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Tobbell, Jane and O'Donnell, Victoria

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The formation of interpersonal and learning relationships in the transition from primary to secondary school: students, teachers and school context

Jane Tobbell, University of Huddersfield, UK

Victoria L O'Donnell, University of West of Scotland, UK

The importance of relationships in education has been well established in the literature. However, the nature of relationship is seldom defined and as a result interpersonal and learning relationships are conflated and so implicitly treated as synonymous. In this paper we argue that learning relationships are different from interpersonal relationships, but crucially that interpersonal relationships are a pre-requisite to learning relationships. We define learning relationships as those which allow for the emergence of, and passage through, the zone of proximal development. At present there is a paucity of research which examines relationship formation of any type in education and in this paper we seek to address this gap. At the point of transition from one school to another there is a normative imperative to form new relationships. This paper focuses on the experiences of students in their transition to secondary school and explores the formation of relationships with their new teachers. An ethnographic method was employed which followed children during their final year of primary school and into their first year of secondary school. Through student and staff voices and observational data, the opening and closing of opportunities for the formation of interpersonal relationships, and by extension, learning relationships, are explored. The paper presents data from three schools in the UK and identifies the themes of courtesy, rules and resistance, and school systems and pedagogical practice as key determinants in relationship formation. We acknowledge that these findings represent the focal schools, but argue that the data demonstrate that attention must be paid to the construction of enabling transition contexts to facilitate the formation of interpersonal relationships which may lead to learning relationships in the new school. We further call for more focussed research which explores the nature of learning relationships.

Keywords: transition from primary to secondary school, interpersonal relationships, learning relationships, school context

It has been established in both empirical research and theory that enabling relationships are fundamental to the process of learning. The establishment of the importance of relationships emerged most strongly in Vygotsky's work. The underpinning ontology of Vygotskian psychology is that development is distributed across the social experiences of individuals, and that all behaviour, including cognition, reflects societal imperatives accessed through relationships with more able others. A range of empirical work has supported this, demonstrating that relationships cannot be thought of as a variable to be manipulated, but rather that they are inextricably embedded in all

learning and development. Therefore, the formation of interpersonal relationships necessarily precedes the emergence of successful learning relationships, which can be thought of as inextricably embedded in mutuality of social action. Acceptance of this premise demands that attention be paid to the opportunities for relationship formation and the quality of those relationships as a prerequisite for learning relationships, when researching educational experience. Giles (2011) has argued that despite the importance of relationship to educational experience they are largely invisible and taken for granted; he states that 'it is time to recognise and address the impact of relationship' (p89) in education. In this paper we focus on the transition from primary to secondary school and present data that demonstrate the challenges for both teachers and new students in the formation of interpersonal relationships, and so by extension, learning relationships. We do not claim that the contexts we present represent all schools but rather, through analysis of our data, we illustrate that quotidian and implicit practices in educational institutions can serve to militate against relationship formation and that perhaps as much attention needs to be paid to opportunities for relationship formation as is paid to curriculum content. Whilst a body of work on educational transitions has identified the importance of relationship (see Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit 2010; Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen, 2010; Martínez, Tolga Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak and Nellis, 2011) in the negotiation of the new environment, there is little explicit emphasis on the perceptions of relationship from those in transition and the practices and actions which underpin interpersonal relationship formation and how these construct transition in the learning environment. Moreover, there is very little work which provides contemporaneous data reflecting the actions, behaviours and perceptions of students in transition and the staff group who support them. We would argue that in order to understand relationships in transition to new learning environments, the meanings which emerge from the actual behaviours in context are necessary and this work seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Understanding relationships and learning

Morry, Reich and Kito (2010) suggest that interpersonal relationship quality can be understood as the degree of positive or negative perception an individual holds towards a given relationship. This seems a somewhat simple approach given the complexity of interpersonal relations. However, it acknowledges the importance of subjective experience in the negotiation of relationship if not the source and nature of perceptions. Given the complexity of relationship and the heterogeneity of students and teachers, it would be neither possible nor desirable to generate a list of what constitutes 'a good relationship', although, efforts have been made to do this. Alderman and Green

(2011) commend the 'social powers' model, which categorises different teacher behaviour and recommends techniques for leveraging coercive, manipulative, expert and likeability behaviours to enhance relationships in the classroom. However, Farini (2009) in his study of communication in Italian primary schools, challenges the notion of normative teacher performance and the claims made that certain inputs will result in certain outputs. Instead he argues that children and teachers should be considered as people in meaningful and dynamic relationships and should be prepared for the complexity therein. Neither of these researchers make an explicit distinction between interpersonal relationships in general and learning relationships in particular, but this seems important, because not all interpersonal relationships lead to learning relationships, but all learning relationships emerge from successful interpersonal relationships. The purpose and context of the relationship are key to the mechanisms of formation and maintenance. Socio-cultural theory foregrounds relationship in learning and demonstrates the function of social interaction in the learning process, allowing for a more distinct understanding of what constitutes a learning relationship. Relationship is prominent in Vygotskian theory, particularly in the theoretical notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). An essential aspect of the ZPD is that it *emerges* between teacher and learner as a function of interpersonal relationship. It has sometimes been referred to almost as a tool to help learning, but this would be to misunderstand the concept. As a function of the interactions of the learner and teacher, a ZPD emerges when, in collaboration, the teacher assists the learner to understand/perform in ways which the learner would be unable to do alone. The teacher scaffolds the learner in their performance and as a result the learner acquires the ability to perform the actions alone and eventually internalises those actions. Again, efforts have been made to summarise the appropriate actions of the adult in assisting in the passage through the ZPD. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and Rogoff (1990) use the terms 'scaffolding' and 'guided participation' respectively to explain a process which they suggest involves the adult recruiting and maintaining the interest of the learner, demonstrating efficient ways to perform the task and helping to manage emotions in the learner. However, Hoogsteder, Maier and Elbers (1998) have criticised this approach and pointed out that learning involves the learner as much as it does the teacher. They point out that much of the research regarding the ZPD is unidirectional, looking at the teacher's performance and state that in any collaborative task adults and children negotiate a way of approaching the task which varies across time and task. The child is as much a contributor to the learning process as is the adult; they negotiate with each other, and learning is much more than instruction. This is important because it provides some guidance in understanding the nature of an effective learning relationship. It is one where the teacher and learner work together to enable

