ma un orizzonte pratico per un'istruzione che promuove l'autonomia, la resistenza e la capacità degli studenti di forgiare identità plurali in un mondo globalizzato.

Keywords: Third Space; Subjectivation; Agency; Hybridity; Educational relationship; Mestiza.

* ✉ enrico.ieroncic@univr.it

1. Introduction

“Cultures are never unitary in themselves,
nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other.”

– Bhabha, 1994 (p. 52)

This paper explores the intersections of different theories, advocating for a possible reconfiguration of the existing educational paradigm, referred to as the “Major key” towards a process-oriented pedagogy in the “minor key” (Ingold, 2018). In this sense, Homi Bhabha’s (2012) Third Space theory is reinterpreted as a critical mesosystem drawing on bell hooks’ concept of radical intersectionality (1998; 2009). In the context of contention and agency, the process of subjectivation enables learners to understand how to navigate the world as adults while critically examining their own desires (Biesta, 2024, p. 12). This process is rooted in the ethical practice of “giving an account of oneself” (Butler, 2005). Subjectivation takes shape through radical hybridization, which is conceptualized as a form of creolization. As Glissant (1997) notes, “creolization, one of the ways of forming a complex mix [...] is only exemplified by its processes and certainly not by the ‘contents’ on which these operate” (p. 89).

Creolization advocates for the right to opacity, countering the normative coercion towards transparency. Opacity constitutes the ethical foundation characterized by the right to non-alignment. Hybridity denotes the semiotic and enunciative state, while creolization represents the dynamic and unpredictable process of mixing diverse elements. Mestiza consciousness embodies the cognitive and existential perspective that arises from the ability to navigate such complex interrelations effectively. Opacity serves as a performative act that elucidates the contingent nature of categories such as race and culture: “norms are only precariously inhabited, and they can be reconstituted. The subject may [...] fail to successfully inhabit the norms by which she has been interpellated as a racial subject, or she may be able to cite anti-hegemonic practices” (Chadderton, 2018, p. 113). The intersection of these dimensions results in the development of *La mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987). It is concluded that the Third Space is not merely a metaphor, but a pragmatic horizon that is important for educational design, promoting critical autonomy and situated design for learning (Ferrari et al., 2021).

2. School in the Major key *tone* and the violence of transparency

“The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute
truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be.”

– Glissant, 1997 (p. 192)

According to Ingold (2018), education *in a Major key* has characterized the teaching model and school systems for decades. This educational system involves a vertical one-way transmission of authorized knowledge from teachers to students. Knowledge is viewed as stable and predefined, with teachers in a higher hierarchical position, transmitting information and skills to learners who passively receive instructions. Ingold compares this rigidly traced path to a musical score where every note is already written, and the performers must simply reproduce them with precision and attention to execution. In Major key education, studying is a systematic effort to acquire knowledge, where “at the beginning, the student lacks knowledge, but by the end she has come into possession of it” (Ingold, 2018, p. 49).

Contemporary education is trapped in a model of instrumental relationality. This model is excessively focused on qualification, neglecting the emancipatory goal of subjectivation (Biesta, 2024). The educational institution, operating as an ideological apparatus, imposes a requirement of transparency on learners, asking them to make themselves intelligible and measurable against predefined standards and categories of identity and performance. This demand for transparency constitutes a form of normative violence that denies the constitutive opacity of the subject, also because “to imagine the transparency of Relation is also to justify the opacity of what impels it” (Glissant 1997, p. 56), whereas “transparency is the action of the distribution and arrangement of differential spaces, positions, knowledge in relation to each other, relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order” (Bhabha, 2012, pp. 155-56).

At the same time, “students are still expected to follow a curriculum which has been laid down in advance, and to progress through measurable stages from initiation to completion” (Ingold, 2018, p. 12). This type of education system implicitly denies the capacity of the actors in the educational landscape to act, and “students are treated as objects when [...] teachers need to intervene in students to produce measurable learning outcomes” (Biesta, 2024, p. 3).¹ Teachers, often overwhelmed by the demands of the curriculum and bureaucracy as well as by the number of students in their classes, find themselves unable to personalize their teaching and assessment of student progress, lacking the time or real opportunities to do so but “it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (hooks, 1994, p. 129). So, teachers often resort to a metric that is anchored in its absolute value, overlooking the fact that the metric can also emerge through the act of tracing itself. A trend further emphasized by dominant learning theories that focus on training practical skills that meet the demands of a flexible labor market and can be easily assessed through standardized evaluation systems (Tarozzi, 2025, p. 114). Traditional “banking” education, as critiqued by Freire, does not provide students with a comprehensive understanding; instead, it presents disconnected fragments of reality. In contrast, problem-posing education may inspire learners to closely analyze the world and actively participate in its reconstruction. This transformation of education into an engaging, collaborative journey may cultivate a genuine passion for learning and encourage a commitment to effecting meaningful change.

