

Dan and the Third Space Theory

One October morning a boy called Dan found himself in the small attic classroom of the town-centre learning shop. His dad had brought him along, and when the tutor suggested it wasn't worth him staying, his dad had sighed with relief and left.

Dan looked nervously around the room, his woolly hat pulled firmly down over his ears. He tipped his chair back on to two legs – it was a habit now - but there was nowhere to fall to. The room was too small. Perhaps this was why the teacher didn't bother to challenge it. They were all older than him. Well, he expected that; he was a school kid in spite of his height, and this was an adult class.

His desk was a grey square, barely big enough for his red folder and record book. The walls were filled with notice boards (a wedding photo featuring two people in the room, complete with red eyes, and photos of students receiving awards smiling benignly down on him), posters, a whiteboard and a rack with skinny looking books on. Behind him the barred window – security for the computer suite – reminded him of a prison, and the morning sun beat hot on his back.

The lesson had been a blur of words and instructions, and he wasn't sure whether to believe the tutor – the only person he had met before this morning – when she reassured him that it would get easier. He was taken aback when one of the adults turned to him and asked his opinion on children and mental health. She seemed really interested in what he had to say, even though he had felt his impromptu little speech was garbled, and his face red.

To go back the following week, or not? He had been excluded from school – he was too loud and got in with the wrong crowd. The college up the hill hadn't offered him anything suitable, so his choices were diminishing fast. His teacher had pleaded with the college to give him a try, on the grounds that he needed an alternative place to learn. So this was a trial of sorts – last chance saloon; would he make it?

Weeks went by. The English lessons still presented him with problems: he tried really hard to tell verbs and nouns apart but his answers were mostly guesses. And worksheets! He couldn't get used to the idea that the answers were on the back so cheating wasn't worthwhile. Besides, the other students didn't seem to bother to cheat; they actually wanted to get it right for themselves. And they continued to be interested in his point of view.

But the Maths, now there he had the edge. He had a cool method for remembering his nine times table, which the tutor asked him to demonstrate. He could do subtraction too, and showed everyone else how to do it, using the whiteboard. When she used a metre rule to teach tables, he picked it up quickly (and forgot it again, but hey).

He never arrived late, and missed only one lesson, and that was because he was ill. But he did make sure he reminded the teacher of the imminent end of the lesson at two minutes to twelve, and he struggled to do the homework. So he'd rather finish it hurriedly in the classroom, before leaving.

For Dan, college became a 'third space'*. His home was not conducive to book learning, with the TV on constantly and the cramped space; his mother made demands on him, and his dad didn't communicate much. They both nagged him, which didn't help him to persevere when it got hard. He had little need for reading or writing, and preferred to avoid the hassle with his parents.

School had become impossible: his tall physique and unruly manner had alienated the teachers, who had given up trying to get him to conform. His best efforts were put into impressing classmates with loudness and jokes, and then overreaction when he considered the teachers' reprimands to be unfair.

So college was a haven of success and acceptance, where he 'toed the line' amicably and joined in the adult banter with relish. He gained individual help with skills which challenged him, gained confidence and learned to explain what he knew to others. He even took off his hat and had his hair dyed.....

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*Third Space Theory is a term coined by Anita Wilson in relation to literacy practices of prison inmates. See Wilson, A (2000) 'Third Space Theory' in Barton, D Hamilton, M & Ivanic, R (2000) *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context* London:Routledge

Wilson,A (2003) 'Researching in the Third Space' in Goodman,S et al *Language and Literacy in Education* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Ltd