learning. This understanding makes a learning relationship distinct from other interpersonal relationships – the purpose of learning relationships is to enable passage through the ZPD.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (1999) also establishes the importance of relationships. The propositions that underpin the theory state that the 'primary engines' of development are the proximal processes (that would include face to face relationships between teachers and pupils) in the environment and that for these to be effective in learning, the processes need to be progressively more complex and regular. Such an understanding gives further distinction to an understanding of what constitutes learning relationships – they involve increasing complexity over time. In addition, these processes are influenced by the proximal and distal systems which construct a context, from the quality of face to face relationships within the school to the wider societal demands of the education system. This suggests that learning relationships need certain conditions: they need time to construct an interpersonal relationship in which negotiation can take place; they need time to develop in the complexity of those interpersonal relations; and they need the mutual engagement of both teacher and learner. Moreover, the wider systems in which behaviour is embedded need to enable this.

Wenger's (1998) community of practice (CoP) theory also provides a useful theoretical model for understanding the prominence of relationships in learning. In this model learning can be thought of as participation in a community which is constructed by its aims, values and behaviours. Engagement in and performance of the valued practices constitutes participation, but the practices need to be learned, and their acquisition is not inevitable. Participation can range from peripheral, where an individual does not engage in the desired practices of the community; to marginal, where an individual is not permitted (either explicitly or implicitly) to participate; to full participation, where a mutual identity emerges involving both individual and community change.

These three socio-cultural positions can be synthesised in terms of educational transition: participation or learning are central to the notion of transition because in starting out in a new institution individual students need to understand the new practices and perform within the bounds of those practices. One of the processes which mediates participation is the actions that construct teacher-student interpersonal relationships and by extension, learning relationships. We might theorise that these emerge through express context goals, that is the role of the teacher, the student and the school. In order to learn the new practices, students and teachers need to establish complex interpersonal relationships, in order to negotiate enabling learning relationships which allow for passage through the ZPD. Following socio-cultural principles the types of practices, the

context in which they take place and the people performing them become the focus of analysis because it is at the level of this interaction that learning or otherwise can be understood.

Relationships in education

The importance of relationships has been demonstrated in the research across the range of educational institutions from kindergarten to university. However, the research tends to refer to 'student – teacher relationships' without necessarily identifying these as learning relationships. In fact, given the preceding arguments, interpersonal relationships and learning relationships are not interchangeable terms. The review of theory above suggests learning relationships involve additional dimensions to those of friendship or acquaintanceship; their purpose and goal is to enable the accretion of knowledge and action and the performance of these in specific contexts. Much of the research does not explicitly address the actual nature or performance of relationships, but it does give some insight into how interpersonal relationships militate for or against participation in education.

Iruka, Burchinal and Cai (2010) investigated the long term effects of relationships in kindergarten with teachers and found a positive correlation between supportive and caring teacher–child relationships and successful navigation of the education system up to fifth grade. Crucially they found that positive relationships between teachers and their pupils enabled appropriate social behaviour within school, and from a communities of practice perspective, engaging in the valued practices of a community is essential for learning. Other research supports the suggestion that interpersonal relationships are a necessary precursor to engagement in the practices necessary for successful learning in a community. In a New Zealand based study, Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana and Evans (2010) found further support that teacher-pupil relationships may influence social behaviour, their research indicating that bullies and their victims self-identified as having poorer relationships with their teachers at primary school level. Crosnoe, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Elder (2004) have also found that enabling staff-student relationships (which they refer to as intergenerational bonding) influence disciplinary issues; the more effective the bonding, the less the likelihood of discipline problems at high school. Lizzio, Dempster and Neumann (2011) note the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in students' identification with school. Their research suggests that the greater the identification with the school, the greater the student motivation is.

Further research has demonstrated the link between interpersonal relationship and academic performance. Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green and Dowson (2007) argue that young people need a range of positive interpersonal relationships across their lives, but importantly demonstrate the connection between valued teacher-student relationships and academic success. Murray and Zvoch (2011) in their research with students considered to be 'at risk' both clinically and academically, note the connection between at risk behaviour and relationship quality; the more issues there were in the teacher-student relationship, the more at risk the student was perceived to be. In that research Murray and Zvock found some concordance between teachers' and students' views of their relationships. However, in an Indonesian study, Maulana, Opdenakker, den Brok and Bosker (2011) found that teachers had a more positive view of their relationships with students than did the students, rating themselves as having more proximity to students whereas students found them more distant. From Hoogsteder et al.'s perspective, this lack of mutuality in interpersonal relationships would represent a barrier to passage through the ZPD, without which learning cannot happen.