Let us remember that school exists to serve learners. Here, school is understood in terms of *empowerment*—as a long-term process aimed above all at increasing an individual’s power and control (and their perception of these) over their own life, their own choices, and their own future, in relation to others (Batini, 2013, p. 11).

In other words, it is suggested that

we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech, that in the patient act of listening to another tongue we may subvert that culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately (hooks, 1994, p. 174).

3. Beyond education, in the minor key *mode*

“The school system has always struggled to recognize us. It is not done intentionally; it is simply used to leave the least behind.”

– Hakuzwimana, 2024 (p. 70)

In schools, learners often lack the time and opportunity to explore education in the minor key—where meaning emerges through the very performance of gestures. As hooks underlines, there is the need “to examine critically the way we as teachers conceptualize what the space for learning should be like” (hooks, 1994, p. 39). In minor key education

one goes not from facts ‘on the ground’ to theories, by in-duction, nor conversely from theories to facts by a reverse process of de-duction, but rather along the sensible path of a continuous variation, that is by ex-duction. One is led out along the way (Ingold, 2018, p. 41).

Education in the minor key proposes a process that goes beyond the written score, namely, towards an experience of travel and discovery. According to the anthropologist, education “is about attending to things, rather than acquiring the knowledge that absolves us of the need to do so; about exposure rather than immunisation” (Ingold, 2018, p. ix). In other words, we must learn (and guide others) to expose ourselves to things instead of immunizing ourselves with knowledge about them. Ingold’s musical

1. This and the following citations from works in languages other than English have been translated into English by the author to make the text flow more coherent.

analogy is particularly appropriate because it effectively represents the complex nuances of education. Within the realm of music, the Major key or Major tone is characterized by confidence, assertiveness, and affirmation, while the minor key or minor mode tends to evoke feelings of anxiety and disturbance, yet it also inspires curiosity. Working in education in a minor key also means promoting these characteristics, exploring every decision that shapes how we move and therefore discover and grow, in this or that direction. As Ingold underlines,

the word ‘skill’ has its roots in the Middle Low German *schillen*, ‘to make a difference’ [and] shares an etymological affinity with the word ‘shell’, a casing that is opened up by splitting or cleaving along the grain. The minor gesture cleaves the event from within (2018, p. 42).

Skillfulness, therefore, finds its meaning not in imposing an external structure on malleable material, but in finding the texture of things and shaping it toward an ever-evolving purpose.

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components (Glissant, 1997, p. 190).

In other words, it is imperative to acknowledge that each individual within the classroom setting influences the dynamic and contributes to the overall atmosphere. These contributions represent valuable resources. When harnessed effectively, they significantly enhance any class’s capacity to cultivate an open and inclusive learning community (hooks, 1994, p. 8).

4. Contested spatial dialectics: The Third Space(s)

“Third places serve to sort people according to their potential usefulness in collective undertakings.”

– Oldenburg, 1989

The Third Space is a transformative environment for exploring identities beyond conventional boundaries, highlighting the fluid intersections of identity, culture, and knowledge (Woolf, 2019). Rather than forcing adherence to a dominant cultural paradigm, it encourages a productive exchange of ideas, allowing individuals to shape their identities by integrating diverse perspectives rather than conforming to a single set of dominant values. The Third space advocates the right to opacity, countering regulatory pressure toward transparency. These elements can be thoughtfully appropriated, reinterpreted, and contextualized anew, thereby enriching personal identity and contributing to a broader discourse on cultural pluralism and social cohesion (Tatham, 2025).

