

## Exploring the Spaces of Art Education

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*The politics of space has been brought to the fore by theorists such as Soja (1996), Bhabha (1991), Grosz (1995), and Foucault (1977). Much of this theory suggests that investigating spatial issues, such as the arrangements of buildings and the distribution of people and objects, can reveal insights into the power hierarchies of people and places. In my research, I was interested to explore how space influenced education, and more specifically, the art classroom. I therefore, adopted a poststructuralist framework of space to analyse my observations of art classrooms and interviews with art teachers in secondary schools in Queensland, Australia. The purpose of this research was twofold: firstly, to explore how teachers, students and educators place and position art in educational spaces; and secondly, to investigate how students and teachers negotiate the spaces within the art classroom. From this discussion, I argue that space influences the creativity and self-expression of art students and the pedagogical methods employed by art teachers. However, I also argue that spatial issues influence the hierarchal positioning of the arts in schools and marginalise its status within educational discourses.*

### Introduction

As part of my research into visual arts education, I collected the art created by students and observed art classrooms in Queensland secondary schools<sup>1</sup>. I also interviewed art teachers about their practices, attitudes and philosophies. One interesting theme which emerged from the teachers' responses was their references to space and spatial issues. For instance, the teachers spoke about the placement of the art classroom in educational spaces, the infringement of the art classroom space by others, the movement within art spaces, the surveillance of space, and the differences in the art classroom to other schooling spaces. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to tease out this issue of space and its relationship with art education, and to contextualise the teachers' comments by the theory around space.

I begin by discussing the theoretical notion of space within a poststructuralist premise. I then introduce my research participants and outline my research method choices. I also introduce the poststructuralist tool of discourse analysis which I used to critique the teachers' interviews around the issues of power, control and difference and their connection to space. Through my analysis of these issues, focused on the key questions of: how did the teachers refer to their art classroom? How did the positioning of the art classroom correspond to the power hierarchies in the schools? How did the teachers conceptualise the space within the art classroom? How did teachers shape this space? How did other teachers and school bodies perceive the space within the art classroom?

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<sup>1</sup> In Queensland schools, 'secondary' school refers to Years Eight to Twelve (approximately aged between thirteen to seventeen).

In this paper, I summarise two issues which emerged from this line of questioning. Firstly, I focus on how the geographical location of the art classroom is related to the hierarchal positioning of the arts within educational discourses. Secondly, I explore how teachers and students negotiate the space of the art classroom, which according to the teachers has different spatial features to other school spaces. The aim of this discussion is to highlight how art classrooms can disrupt traditional spatial mechanisms of control and surveillance that structure schools, and instead, generate spaces characterised by activity, noise and movement. However, I will also draw attention to how spatial issues influence the marginalisation of art education within educational discourses — as I believe space is a contributing factor in the circulation of negative and misguided perceptions of art.

The purpose of this discussion is to open up the dialogue surrounding arts place in education by considering the effect of space, and by doing so, prompt further inquiry into how this can influence: the promotion of arts in education; the development of pedagogical practices; and the creation of strategies that work towards demystifying art spaces in schools.

### **Poststructuralism and the Notion of Space**

In line with the framework's theoretical premise of multiple truths, there is no one 'true' or fixed definition of poststructuralism (Weedon, 1999). In my research, I have used Builema and Smelik's (1993) notion of poststructuralism, which "rejects the structuralist view that unchanging, fundamental and universal structures lie at the basis of the world of phenomena, texts, social systems" and instead "focuses on problematising structures by studying their discursive construction, their function and their power" (p. 193).

There are many different strands of poststructuralism that place different emphases on gender, bodies, difference, discourse, language and power. However, in this paper I turned to poststructuralist theorists who explored the relationship between these specificities and the notion of space. Indeed, the political nature of space is highlighted by Foucault (1977). Through his research into geographical and institutional spaces (such as prisons and psychiatric institutions), he demonstrated how space is negotiated, lived, embodied, enforced and resisted (Foucault, 1986). As such, Foucault focused on 'spaces of dispersion' which refers to the intermeshing of events, people and phenomena in space.