Using open-ended questionnaire methodology, Marin Sanchez, Martinez-Pecino, Troyano Rodriguez and Melero (2011) gathered data on the university teachers' role. Their data suggest that students value good communication skills together with courtesy and an open approach to the relationship; they value teachers who are easy to talk to and who do not demonstrate authoritarian behaviours, perhaps because such teachers invite mutuality in the relationship. Indeed, the importance of respect in the teacher–student relationship is prominent in other research. Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Earl Scott and Garrison-Wade (2008) interviewed African American students in high schools and their participants reported that they often felt stereotyped by their white teachers and experienced a lack of connectedness, identifying variance in their underpinning social understandings. In Iruka et al.'s research discussed above this notion of staff–student similarity also emerged. The African American student participants in the study revealed a mediating effect of ethnic similarity in reporting the quality of their relationships with teachers. So, the research suggests that effective staff – student relationships are characterized by courtesy, openness and mutual exchange and it may be inferred that such characteristics are prerequisites to successful interpersonal relationships, which underpin passage to effective learning relationships. Given our proposition above that learning relationships are inextricably embedded in social interaction, positive interactions may enable increasingly complex communication and action, which allow for learning, through passage through the ZPD, and so participation in the valued contextual practices.

Richardson (2005) in his discussion of teaching and learning in higher education has argued that teaching and learning are underpinned by the perceptions of the individuals involved and so these perceptions become important in understanding learning relationships. Although as we commented above, understanding relationships in schools is more complex than individual perceptions – the context of those perceptions is also important. Much of the research discussed above does not immediately locate the data in the actual context of the school (that is the practices) which a commitment to socio-cultural theory would demand.

Relationship and educational transition

As discussed earlier, all relationships (both interpersonal and learning) emerge through expressed context goals. In transition, it may be that the role of the student changes, but the student does not necessarily understand this. This would represent a discontinuity between teacher and student and thus mitigate mutuality. So, the idea that the teacher–student relationship is mediated by perceptions on each side is an important one when considering educational transition. When moving from one institution to another the students or pupils bring with them the experiences and understandings from their former establishment, but the teachers' behaviour represents the transition institution. It does not necessarily follow that the existing student perceptions will be concordant with their new environment. Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) note the differences in emphasis between pre-school and primary school in their study carried out in Finnish schools. In primary schools the emphasis was more on the content of the curriculum and acquisition of academic skills whereas in the pre-school, children were encouraged to play. However, they do argue that the quality of the relationships between children and staff (the nature of quality is difficult to define; basic social behaviours such as courtesy or power to contribute are implied rather than explicitly discussed) can help to inculcate essential characteristics such as curiosity and motivation, to enable successful participation in primary school, which is central to learning. The importance of relationship in assisting the transition process has also been emphasised by Powell and Marshall (2011). They explored the experiences of at risk students returning to their home schools after a period of alternative schooling. They note the need for support in the form of positive relationships with staff in returning to their home schools. They suggest that in the regular schools the teachers adopt a 'policing mentality rather than [a] support mode' (p15) and recommend that teachers receive training to enable them to form interpersonal relationships which may then lead to learning relationships. Paechter (2001) has noted that teaching environments which construct a surveillance culture may result in resistance from students, who adopt that

resistance in the face of powerlessness. Such resistance would militate against the establishment of successful interpersonal relationships. De Wit, Karioja, Rye and Shain (2011) investigated both teacher-student and student-student relationships and found that as students move to high school and move through high school, they perceive a decreasing amount of support (although once again the nature of this support is not explicitly discussed, but from the Communities of Practices view point we may define this as actions which enable student participation) from both teachers and peers and that this is associated with declining attendance (De Wit, Karioja and Rye, 2010). They '... call for a concerted effort from school administrators, educators, and political decision makers to implement policies and practices aimed at improving the quality of interpersonal relationships between students and their teachers and classmates.' (p569). The decline in relationship quality in the transition from elementary to junior school in the USA is supported by Martínez et al.'s (2011) study which found that some girls experienced difficulties in making new social relationships and that boys experienced a decline in positive school experiences. They too recommend that more attention needs to be given to the issue of relationships in managing transition.

Much of the preceding research has emerged from questionnaire methodology and without sight of the full questionnaires it is difficult to identify the parameters of relationship and experience which have been studied. Some of the questionnaire items are as simple as 'I like school' whereas others seek to uncover more complex psychological factors, such as feelings of self-esteem or resilience in mental health. As a result, whilst we can confidently assert that a body of research underpins the proposition that relationship and participation and achievement in education are connected, it is more difficult to identify the nature of the relationships under investigation (interpersonal or learning), and the meanings which underpin those relationships. Given this methodological approach, there is an absence of data surrounding the lived experience of staff and students in forming and navigating those relationships at the point of transition.

In this work we seek to address this gap and examine the interaction of person, practice and context at the point of transition in the formation of interpersonal relationships, as a necessary precursor to the formation of learning relationships. As we have argued above, learning can be understood as participation which is mediated by relationship, which is further mediated by the interaction of person and practice in particular contexts. As Wenger states, all practice is underpinned by the meanings ascribed to it by the community which enacts it. Such an approach should address in part the limitations of the existing research reviewed above, which focuses mostly on self-report, pre-constructed questionnaire methodology, and which therefore cannot uncover the mechanisms and

systems of interpersonal relationship formation, which are so crucial to successful transition and relationship maintenance, and so central to learning.