As Spreen underlines, “Third Spaces are both cognitive and embodied multi-sensual spaces that involve emotions, desires, memory, artistic expression, ritual, social solidarity and performativity” (Spreen, 2023, p. 110). Memory is composed of experiences about people and their actions, anchored in spatial and temporal contexts. Thus, the relationship between emotions and places is very evident.

Understanding and appreciating our different locations has been a necessary framework for the building of professional and political solidarity between us, as well as for creating a space of emotional trust where intimacy and regard for one another can be nourished (hooks, 1994, p. 132).

While early sociological definitions of “third places” focused primarily on functional areas for collective socialization (Oldenburg, 1989), postcolonial and spatial theories have radically reframed the concept. Homi Bhabha (1994) identifies the Third Space as an interstice that emerges from ambivalent cultural translation, capable of “upsetting the binary” dichotomy of colonial dialectics. Bhabha compares this space to a stairwell, in which it is possible to move through its hither and thither, asserting

that this temporal movement safeguards against identities at both ends becoming entrenched in fundamental polarities. On the other hand, hooks compares this liminal space to a porch, a symbolic threshold, that stands between the house and the world of sidewalks and streets where “crossing it opened up the possibility of change” (hooks, 2009, p. 146). It is in this zone of ambivalence that hybridity, as a contentious process, subverts to the authority of hegemonic discourse. “The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code” (Bhabha, 2012, p. 54).

This semiotic dimension is complemented by Edward W. Soja’s (1996) perspective, drawing on Henri Lefebvre (1976). The Third space is the critical synthesis, the lived space, which transcends the duality between the First space (the material, perceived space) and the Second space (the cognitively construed ideologies, norms, and priorities acquired through formalized training, the ideological, represented space). Education in the minor key occurs in the Third space, where canonical authorized knowledge (Second space) is actively intersected and destabilized by the materiality and existential geographies of learners (First space), resulting in situated knowledge. As Maran (2023) underlines, the terms “space” and “place” are often employed interchangeably in literature, creating a degree of ambiguity in their meanings. However, in an interview, Soja “uses Thirdspace to refer to a particular way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced space” (Borch, 2002, p. 113) and underlines this concept later, affirming that all three spaces represent perspectives, which are different ways that observers look at and interpret space and reality, also because “everything in society is spatially and historically constituted [and] space is just as important as time” (Borch, 2002, p. 116). Consequently, space is characterized by a dynamic fluidity that permeates various fields of inquiry, including cultural studies, linguistics, and narratology, each of which explores the intricate relationship between individuals and their environment(s). Third places are “rather about ‘thirthing-as-Othering’: a voice simultaneously from the margins and the center, the future and the past, the infinite possibilities of space from all points and times simultaneously” (Aitken, 1998, p. 149).

5. Margins as a locus of agency

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

– hooks, 1994 (p. 12)

Third Space receives its most explicit political charge through bell hooks’ conceptualization of the margin (1998; 2009). The scholar challenges the hegemonic view of the margin as a place of deprivation, instead of defining it as a site of radical resistance (hooks, 1998). In another work, she states that: “they must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders” (hooks, 1994, p. 183). Inhabiting the margins allows for a critical view of the whole that is precluded from those operating from the center and “it is because we remember the joy that we call each other to accountability in reclaiming that space of agency where we know we are more than our pain, where we experience our interdependency, our oneness with all life” (hooks, 2009, p. 48).

The dialogue between Bhabha and hooks translates liminality into an active political strategy. The agency emerging from ambivalence is embodied in the praxis of the margin: a position from which it is possible not only to criticize, but also to construct an alternative “culture of place”: “the human agency renders unpredictability in the output of the negotiation in the third space” (Bhandari, 2022, p. 174), also because “people are not ‘free’ agents, but their actions are enhanced or constrained by the tools that are available as well as by other affordances or constraints in the environment” (Deters, 2011, p. 34). This locus of non-belonging is the spatial precondition for the exercise of ethical subjectivation. As hooks underlines, the porch stands as a significant threshold between the home and the street, representing a powerful space that can be leveraged for antiracist resistance (hooks, 2009, p. 148) and

when we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive, it need not matter whether those spaces are diverse. What matters is that, should difference enter the world of beloved community, it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong (ivi, p. 183).