This connection between space and education has been explored by a number of researchers. For instance, Middleton (1998) explored how schools use the surveillance of space to discipline bodies and sexualities and Thorne (1993) investigated the ways boys and girls use different spaces in schools. There have also been studies that: explored the relationships between space and the performance of students and teachers (Nespor, 1997); discussed the impact of school design and planning (Jamison, Fisher, Gilding, Taylor, & Trevitt, 2000); and studied the segregation of spaces in secondary schools (Siskin, 1994). Indeed, the importance of studying education in terms of space was highlighted by Siskin (1994) who concluded that the arrangements of space influenced teachers activities, the formation of professional relationships, and the "sharing of information and knowledge" (p. 4).

For my research, the consideration of the spatiality of schools enables me to extend understandings around the context of art education, as it allows my research to: explore what space reveals about art education; provides a framework to discuss the hierarchical positioning of art education; and presents an alternative analysis that may expose additional readings of arts place in education. Furthermore, as poststructuralism disrupts the notion that schools are fixed

and static, it allows my research to take up a productive way of seeing and understanding space: one that focuses on the shifting, fragmented, multi-faceted and contradictory nature of space. As such, through my research I am able to question configurations of power hierarchies and relationships, and in doing so, open to up these spaces to change and transformation.

## **My Research Spaces**

What we have learned from poststructuralism is that all texts are read from particular social positions and locations, and, therefore, my research site and participants also need to be situated. Therefore, I feel it is important to outline my research participants, method choices and the data analysis framework I adopted.

### *The Teachers*

When choosing teachers to be involved in my research, it was based on my criteria of 'productive' teachers. These criteria included: teachers who to different extents and in different contexts work to challenge the dominant discourses within art education; teachers with a commitment to fostering multiplicity and difference in the art classroom; and teachers who have encouraged students to explore notions of subjectivity, society and culture. As such, I chose three female<sup>2</sup> teachers I had either worked with or been associated with, and meet these criteria in some way. One of the teachers I worked with was Amy, who had been teaching for nine years and taught at a state school in the outer suburbs of a large metropolitan city. This school (School A) had a large student population of almost 1400, with over 100 teachers. The school is situated on a major train line and many of the students travel to this school from outlying areas or other suburbs. This school predominantly services low socio-economic students.

The second teacher I worked with was Beth, who was a relatively new teacher; she had been teaching for two years in a rural Catholic affiliated school that opened in 1996. The school she works within (School B) caters for approximately 350 students, who reside in the township or surrounding farming areas. This rural town predominantly functions as a mining and agricultural town.

The final teacher I worked with was Charlotte, who taught secondary art in a Preschool to Year 12 Catholic School in a suburb of a major metropolitan city (School C). This school population has a high percentage of students from a Pacific Islander background.

### *The Interviews*

I felt it was important to learn about what teachers had to say about their lived experiences, their opinions of art and to learn about their views on education. I therefore adopted the interview method, as a way of exploring the voices of teachers, and to position their subjectivities in relation to educational discourses and spaces.

As a researcher, I am aware that the teachers were the tellers of their experiences, and I rewrote their stories as translations (Lather, 2000, cited in Cohen-Evron, 2002). Thus, my analysis of these interviews was constructed on what the art teachers have been able to tell me and what I have been able to hear (Cohen-Evron, 2002). Indeed, for my interviews to be

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<sup>2</sup> A major delimitation of the data is the lack of representation by male teachers. I did contact a male teacher to be involved in the study; however, he declined due to work commitments.

productive — in that they provide spaces to hear others’ stories, to explore lived experiences and subjectivities — I felt it was necessary to adopt a feminist poststructuralist approach to the design and structure of my interviews. To fashion such an interview, it was necessary to consider the influence of power and subjectivities on interviews and the importance of developing reciprocity. Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, which is a fairly open framework that allows for focused, conversational, two-way communication (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 1998). I utilised this model as it allows spaces for my own and my participants’ experiences, voices and concerns.

### *Discourse Analysis*

To analyse the teachers’ interviews, I adopted the poststructuralist tool of discourses analysis. Within poststructuralism the term discourse encapsulates more than just linguistic meaning: it is a social practice through which people are inducted into ways of valuing, stances and points of view which reflect and produce the interests of a group (Morgan, 2002). From this perspective, in my research the teachers, students and schools were situated within an array of intersections, networks, relations of power and discourses. In undertaking my discourse analysis, I focused on my specific research interests of investigating: how space is negotiated by students, teachers and administrators; how space influences which discourses were established, instituted, mobilised and confirmed in the art classrooms; how discourses position art classrooms in schools spaces; how space is conceptualised within the art classroom; and how teachers and students circulate and construct discourses in this space.