Aims and Method

The data in this paper represent part of a much larger, ethnographic project which followed a group of children from the final year of their primary school (aged around 11) to the first year of their high school. It also employs data from accompanying projects which interviewed pupils in the first year of their transition to two other high schools. To focus this article appropriately we have identified the following research questions:

- How do staff behaviours and student perceptions contribute to the formation of interpersonal relationships at the point of transition from primary school to secondary school?
- How does the context of the secondary school influence the formation of interpersonal relationships at the point of transition from primary school to secondary school?

A range of data collection methods were used in this research, specifically:

- Participant and non-participant observation
- Conversations
- One to one interviews
- Focus group interviews
- Document analysis

The data represent three schools in different geographical locations in the UK. The majority of data derives from a medium sized Catholic school (referred to as S1), in a medium sized town in Yorkshire. The intake predominantly comes from the four Catholic primary schools in the town. The school, at the time of the research, was considered successful by dint of positive inspection reports and a high position in league tables in the county. The school had a strict uniform code and at the time of writing had introduced a new rule that incoming pupils had to wear blazers at all times. The timetable was divided into six periods per day. The second school (S2) was based in the Midlands and is a large school, divided into two sites, one for the junior years and one for the senior years. The school was atypical in that no uniforms were worn by the students and the staff was called by

their first names. Moreover, the timetable was divided into only four periods per day. Again this school did well in the league tables and was judged favourably in inspection reports. The final school (S3), a single sex female school in the North West, was considered to be an improving school. It took a traditional approach, with rigorous uniform rules and a six period per day timetable. All three schools enjoyed a positive status in their communities and were over-subscribed.

The data which support this paper comprise observations and interviews from the first school, and involve students who were followed by a researcher from their primary school to the secondary school over the period of one year. The data from the remaining schools comprise focus group interviews conducted towards the end of the school year, in the students' first year at secondary school. In these interviews, students were asked about their transition experience and asked to reflect on their new high school in light of their primary school.

Analysis

We adopted Anderson's (2002) focused problem approach for the purposes of analysing the data. The analysis was informed by several factors: firstly, we were guided by the arguments articulated previously, that in order to learn the new practices, students and teachers need to negotiate enabling interpersonal relationships which can then lead to learning relationships, allowing passage through the ZPD and movement towards more complex activity. We sought to identify factors which, whilst specific to the focal schools, revealed larger insights surrounding relationships and transition. Secondly, we were informed by socio-cultural understandings of learning.

Both authors read and re-read the data, the units of analysis included the encounters between staff and students, the meanings students ascribed to staff actions and school procedures and the practices of the institutions. Each unit was considered in terms of relational concept and transition imperatives and using a constant comparative technique codes were identified individually. The codes were then merged and key emergent themes identified and compared. The final themes were then constructed as a result of this process (Boyatzis, 1998). See Appendix for the coding table.

Findings

Courtesy

A very prominent emergent theme was that of courtesy or lack of courtesy on the part of the school staff. Courtesy can be understood as those social behaviours which are acceptable in a society and which underpin interpersonal relationships. This fits with Marin Sanchez et al. (2011), Douglas et al. (2008) and Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen's (2010) work described earlier, which either implicitly or explicitly highlighted student desire for respect and courtesy when dealing with teachers. Treating people with courtesy is a sign of respect which is a necessary factor in the formation of interpersonal relationships. A social practice common to most societies is that of introducing yourself to new people, identifying yourself with your name. On multiple occasions the observation data reveal teachers standing in front of large groups of children without any personal introduction. The following observation is taken from fieldnotes from the first day of high school. All the students were told to gather in the dining room where they would be divided into technology groups. The staff gathered slowly and the children stood around, until eventually a teacher stood on a chair and addressed the children:

> *After lunch we all gather in the dining room to find out technology groups and locations. A man walks in and stands on chair and shouts 'Right can you all shut up now and look this way. Not when you feel like it when I tell you to. Oy, why are you talking? Oy, you go and stand over there now.' Teacher has tie down and top button undone, shouting aggressively, pulls out boy who is talking. Boy leaves his group and walks to the wall, he is bright red in front of the year group. Other teachers smile to each other. The man reads out technology groups and groups leave with their teachers.*
>
> *Observation – S1*

On another occasion in the first week of high school there was a fire drill which was widely advertised, indeed a minute or so before the fire bell the teacher told everybody to pack up their things and the class waited for the bell to ring. On the sounding of the bell, all the students and teachers gathered their belongings and made their way to the outside netball courts which was the designated area for evacuations. Once the children had all lined up alphabetically, according to their tutor groups, a man came to the front of the group. The fieldnote reads:

> *A teacher comes to the front, I've never seen him before and he doesn't introduce himself. He tells them how disappointed he was by their actions, they walked too slowly, didn't line up quickly enough and talked when they were in their lines. He continues haranguing them for five minutes, tells them they didn't know it wasn't a serious fire, they did though, the fire drill has been discussed all morning.*

These represent just two incidences of a lack of courtesy, where new students are effectively dismissed by the teachers in charge. Both these teachers shouted at the children and harangued them for talking. As we noted earlier, Paechter (2001) has argued that in the face of powerlessness, pupils find multiple ways to express resistance, which may result in self-marginalisation from the

community. In Wenger's (1998) terms, such self-marginalisation results in disidentification from the community (Hodges, 1998), a product of which is a resistance to the formation of relationships with full participants.