6. Ethical subjectivation and de-instrumentalization in the Critical Mesosystem

“A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”

– Anzaldúa, 1987 (p. 3)

A Third Space in school may be considered as a bridge between a student's home, community and cultural discourses and practices, and school discourses and practices (Green et al., 2020). Rather than merely tracing the historical origins of these diverse background elements, the primary value of the Third Space lies in its capacity to allow new, unprecedented positions to evolve (Bhandari, 2022). Benson (2010) further explains how third spaces can be effectively established through multimodal assignments that build on and utilize students' strengths in their primary literacy skills. By incorporating various forms of communication and expression—such as written, visual, and digital media—teachers can create an inclusive learning environment that reflects the diverse experiences of their students. Benson emphasizes that “when teachers and students collaborate within a third space, then hopefully all classroom participants will become engaged in a shared goal of using knowledge to improve their world” (2010, p. 562). This collaborative dynamic not only fosters deeper engagement but also encourages students to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways that can positively impact their communities and beyond.

So, this interfering third space can be described as “being in the beyond” (Bhabha, 2012, p. 10) with ramifications to multiple directions (Bhandari, 2022, p. 173). Third Space is indeed the fertile soil ground for subjectivation. Judith Butler (2005) defines the ethical act of “giving an account of one-self” as a process that reveals the inevitable ethical opacity of the subject, or the impossibility of fully narrating one's pre-social formation. According to Butler, someone starts to give an account because someone asks to, and “that someone has power delegated from an established system of justice” (2005, p. 11). In response to this apprehension, individuals frequently present themselves using “I” to clarify their actions and to ascertain whether a particular deed attributed to them was in fact their own. Some individuals may accept their responsibility, while others may mount a defense by suggesting that the root cause of the situation lies elsewhere. “These are the parameters within which my account of myself takes place” (ibidem). This opacity is the point of rupture with Major-key pedagogy because instrumental education demands transparency for measurability, also because

the ‘me’ is the controlling and limiting side of a person, whereas the ‘I’ introduces novelty and creativeness into a situation. It is the ‘I’ that creates the possibility for social change. The semiotics of behavior refers to the meaning that is associated with words, gestures, artefacts and acts, and the transitivity of signs for self and others (Deters, 2011, p. 41).

Minor-key pedagogy, by contrast, values opacity as a site of agency and resistance. An opacity that is

at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing (Glissant, 1997, p. 111).

Hybridization, in this context, functions as a performative process. The student's hybridization, situated within the Third Space, reflects a departure from established categories. This process emphasizes the fluid nature of these categories while also creating opportunities for transformation, thereby acting as a form of resistance to the dominant hegemonic norm: "resistance is a process of transformation from the social, cultural and material oppression with a new social relationship of mutual interdependence" (Bhandari, 2022, p. 179).

The Third Space's significance can be further clarified by examining it through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979), which emphasizes the role of multiple environmental systems in shaping individual development. The shift toward ecological theory is quite necessary because critical pedagogy risks remaining a purely discursive or individual endeavor. Linking the Third Space to Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem allows us to empirically map how individual students' resistance (microsystem) can become institutionalized and interact with school and social structures (exosystem/macrosystem). This framework categorizes influences into multiple levels: the microsystem, which includes immediate environments such as family and school; the mesosystem, which encompasses the interactions between these immediate environments; the exosystem, which consists of broader social systems that indirectly affect the individual; and the macrosystem, which includes cultural values and socioeconomic conditions. By considering this comprehensive approach, we can compare different perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of how the Third Space serves as a vital bridge, integrating various layers of influence and fostering development through the interactions and relationships that occur within, across, and beyond these systems. This exploration highlights not only the complexity of human development but also the potential to enhance educational practices and community engagement within the framework of the Third Space. A genuinely transformative vision for education necessitates integrating individual agency with the imperative for structural and socioeconomic reform. Without this integration, education alone falls short and may inadvertently nurture an unrealistic belief in the individual's infinite potential (Tarozzi, 2025, p. 93).