## **Art Education in Schooling Spaces**

In adopting the poststructuralist strategy of discourses analysis, I was interested to explore how space was interconnected with language, bodies and power structures. I therefore examined how the teachers in my research discussed their art classroom and referred to arts place in educational spaces. One interesting theme which emerged from the interview data was that all the teachers in my research referred to their art classroom as being physically apart or separate from the other school spaces. For instance, when asked how administrators see the art classroom, Beth’s response was as “the building down the back” (Beth, School B). Indeed, all the teachers interviewed expressed feeling removed from the main buildings and administration — where most of the business of the school takes place, such as management, the hub of authority and the point of contact between parents and school. For the teachers, this sense of being disconnected and separate was reinforced by the fact that administrators and other teachers failed to bridge the distance. For instance, when the teachers were asked about visits from administrators, Beth responded that “Never. I’ve never been visited by anyone in admin” (Beth, School B).

Similarly, Charlotte commented that administrators rarely visited her art classroom:

. . . only when they want to drag a kid out because he or she’s in trouble. When the new Deputy Principal first started [laughs] there were Year Elevens in the dark room, and they were in the middle of developing stuff and he just walked straight in. Well, he copped a mouthful from these kids . . . And he went away and I walked in about ten minutes later and these kids came out and were fuming and I said “What’s wrong?” and they said “[Deputy’s name] just came into the dark room and he didn’t knock he just walked in and ruined all our paper” you

know, he was probably looking for someone, but still. So I think that's the only time I've ever seen him up there. (Charlotte, School C)

As seen through Charlotte's comments, the art classroom was where administrators went to find 'trouble', rather than to support teachers and students. I believe this distance may also be a contributing factor to the misunderstandings about the art classroom that manifests itself in a lack of support for and knowledge about art education. For instance, Amy outlined the lack of support for art education:

A different admin said, "Oh you've got paint up there . . . you'll be right", and they just think it's just got to do with the material, they don't understand the conceptualisation, they don't value the expressive qualities of it. I mean that's all it is, and that's all any kind of prejudice is built on, not knowing. . . (Amy, School A)

As seen in this comment, the administrators referred to, and saw, the art classroom as being "up there" and, owing to the distance, they misconceptualised art by reducing it to the materials used rather than the educational experiences. As well as being separate and removed from administrators, the teachers also outlined that they often felt segregated from other subjects and school spaces. This is in part due to the structure of secondary schools, which is constructed into discrete areas and time and, in doing so, isolates subject areas and teachers (Bitzman, 1991, cited in Cohen-Evron, 2002, p. 84). For the art teachers in my study, the school's structuring of space and time has led to feelings of frustration and isolation. As highlighted by Amy, a teacher within one of the largest schools in Queensland:

. . . this is such a spread out school that we don't ever get together for morning teas and a lot of teachers you don't know and they don't know what you do and so they can be really disrespectful . . . (Amy, School A)

Similarly, Beth noted that:

Because we are so removed from the school population on the school's premises, a lot of people don't see what's being produced down there, which is — I guess is another reason, why it is called as a bludge subject, because no one sees what we produce. (Beth, School B)

The remarks by the teachers highlight the space issues between the art classroom, administrators and other schooling bodies; a situation which breeds a lack of knowledge about the practicalities of art and how it operates. As I will return to in later sections of this paper, this sense of removal from other school spaces has led to the circulation of myths about art education. However, it is partly from positions of structural weakness that these art teachers have found ways to be effective and transformative. For instance, as the art classroom is on the margins of the schools it may provide art teachers and students with more freedom to enjoy their autonomy. Beth exemplifies this point:

I sometimes feel like we're forgotten because the building is so removed from the rest of the school. In a way that's good because we can make as much noise and be as dirty as we want to, but, at the same time, it's not as important as other subjects, unfortunately [sad laugh]. (Beth, School B)

For Beth, being removed from the classroom allows the students to make more noise and be more dirty, which may influence the innovativeness and creative capacity of art education.