Other data pointed to perceptions of lack of courtesy. Participants across this research remarked on teachers' shouting and their dislike of this:

Students from S3, on being asked what they liked in a teacher, commented '*If they're not shouting at the class all the time*' and '*And it's just like she's really horrible and she shouts ...*'. One participant from S1, who had been an extremely engaged and able pupil at primary school told of some of the reasons she preferred her old school to her new one. She had been accused of making telephone calls to another student, was confronted by teachers, and described the scene: *'It wasn't me and the teacher was just shouting in my face, saying I don't believe you and all this and if ... and then once they found out it wasn't me they didn't apologise. So I prefer StU's.'* Another pupil from S2 made a very simple comment on being asked about what he valued in a teacher. He said, '*If they said oh hello how are you? But they don't*.'

As we discuss above there is very little literature which explores the formation of interpersonal or learning relationships so it is difficult to trace the influence of lack of courtesy over time. O'Broin and Palmer (2010) have investigated the formation of coaching relationships in business and they note the importance of rapport and trust in the process. It is not easy to see how rapport or trust could develop in the absence of the observation of basic social behaviour. Again, there is little research which explores courtesy, but one study which focused (using experimental methodology) on the workplace suggests that rude behaviour decreased task performance and undermined the formation of helpful attitude (Porath and Erez, 2007).

During the school day the students in the observations in S1 were required to move from classroom to classroom up to six times. They were not permitted to enter new classrooms without the invitation of the teacher; indeed if they did this they were asked to leave the classroom and await an invitation. However, the observations reveal that on multiple occasions during a school day, the class was kept waiting outside the classroom because either the teacher had not arrived at the specified time or the teacher was talking to someone else inside their room. On some days the fieldnotes reveal that up to 30 minutes were wasted in waiting outside classrooms for teachers. There is not a single observation which shows a teacher apologising for this, yet students who arrived late were punished through demerits or detentions. The researcher would wait outside with the children and often when she entered the teacher would comment that she need not have

waited outside – punctual access was granted to adults, but not children. This point constitutes a substantive issue in understanding relationship formation. We would not claim that the behaviours described above are generalised to all schools, or all teachers in the focal schools, but the principle of how teachers construct the rights of the students in terms of courtesies paid to them is a general one. A relationship which requires certain behaviours of one of the parties but not of the others is an asymmetric one and may result in feelings of resentment and accusations of lack of fairness on the part of the less powerful party; indeed all the participants from all three schools in this study were very vocal about issues of unfairness. Cullingford (2002) has noted that in schools the power balance is firmly in favour of the teacher and we would argue that where that power is abused, even in seemingly small ways such as lack of introductions, or keeping students waiting, the formation of rapport or the growth of trust is problematic. Again, Paechter's (2001) notions of resistance are applicable in understanding this.

At the point of entry into the new community, the new participants are scanning and assessing their environment for information so that they can construct an understanding of it. If new students are to participate successfully they will have to shift their behaviour in line with the new environment. However, as noted above this is not an inevitable process. Wenger (1998) points out that in some cases participants choose not to join in with the new community, rejecting the values and practices whilst others may feel marginalised as a result of the practices they observe. It would seem important then that from the commencement of transition, the powerbrokers in a community actively encourage practices which invite participation, and thus facilitate the formation of interpersonal relationships, making new members feel welcome and secure. It cannot be said that a failure to observe basic, social behaviours constitutes such action.

Rules and Resistance

For any social collective there need to be agreed rules of action in order that the aims of the community can be met. The literature discussed previously (Iruka et al., 2010; Raskauskas et al., 2010; Lizzio et al., 2011) demonstrates that positive interpersonal relationships decreased discipline problems in school and increased appropriate social behaviours. The student participants in this study accepted the need for some rules, and judged teachers who failed to maintain the rules of order in classrooms harshly:

> *'I think if the teacher can make you sort of be quiet, not silence, but not so there's lots of noise so you can concentrate.'*

Interview – S3

'In history I used to mess about but now we've got a new teacher, MrG and he's very nice but you can't mess about.'

Interview – S1

' Science is alright but again it's like Spanish because MrS just can't control his class, so everyone walks all over him and he just gives out detentions for nowt.'

Interview – S1

'Researcher: *What about Spanish do you like that?*
Participant: *I did but I was really looking forward to it but our teacher can't really control the class, so we don't learn much really.'*
Interview – S1

'I like RS because um it's easy to work in there because sometimes in the lessons we get distracted but the teacher she's nice but she can also sort people out if they get out of order and it's easy to get on and I learn more in this one. It can be boring but it's interesting sometimes.'
Interview – S1

As noted earlier, the perceptions of students are linked to interpersonal relationship formation (Moray et al., 2010), and students' expectations of the relationships which will be formed in a new educational environment may affect the transition process. The participants in this study all expected and accepted that the secondary school would have rules and regulations which they would be required to observe. The rules of order are not always observed, but they are valued because students recognise that they cannot learn in a disorganised and noisy environment. However, it was in the inconsistent application of those rules, the perception that certain rules were unfair, and in the sheer number of rules where students expressed discontent and resistance. Moreover, as Powell and Marshall (2011) note, school environments which construct teachers as 'police' rather than as supporters of students do not encourage positive interpersonal relationships.