In this context, the Third Space should not be viewed simply as an isolated Exosystem or Microsystem; rather, it serves as a Critical Mesosystem that plays a vital role in facilitating Ecological Transition: "an ecological transition occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26) and "a mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life)" (Ivi, p. 25). This transition involves the dynamic interactions between various environmental contexts—such as family, school, and community—that influence individual development and learning. Genuine transformation in education requires implementing democratic practices that foster active, meaningful participation among educators and students. This approach fosters an environment of collaboration and mutual respect, allowing students to contribute to their own learning and engage in thoughtful discourse. In contrast, many prevailing educational models prioritize hierarchical relationships that create a power imbalance between teachers and students. These dominant frameworks often adopt transactional approaches to education, in which learning is viewed as a mere transfer of information. Moreover, an excessive focus on standardized testing can narrow the curriculum, hindering the development of critical thinking and creativity. Additionally, punitive disciplinary practices may cultivate an atmosphere of fear rather than one conducive to growth and support. Ultimately, embracing democratic practices in education is essential for creating a more equitable and effective learning experience for all stakeholders involved (Giroux, 2024, p. 36). The Third Space may therefore serve as a bridge, connecting these disparate systems to foster comprehensive growth and adaptability in diverse cultural contexts. By recognizing Third Space's function within Bronfenbrenner's model, we can better appreciate its significance in promoting holistic human development. From the perspective of transformative education, experience constitutes the essential context in which alterations in the subject-object relationship occur, enabling consciousness to derive insights from it. Accordingly, the educator's responsibility is to establish the optimal conditions for such experiences to occur and to identify effective methods for their replication (Tarozzi, 2025, p. 117).

The integration shall be clear: pedagogy in the minor key aims to intentionally settle in this Mesosystem to trigger Ecological Transition (the change of role and setting) given by hegemonic narratives. The

student, positioned at the core of the educational framework, acts as a vital agent of transition. By effectively conveying critiques and insights from the Microsystem to the broader Exosystem of external influences, education may play an essential role in facilitating change. This process also involves the Mesosystem, where connections between various social environments are established and strengthened. Ultimately, this multifaceted approach shifts the focus from merely identifying individual deficits to recognizing and fostering systemic properties that enhance student autonomy and empowerment. By doing so, it encourages a more holistic understanding of student development within the educational landscape.

7. Conclusions

“The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”

– Anzaldúa, 1987 (p. 79)

Violent transparency is countered by opacity, which manifests itself in hybridization, is processed through creolization, and stabilizes in mestiza consciousness. Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness (1987) may be a possible outcome of pedagogy in the Third Space. Mestiza consciousness transcends border identity, fostering awareness in a Third Space. It recognizes contradictions and uses them to create new knowledge, making it essential for rethinking our frameworks. This involves transitioning from convergent thinking, which employs analytical reasoning and rationality to achieve a specific objective, to divergent thinking, characterized by a shift away from predetermined patterns and goals, fostering a more comprehensive perspective that prioritizes inclusion over dichotomous exclusions.

La mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another [...] la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 78).

On the other hand, “Third Space is an idea that helps explain phenomena that are in-between, outside of, or a product of concepts otherwise defined in sets of two” (Whettingsteel, 2020, p. 677). Moreover, it emphasizes the significant contributions of various marginalized cultures and languages in the construction of meaning (Bhandari, 2022, p. 173). La Mestiza, who inhabits the Borderlands, develops a plural synthesis that brings out the best of all cultures, places, spaces, and systems.

The production of meaning requires that these two places [I and You] be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious (Bhabha, 2012, p. 53).

The claim to the right to opacity (Glissant, 1997) is his most incisive thesis: the Other has the right to exist in their unique relational complexity without having to be totally understood and assimilated by Western reason. In the third space, the educational relationship is based on non-recognition and non-assimilation, with hybridization serving as a performative act that intentionally rejects imposed transparency.

La Mestiza consciousness embodies grown-upness (Biesta, 2024), as it is a subject who has learned to navigate the ambivalence of and from the borders, questioning its own desire in relation to multiple contexts. The purpose of mestiza consciousness is to dismantle the duality that confines her. It illustrates through physical experiences and artistic imagery how this duality can be transcended (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80). Her consciousness embodies a frontier epistemology, a situated knowledge that challenges the coloniality of knowledge, offering a model for successful ecological transition. La Mestiza represents a complex process of blending diverse elements, resulting in a subject who embodies both darkness and

light. This transformation challenges conventional definitions of these forces, fostering new interpretations and inviting a reconsideration of their interconnectedness in our understanding of existence. In this context, creolization—a process of cultural fusion and innovation—should not be viewed as a challenge to be resolved, but celebrated as a rich source of new knowledge and understanding.