### **The Spaces within the Art Classroom**

Although the geographical location of the art classroom affects arts status in school, another spatial factor which also influences arts' hierarchical position is the negotiation of the spaces within the art classroom. In the interview Amy described her art classroom:

[My classroom is]. . . a very open space, um, I think because the kids have their artwork there rather than a textbook, they have things in that room that they have created, they have a lot of say over that space, they have to clean up that space, so I think that makes them feel a lot more friendly. . . I think also, I don't know, I'm not too sure, but in an art room because we often have to go and get stuff, art teachers often move between classes. So you'll have, if you're a student, it's quite often that all three art teachers in the building have talked to you about your work. So there's not that division between teachers' rooms or spaces, and especially the way we work at the moment, because we all get on well, the kids all know we really like each other; it's a pretty happy space, a messy space, but it's a happy space. (Amy, School A)

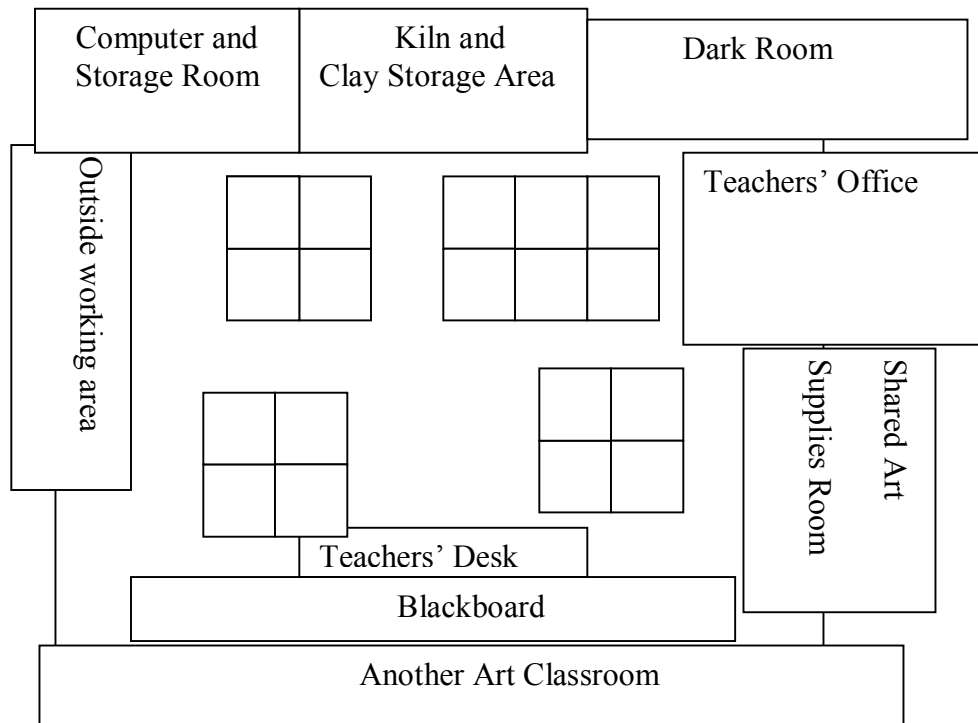
What I found interesting when analysing these comments was the references to space and how they move within this space. For instance, in Amy's description there are a number of comments about the spaces within the art classroom — as a “happy space”, “messy space”, “open space”, a space that is marked by students' work and a space which students “have to clean up” (Amy, School A). What is also interesting about this comment is the blurring of some traditional structures that monitor, control and regulate students' and teachers' bodies in schooling spaces.

Indeed, a number of the comments from the art teachers in my research highlighted how the art classroom disrupts these dominant controls over space which commonly characterises classrooms — which marks art as different from other classroom spaces. For instance, the teacher is not positioned as the all-seeing gaze in the front of the classroom as she, like the other art teachers, “moves between classes” and other student spaces (Amy, School A). This movement has also blurred the division often allocated to teachers' space and students' space — which the teachers and students smudge. So instead of the art classroom being a space of control and constraint, the art classroom (at least by comparison) is a space of expression and the constant movement of bodies in space.