Students do not resent the imposition, if done fairly, of rules; indeed they expect that in their relationship with the teacher. However there was a plethora of rules in one of the focal schools. Prior to starting at S1, the primary school pupils took part in a transition day, where they spent the school day at the high school. The fieldnotes from that day demonstrate the emphasis on rules. In the class being followed the children sat in silence for 40 minutes whilst the teacher listed the rules they would have to obey. These ranged from the ordinary (such as not pushing other pupils down the stairs or attendance at assembly), to the personal (a prohibition on make-up, the banning of any jewellery apart from small stud earrings), to behaviour outside school hours (students were

forbidden to enter the nearby park either before or after school). A major emphasis was put on the school uniform. In CoP terms this represents a reification of the values and practices of the school community, and its significance was clear from the outset. The headteacher's welcome on the first day was noted down in the fieldnotes:

> *'MrD, the headteacher comes to the front, doesn't introduce himself but starts talking. He first talks about uniform, says they look very smart 'I saw a few shirts flapping out, but tell your parents that MrD was proud of how smart you looked.'*
>
> *Observation – S1*

He did not refer to their academic work or any social opportunities, but focused on what the children were wearing. The research data demonstrate the amount of time and energy devoted to ensuring the correct uniform dress was maintained. Children were expected to wear shirts with the top button done up and a tie to be of a regulation length. Their shirts had to be tucked in at all times and they had to wear a blazer and regulation socks and shoes. There was also a regulation sports kit which included shorts, skirts, tops and track suits – on any particular sports lesson students might be required to wear any part of this kit and so were obliged to bring it all to school with them and carry it around all day (there was no space provided in the form of lockers or rooms where students could leave their belongings). Students were not permitted to remove their blazers without the express permission of a teacher. Teachers intervened if shirts were not tucked in, if ties were thought to be incorrectly knotted or if shirt buttons were undone. If make-up was worn the students were ordered to go to the lavatories and remove it and jewellery was confiscated. Despite the adult preoccupation with uniform, the students demonstrated multiple acts of resistance by continuing to personalise their attire or questioning the point of it:

> *'I think it's alright to want to make you look smart at school but I think it's a bit stupid when you're walking down the hill and there's teachers all the way down the hill telling you what to do then, 'cos you're out of school then aren't you and that's your free time innit? And they're all stood there and MrG and MrC or summat are stood in the bus station making you do it and that's not good is it, you're free and they're stood there telling you to put your shirt in, I think that's a bit drastic. I think it's important in school obviously to make people look smart.'*
>
> *Interview – S1*
>
> *'I don't really like MissG, cos when you have your tie like that, she tells you off so you have to have it proper fastened. She does that every morning and every time you go home.'*
>
> *Interview – S1*

I don't like the blazers, I don't mind the jumpers and shirt and tie and everything but the blazers are awful. When it's raining you have your coats and stuff and you can't take them off when you want. I don't like the no make-up. I think it's alright not to wear loads but some people just put a bit of mascara on and they get detention and told to wash it off but it's not doing anyone any harm really is it?'

Interview – S1

'Mia has been given lines for forgetting her shorts (she wore her track suit bottoms instead), she tells Amy who turns to me and says 'It's pathetic this school.''

Observation – S1

Riley and Docking's (2004) research gave voice to disaffected pupils who questioned the connection between uniform and learning, failing to see how one influenced the other. In fact, despite the emphasis on school uniform in the UK and its former colonies, public school systems in the remainder of the world seem to deliver successful educational services in its absence. In fact, it would seem that the constant need to reinforce the uniform rules in the face of sustained pupil resistance constituted a bar to the formation of interpersonal relationships; time available was often taken up with instructions and comments on uniform which remained constant and perhaps militated against opportunities for increasingly complex interactions. In fact from a teaching point of view the plethora of rules in some schools seems problematic. Axiomatic to Vygotskian notions of learning is the quality of the relationship between teacher and learner. If a teacher is charged with enforcing a set of rules which her/his pupils are constantly trying to resist then that will shape their relationship in a particular way. Children who resist more (they leave their shirts out, they don't do the homework they think is pointless, they are a bit disorganised and arrive late) will inevitably have more contentious relationships with teachers and may not learn from these teachers as a result. The curriculum cannot be disembedded from the teacher-student interpersonal relationship and that relationship cannot be disembedded from the wider school and societal culture.

In one of the focal schools (S2) in this study uniform was not required and students called the teachers by their first names; this was in contrast to the primary schools from which they had come. In the data there is some evidence that these students felt less controlled and indeed contrary to much of the transition data, many of them reported very positive transitions:

'I find the teachers here more approachable than they were at primary school, there's more of them and there's a wider range of people and more personalities and some of them have more approachable, they're more approachable than others.'

Focus group – S2

'I'd say don't be scared because it's so big 'cos at the end of it it's a really close community'

Focus group – S2

'Researcher: *What do you like about the lessons?*
P3: *They're more interesting than at our old school and uh and we have a laugh more at this school.*
R: *In the lessons?*
P3: *Yeah'*
Focus Group – S2

The insistence in schools that teachers be referred to by their titles and surnames or as 'Sir' or 'Miss' represents a rule that is incongruent with wider UK society. Whilst it was the case 30 years ago that children referred to adults in this way, in contemporary British society children call adults by their first names. Indeed in colleges and universities the use of first names for all staff members is routine and this is also the case in a range of small and large organisations. Whilst this may not be the same in other cultures, the key point here is that if school rules were more congruent with wider social practices, then this might better fit with students' previous experiences of interpersonal relationship formation.

Thornberg (2008) carried out a qualitative study with pupils in Swedish primary schools and concludes 'This study indicates that pupils' perceptions ... of arbitrary rules, unfair rules and rule applications, and bad or poor rule explanations from teachers, appear to lead to criticism and negative attitudes among pupils.' Cullingford points out that a good pupil obeys all the teachers' rules unquestioningly. The institution cannot function if the inhabitants question the rules. Of course an unquestioning observation of the rules is a denial of the possibility of participation for the pupils. Merely following the practices laid down by others does not constitute participation in community of practice terms, and does not lead to identification with the community. Indeed, should the rules constitute a very different set of interests to that of the pupils it might lead to what Hodges (1998) has termed dis-identification which, as argued earlier, makes interpersonal relationship formation a more problematic endeavour. This is synonymous with Paechter's (2001) notions discussed above that resistance may constitute power on the part of the powerless.