The operational translation of the theory in the Third Space is reflected in Situated Design for Learning (Ferrari et al., 2021). To create a critical mesosystem, educational design must intentionally promote socio-materiality, overcoming the distinction between formal and non-formal learning. “Liminal spaces are read through a strength-based lens where agency is not lost but may thrive in unexpected ways” (Ballou et al., 2024, p. 1561). The goal is twofold: to make the environment porous and to “enable exchange of expertise between adult and guys and among guys in a horizontal relation, engaging them in the negotiated third space and in the co-creation process” (Ferrari et al., 2021, p. 2). The design must use devices that act as catalysts for performativity: real challenges that force the learner to confront an external and resistant reality, thereby activating the ethical subjectivation and agency of the marginalized, recognizing that “a person enacts agency by accenting these discourses with their own emotional-volitional tone” (Deters, 2011, p. 24).

In conclusion, the Third Space concept provides a pragmatic horizon for educational design, facilitating a shift from conventional, instrumental approaches to more innovative pedagogical practices. This framework is rooted in relational ethics, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing opacity as both an inherent right of individuals and a fundamental condition for meaningful engagement in society. Furthermore, Third Space(s) may promote the framing of educational interventions as ecological transitions within the mesosystem, a term borrowed from Bronfenbrenner’s theory. This perspective encourages educators to design learning experiences that are interconnected and responsive to the complex realities of students’ lives, fostering a holistic understanding of their environments. This shift frames education as a process of personal and social development, where learners gain, in the minor key, the ability to engage critically and responsibly with their surroundings.

To fully embrace the Third Space, educational institutions must undergo a transformation, evolving into dynamic laboratories for ecological transition. In this environment, creolization—a process of cultural blending and innovation—should not be viewed as a challenge to be regulated but rather celebrated as a rich source of new knowledge and understanding. This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also contributes to the emergence of resilient communities capable of navigating and thriving within a diverse and interconnected world. “To design educational interventions, however, it is essential to explore what has happened on an inner level within adult students—or, in phenomenological terms, within their consciousness” (Tarozzi, 2025, p. 117). Experiences must challenge the assumptions and prejudices that limit our perspectives, encouraging individuals to step outside their comfort zones. We need unexpected moments that evoke awe and reverence. These experiences should leave adult learners feeling both overwhelmed and enchanted, fostering a sense of discomfort and fear while simultaneously inspiring wonder (ivi, p. 119).

The following considerations can be drawn for inclusive teaching, to transform the classroom, even if only for a moment, into a porous and liminal “Third Space”, where learning can be reoriented toward an engagement with the world rather than merely the structured acquisition of knowledge:

- Value extracurricular activities: recognize that learning spaces outside the classroom (tutoring, clubs, workshops, etc.) are essential for building a student’s identity and can offer freedoms that the rigid structure of school sometimes denies;
- Focus on strengths, not weaknesses: the most effective educational approach is not to fill in gaps but to develop an existing skill, which serves as a bridge to the new ones;
- Use autobiographical storytelling: allowing students to tell their own stories helps bring out their agency and recognize their dignity beyond the linguistic level;
- Accept “opacity”: do not expect students to be immediately “transparent” or measurable according to rigid and/or predetermined standards. Respect moments of silence and the unique ways in which each student navigates school norms;

- Promote horizontal relationships: create an environment where students can exchange skills with one another, transforming the classroom into an open learning community;
- Flexibility in timing: a minor-key approach to education requires slowing down and emphasizing charting the course rather than the speed at which the program is completed.

Recognizing the concept of the Third Space necessitates confronting the constraints inherent in the real-world school system. These constraints include the rigidity of bureaucratic timelines established by the ministry, the challenges posed by standardized testing that often undermines the acceptance of ambiguity, and the scarcity of flexible physical spaces in middle schools, which are frequently confined to lecture-style classrooms. Consequently, this paper aligns with the theoretical framework of my PhD research project concerning the Third Space within middle school education. For the empirical component of my research, we have designed a plan to observe interactions in a middle school setting. Additionally, we intend to conduct a series of workshops to engage teachers, students, and other educational stakeholders in discussions on these critical themes. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and workshop sessions will be the main instruments for this research. The aims are to identify the Third Space and its characteristics, asking participants to reflect on their interactions, to identify enabling factors and barriers to creating and maintaining a Third Space within the school, to reflect on how the Third Space may influence the development of students' subjectivation, and to identify the pedagogical practices that can emerge or can be facilitated in the Third Space, and how do they contribute to promoting inclusion and educational equity. The study will be longitudinal, and it is expected to come back to the school, writing together a research report with teachers and other stakeholders, and creating a podcast with the students reflecting on this experience.