Movement within the art classroom was highlighted by all the teachers in my research. Beth noted that “my students aren't constantly sitting in their chairs, you know, getting reprimanded for every time they get up without asking or whatever; there is constant movement around the classroom” (Beth, School B). Similarly, Amy observed:

Because in senior art, students don't all sit down and do a painting any more. I'll have students thumping glass, students using clay, students using wire and tin snips, students painting, drawing on the computer, in the photography room, they are everywhere! (Amy, School A)

The movement described by this teacher can be seen in her classroom set up, which was similar to other art classrooms in my study.



**Figure 1: Art Classroom Layout in School A**

As this diagram shows, there are a number of work areas among which students may move between. For instance, they may collect their work from one space, get their art supplies from another and depending on their choice of artistic media (computers, clay, photography) they may move to another area. Further, students may choose to work outside or in other school spaces such as the library. The movement within the art classroom is also added to by students from other classrooms as they enter to retrieve materials from a shared supplies room. All this traffic by teachers and students contributes to the constant movement the art teachers describe.

Another difference within the art classroom is the desks. The structure and organisation of bodies in classroom spaces have traditionally used desks as a mechanism for controlling students' behaviour and managing activity (Nespor, 1997). However, as the art teachers observed, in the art classroom it is necessary for students to move out of these desks as part of creating art. Further, there are a number of differences in the types of desks within the art classroom. For instance, desks are moveable and physically higher or taller than ordinary desks (similar to other practical subjects such as the science laboratory and manual arts room, however, these tend to be fixed desks). Consequently, teachers standing beside a sitting student are at eye-level with the student, which may provide more individual opportunities for student to interact with teachers. According to Amy, this desk arrangement influences her teaching style:

Probably, the first thing I think of is just a physical thing. I find it really funny being in a room with low tables. Because I feel like — and when I stand up I am towering over the kids and they are sitting in rows and they are looking at you and all of a sudden you just start to tell them what to do. (Amy, School A)

As highlighted by Amy, the height of the desks brought students up to the teacher's level, blurring the teacher/student binary and reducing the need for authoritarian teaching styles. Thus, desks within the art classroom are organised to make one-to-one interaction easier: fostering interaction among students and between students and the teachers (Davidson, 1996).

These differences in classroom spaces can also foster interaction between administration and students. According to the teachers, the art room can be a productive place in which to get to know and interact with students, as noted by Charlotte:

The campus Minister especially, he's pretty good, he often pops in to see what the kids are up to. And I think that's more because he wants to get to know the kids, but by doing that, it shows he values art, he values what we are doing. (Charlotte, School C)

Through this overview of the 'spaces' of art education, I wanted to highlight how the differences within the art classroom may be a contributing factor in creativity and self-expression — both in terms of producing work and of enabling students to relax and be themselves and potentially create transformative art (Sikes, 1987). However, I believe that these differences may also be a factor in the marginalisation of art education, the issue that I now discuss.

### **Marginalising Art Education**

The purpose of this paper was to utilise teachers' voices to identify, acknowledge and appreciate the differences that art education spaces embody. In establishing some of the influences of space within arts education, I can now specifically explore the negativity that these differences can cause by 'othering' and marginalising art within the broader educational system. This point is reflected in Charlotte's response when she was asked about how other teachers perceive art education:

"Well, it's all a bit mysterious and dirty". That's a direct quote, another direct quote, "You just play with materials and chuck it all together up there". What was another quote? "Oh, you guys don't do much all day, all you do is muck around with clay". Righto [laughs]. (Charlotte, School C)

As seen in this comment, other teachers have established a negative attitude towards art by focusing on the materials, and the manipulation of these materials, rather than the educational experiences of art (such as the expression of creativity and developing and resolving ideas). As such, the differences which mark the art classroom — the manipulation of materials, noise, play and experimentation — positions art as non-academic and devalues art within the educational structures. This notion was confirmed in Amy's comment:

We actually — we had a supervising teacher in here a while ago, and he said, "Don't you just throw some paint on it and the teacher will think it is fantastic because it has colour?" and "Just throw paint, that's all you do anyway". (Amy, School A)

Indeed, as these comments highlight, art spaces have been caught within the academic/non-academic binary which is shaped by related dichotomies such as relevant/irrelevant, objective/subjective, factual/experimental and core/non-core curriculum



areas. Thus, art is positioned as the negative counterpart to ‘academic’ subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English. According to the teachers, the marginalisation of art education means it receives fewer resources and less support and positions art as an irrelevant or ‘frill’ subject within education. This notion emerged within a number of the teachers’ comments. For instance, Charlotte reflected upon the differences in the resources of time and support given to ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ subjects:

[School administrators] want us to enter competitions to get the school’s name out there, to get the artwork out there into the community and to let people know what’s happening in the art department. But there’s no time and no support given; you’re expected to do it all in your own time. . . And you know, it’s really tough when English, Mathematics, Science have their competitions and you lose two periods because that’s when the English competition or the Mathematics competition is on. You just think, “Couldn’t you give me two periods to get my Year Eight art class to enter this competition?”. (Charlotte, School C)

Supporting this marginalisation is the notion that art is a ‘bludge’, ‘easy’ or ‘soft’ subject held by other teachers, students and administrators. This was seen in Beth’s response when asked about how non-art students perceive art:

It’s sort of strange. I think non-art students see it as a bludge subject because we have fun when we’re down there. We play music, we laugh, we make noise, we hang off drills and jigsaws and gurneys and whatever else. While they are writing notes off a board or whatever, OK. And it’s sad that some people think that doing or building something is not as good as learning hard-core facts about things. (Beth, School B)

In this comment, the academic/non-academic binary played out in that the ‘hard-core fact’ is positioned against ‘making’ and creating and, because of the prevalence of this notion, students often take art as they see it as an ‘easy’ subject, as illustrated by Beth:

I have a lot of students transfer in and out of art, not a lot, but a significant amount, because I think that they think that they are going to waste however much time of their week, do a bit of painting or play with some dirt or whatever and that’s it. (Beth, School B)

This notion of art as non-academic and irrelevant is often reinforced by school administrators and significant others (such as guidance counsellors and parents). As such, they steer students away from art towards subjects seen as more purposeful or important or subject areas that have perceived vocational outcomes. Charlotte recalled one such instance: “I’m still getting reports from kids that they weren’t allowed to do art in senior because it’s not going to get them anywhere” (Charlotte, School C).

This misleading perception that art is ‘easy’ or a bludge subject is also reinforced by school counsellors and administrators who recommend art as a suitable space for ‘unruly’ and ‘naughty’ students. However, as noted by Chapman (1982) “[t]roubled students may well be aided by the individual attention offered” (p. 176) in the art classroom, and, therefore, achieve well in art. Indeed, the art teachers in my research often enjoyed the challenge of working with students who were perceived by others as ‘problems’; as exemplified by Charlotte: “just seeing kids that don’t

do anything in any other classroom in the school produce fantastic work in your room just makes you feel so good [laughs]” (Charlotte, School C).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have utilised teachers’ voices to focus on two key issues which explored how space positions art classrooms, teachers and learning within the education framework. Firstly, I explored the geographical location of the arts in education, and secondly, how teachers and students negotiate art education spaces. The aim of this discussion was to highlight how these spatial issues influence art education in both negative and positive ways. For instance, I argued that the distance of the art classroom in relation to the administration of the school provided a structural weakness that offered art teachers and students more freedom to be expressive and creative. Furthermore, the differences within the art classroom spaces, allowed a blurring of the traditional structures of schools — which monitors, controls and regulates students’ and teachers’ bodies. These differences also disrupted the teacher/students binary as teachers were not always positioned as the all-seeing-gaze over students. I also argued that because of the differences in space, the art classroom can provide a supportive site to foster interaction between administration and students.

However, I also stressed that the geographical positioning of arts in schools and the differences that art spaces embody, is a contributing factor in the myths and misconceptions that circulate about the art classroom. For instance, this has bred a lack of knowledge about the practicalities of art and has manifested itself as a lack of support for and knowledge of art education. Furthermore, art education is perceived as non-academic and is conceptualised around the materials used rather than the education experiences that art can offer.

In this paper, I have looked towards a poststructuralist theory of space to enable me to look differently at the discursive and non-discursive spaces of art education and to open up what seems natural or normal in these sites to alternative possibilities (Adams St Pierre, 2000). Through this process, I would like to encourage further inquiry into how spatial issues could also be a tool that is used to promote arts in education and to create strategies that work towards demystifying art spaces in schools, such as cross-discipline ownership of space. In doing so, this paper advocates for art’s importance in education, and it is my hope, that it contributes to the ways in which teachers and schools recognise and accommodate the role of the arts in schooling spaces.

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