The immediate and continued emphasis on rules constructs the transition school and so constructs transition identities in particular ways. The students explore avenues for resistance and resent teachers who continue to enforce rules they find incomprehensible. Where there are fewer rules or where the rules make sense, resistance is, of course, less. Ecological theory proposes that for

development or learning to occur, activities in the micro-system need to happen on a regular and increasingly complex basis, and in addition it positions individuals within the wider social systems of a society. The presence of multiple rules which do not make sense or which do not represent wider societal practice may militate against the opportunities for increasingly complex interaction and result in a lack of system fit which militates against participation and so learning. At the point of transition, the new rules of a community are inevitably subject to scrutiny by new members, in a different way to that of established community members and so the nature of the rules is an important aspect of transition and the student trajectory in the new school.

School systems and pedagogical practice

As discussed earlier, De Wit et al. (2010) argue that the decision makers in education form policies which enable interpersonal relationships. The data from this study demonstrate a range of evidence that system and practice undermine interpersonal relationship formation in secondary schools. A significant contextual shift in the transition from primary to secondary school is the number of teachers delivering the curriculum. In the UK, primary school classes are generally led by one teacher (other teachers may take some sessions). On transition to high school, depending on the timetable, students may meet up to eight different teachers in a day. Evidently then the temporal opportunity for forming relationships is reduced and the participants in this study commented freely on this:

> *'S: You know more people as well …*
> *Researcher: At primary school?*
> *S: Yeah, you can recognize them and you know their names and you know all the teachers so you can just ask them'*
> *Interview – S1*

> *'I found primary school really easy because you only had one classroom and one teacher, with all the teachers you just have to remember all their names and at first it's really hard to remember their names.'*
> Focus Group – S2

> *'P4: I think it's easier to get to know them at primary because you're with them all the time so you can get used to them and also in secondary school the different teachers sometimes they teach differently and you have to get used to the way they teach.*
> *R: And how long does that take do you think?*
> *P4: I haven't got used to it yet.'*
> Focus Group – S2

However, this aspect of relationship formation is more complex because the relationship with the primary school teacher tended to predict students' responses to managing multiple relationships in high school. A number of participants reported problematic relationships with their primary school teachers and expressed relief that they could now leave them behind:

> *'I think if you ... in primary school, if you like the teacher and you get on with them then that's alright but if you don't like them then it's harder to get on 'cos you see them forever.'*
>
> *Focus Group – S3*
>
> *'Because when you're at primary school there's just one teacher and sometimes you can take a dislike them but when you're at secondary school there's more teachers so you can get to know them better instead of getting bored with them.'*
>
> *Focus Group – S2*
>
> *'Because in my old school I didn't like it because our teacher was so horrible, he was really mean and he kept picking on me all the time 'cos I couldn't read properly and that didn't like help me to read and now I can just ... my teacher is really nice because she just helps me with everything, she just helps me.'*
>
> *Focus Group – S2*

The schools in this study ran different timetabling systems. One school had only four lessons per day whilst the other two had six lessons per day. The students at the school with only four lessons per day (which was also the school which had no uniform and where students called teachers by first names) tended to report more positive transitions, although note above that students still experienced problems in negotiating multiple relationships with teachers. Interpersonal relationship formation requires time and commitment on the part of the both parties. Given the number of students in the classes (there were not less than 25 in any classes observed) the opportunity for relationship is limited. Blatchford, Bassett and Brown (2011) note, unsurprisingly, that in smaller classes there is an increased incidence of individual student – teacher interaction (an ecological prerequisite for development) and that in larger classes, engagement decreases.

In addition, the emphasis in secondary schools is on subject expertise. In primary school the teachers are trained to take the entire curriculum, but in secondary school each subject has a different teacher (note that differences in practices were also observed by Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) in transition from pre-school to primary school). In transition new students are

faced with approximately 12 new teachers. The observations from S1 reveal that each of these teachers had different rules and expectations: in some classes students were expected to enter and stand behind their chairs and wait for the teacher's permission to sit down or take their coats off; in others they were expected to enter, remove coats, place study materials on the desk, then greet the teacher. Some teachers were fierce about insisting that students ask permission before removing blazers whilst others were irritated if interrupted to answer such questions. It is true that over time most students learned these differing demands, but during the first term of transition, the variation in teacher behaviours added to the burden of transition, to which some of the comments above attest.

The timetable also served to shape pedagogical practices and so the student experience. The secondary school teaching model tends to be more didactic than the primary one and in this study the researcher noted a pattern to the lessons in S1. The major part of the lesson tended to be given over to the teacher delivering information and instructions, followed by a writing activity which was required to be completed in silence. In one art class, the teacher gave a 15 minute demonstration and lecture on how to draw a human eye in a portrait. Later on the researcher commented to one of the students how fascinating this had been and the student replied *'15 minutes on an eye, I don't think so*.' Of course, teachers in individual classes have no knowledge of how other classes are structured (this may be one explanation for the different perceptions teachers and students have about relationship identified in Maulana et al.'s research above) and they are not aware that by the final lesson, students may have spent well over half of their day sitting in silence and listening to teachers talk. Such pedagogic practices deny the mutuality which is essential to the formation of interpersonal relationships. Tobbell (2003) quotes a new, year one secondary school student who, when asked about the teachers at her new school commented, *'Teachers here have too much language.'*