References

- Aitken, S. (1998). [Review of *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, by E. W. Soja]. *Geographical Review*, 88(1), 148–151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/215881>
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Baloo, K., Ramos, F., Crank, R., Crane, D., Hopkins, S., McGovern, M., ... Worsley, S. (2024). Exploring the identities of pathways educators through the lens of Third Space Theory. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32(5), 1549–1571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2230986>
- Batini, F. (2013). *Insegnare per competenze*. I Quaderni della Ricerca (02). Torino: Loescher.
- Benson, S. (2010). “I don’t know if that’d be English or not”: third space theory and literacy instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(7), 555–563. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.53.7.3>
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The Location of Culture*. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>

- Bhandari, N. B. (2022). Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory and cultural identity today: A critical review. *Prithvi Academic Journal*, 5(1), 171–181. <https://doi.org/10.3126/paj.v5i1.45049>
- Biesta, G. (2024). Desinstrumentalizando la educación. *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*, 36(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.31487>
- Borch, C. (2002). Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, Postmetropolis, and Social Theory. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 3(1), 113–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2002.9672816>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Chadderton, C. (2018). *Judith Butler, Race and Education*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73365-4>
- Deters, P. (2011). *Identity, Agency, and the Acquisition of Professional Language and Culture*. London: Continuum.
- Ferrari, S., Triacca, S., Braga, G. (2021). Design for learning in the third space: opportunities and challenges. *Research on Education and Media*, 13(2), 52–64. <https://doi.org/10.2478/rem-2021-0006>
- Giroux, H. (2024). Paulo Freire's legacy and critical pedagogy in dark times. *Critical Studies*, 13, 32–45. <https://doi.org/10.25167/sk.5866>
- Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation* (B. Wing, Trans.). University of Michigan Press.
- Green, K. L., Morales M. D., George M. C., Bettencourt G. M. (2020). "(Responding to) Youth epistemologies to create a third space: a reclamation of learning in an English language arts classroom". *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 19(3), 303–316. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-08-2019-0108>
- Hakuzwimana E. (2024). [Among the school whites: Voices for a welcoming education] *Tra i bianchi di scuola: Voci per un'educazione accogliente*. Torino: Einaudi Editore.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1998). [Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics] *Elogio del margine. Razza, sesso e mercato culturale*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. New York: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2018). *Anthropology and/as Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1976). [The production of space] *La produzione dello spazio*. Milano: Moizzi Editore.
- Maran, A., Raj, M. J. (2023). Integrating Oldenburg's concept of place and Soja's concept of space: a spatial enquiry of denial, repression, and closure in Ishiguro's "The Remains of the Day". *Humanit Soc Sci Commun*, 10, 186. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01676-0>
- Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Spreen, C. A. (2023). Creating third spaces of learning for Post-Capitalism: Lessons from educators, artists and activists. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 25(2). <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v25i2.10963>

- Tarozzi, M. (2025). *Coltivare la speranza. Percorsi di educazione alla cittadinanza globale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Tatham, C. (2025). A systematic literature review of Third Space theory in research with children (aged 4-12) in multicultural educational settings. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 867–886. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2283798>
- Whettingsteel E. (2020). The brown paper roll: A third space approach to participatory design research. In L. Harper (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Annual Design Research Conference 2019: Real/Material/Ethereal*, (pp. 675–691). Melbourne: Monash University.
- Woolf, S. B. (2019). Exploring pedagogies to elevate inquiry: teaching action research in the third space. *Educational Action Research*, 28(4), 579–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1629975>

Enrico Ieroncic – Università degli Studi di Verona (Italy)

✉ enrico.ieroncic@univr.it

Enrico Ieroncic is a linguistic, cultural, and learning facilitator. He helps students in various projects find and tailor their own study methods, offering accessible, inclusive, and intercultural approaches. He is currently a Ph.D. student in Pedagogy at the University of Verona.