Given the emphasis Vygotskian theory places on interaction between teacher and learner in passage through the ZPD, the absence of teacher-student interaction in this research is an area of concern. In each of the lessons in high school teachers were, understandably, focussed on delivering the curriculum objectives of the lesson and this allowed little time for talking with the students and exploring issues. It might be argued that a necessary factor in an interpersonal relationship is the opportunity for conversation, but the demands of the timetable seem to militate against opportunities for student – teacher interaction. There is not a great deal of research which examines the effects of the timetable on the learning experience, despite its reified status in high school management. In one study carried out in New Zealand, Ward (2000) tracked pupils who

decided to stay in middle school and make a transition at year 9, rather than at year 8. He observes: 'One of the few consistencies is that the changes are embedded in a fragmented, period-prone timetable that works to frustrate learning in an integrated manner.' (p373). This suggests that the structure of the secondary school needs to be changed to encourage a more integrated learning approach which may in turn serve to allow more space and more time for teacher – student interaction and the possibility of more robust interpersonal relationships, and thus greater opportunity for the emergence of learning relationships.

Conclusion

In this paper we posited questions around the formation of interpersonal relationships at the point of transition to secondary school and aimed to explore how behaviours, perceptions and context interact and so underpin relationship formation. We provide evidence which suggests that students sometimes perceive staff behaviour to lack the basic behaviours necessary for the formation of effective interpersonal relationships, but importantly, these behaviours are constructed within school systems which do not always foreground the imperative of relationship formation.

We acknowledge that the data represent particular environments and do not seek to generalise aspects of that context. However, we do seek to understand how context can construct relationship and note that in the process of transition, particular attention needs to be paid to systems and practices to provide opportunity for staff-student interpersonal relationships to form, given the centrality of these to enabling learning relationships and school success.

We note above that whilst there is a plethora of research which represents perceptions of relationships in school, much of that research conflates staff – student relationships with learning relationships and presents data which may be decontextualised from experience. We found some support for Powell & Marshall's proposition that teachers may adopt policing rather than support roles, in this observance of rules. De Witt et al.'s contention that perceptions of support dwindles on entrance to high school was not true for all; some students in this research perceived that their relationships in the high school enabled learning more effectively. Marin-Sanchez et al. note that university students want open relationships with their teachers and these data reflect that high school students may also desire this; they express a need for basic courtesies and fair treatment.

Many of the practices in this data represent very ordinary school incidents and practices which may not be questioned by established participants in the school community: the differences between what constitute acceptable levels of courtesy for students and teachers, the purpose and function of

rules and their impact, and the differences in systems and pedagogical practices within and between schools. Nevertheless these represent obstacles to be negotiated by incoming students and may represent barriers to relationship formation on the part of both students and teachers. In that respect these data make a distinct contribution to the transition and relationship literature where there is a paucity of work which examines actual interactions at the point of transition. It seems clear that teachers' focus on rules, systems and teaching practice are designed to facilitate new students' successful transition to the new learning environment; but the data reveal ways in which the foregrounding of such issues serve to militate against the formation of interpersonal relationships, which in turn may present additional barriers to learning. This supports Iruka et al.'s research which foregrounds supportive and caring teacher – child relationships as important in continued participation in school. If at the point of transition students perceive a lack of support and caring it is difficult to see how the interpersonal relationship may develop in complexity to enable participation and learning.

Maulana et al.'s data suggest a discontinuity between teacher and student perceptions of relationship. The data above do not represent teacher perceptions, but given the importance of interaction with context which emerges this would seem to be a valuable area for further investigation. We have argued that the observations represent the quotidian experiences in the school context and may be unquestioned by the inhabitants of that context and for this reason would further argue for the presence of observational data to inform discussion with teachers and students.

We have made a distinction in this paper between staff-student relationships per se and learning relationships and have argued that learning relationships emerge or fail to emerge from the interpersonal relationships inherent in the school community. We have identified aspects of the community which construct relationship, however, we do not claim that this research provides a definitive view of relationship formation in high schools; but our data suggest important conversations which teachers might have about how the practices of their learning community might better create opportunities for student-teacher interpersonal relationships to form and lead to enabling learning relationships. It is clear from the existing research and from the findings of this paper that there is an absence of research which actually focuses on learning relationships and so the processes of formation of these remain unclear. It may be that a case study approach, which followed teachers and students from the point of transition and beyond would represent useful and insightful data which would follow up the findings of this paper.

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Appendix

Analytical codes

Initial Codes	Merged Codes	Themes

➢ Personal introductions at start of year, at beginning of instructions, in giving feedback. ➢ Classroom management tone – perceptions and observations. ➢ Interpersonal exchanges – staff mien, student perception. ➢ Staff behaviour compared to staff expectations of students – observations and perceptions.	Greetings Interactions Instructional tone	Courtesy
➢ Jewellery, make-up, shirts in, blazers, ties – number and type of interactions. ➢ Student desires to learn ➢ Student perceptions of teacher competence ➢ Influence and actions outside the school gate ➢ Making choices in action ➢ Enjoyment ➢ Feelings of inclusion	Uniforms Quid pro quo Keeping order School boundaries	Rules and Resistance
➢ Putting names to faces ➢ Time spent with teachers ➢ Number of students between primary and secondary ➢ Liking the teacher ➢ Teacher knowledge ➢ Length of lessons ➢ Class sizes	School population (teacher and student numbers) Timetables Navigation and interruption Subject expertise Personal relationship	School systems and pedagogical practice

Table One: Coding procedure