Are individual pupil differences the primary pervasive influences on teacher expectations?

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Introduction

This chapter presents substantive findings from a study which explored teacher-pupil relationships, perceptions and expectations in two primary schools in the South West of England. The purpose of the research was to investigate whether a comprehensive understanding of these relationships could enhance insight into classroom life, focusing on individual differences and experiences.

A symbolic interactionist framework was adopted for the four case studies - a Year 3 class (children aged 7-8 years) and a Year 6 class (children aged 10-11 years) in each of the two schools. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with teachers and pupils, systematic observation, field notes and pupil diaries. The names of the schools have been replaced with pseudonyms for the purposes of reporting thus: Redhill Primary School was in a socially disadvantaged area of the city; and, St. Stephen's Primary School was located in an affluent area of the same city in the South West. By replicating the study in dual settings, the study aimed to explore the foci of the research on a comparative basis, rather than to establish homogeneity of the data or the similarity and equivalence of settings and contexts. The basic advantage of the comparisons was that they highlighted processes, patterns and meanings based on contextual and grounded information.

The study focused primarily on whether the individual differences of the pupil could influence the teacher-pupil relationship in the two age groups, and whether the perceptions and expectations of the teacher and pupils changed dramatically during the academic year. It is this aspect of the study which is reported, in substantive terms, in this chapter.

Context

What are relationships?

Hinde (1979, 1997) explained the term 'relationship' as an intermittent and meaningful interaction between (at least) two people, which involved interaction over an extended period of time. He went on to suggest that the interactions needed to have some degree of mutuality in the sense that the behaviour of each takes some account of the behaviour of the other, although he warned that

mutuality does not necessarily imply 'co-operation'. In addition, he suggested that there was a further implication of a degree of continuity between the successive interactions; each interaction is affected by interactions in the past and potentially having an impact on future interactions, '*Thus relationships can be seen as narratives, and the self as including, and largely constituted by, the narratives of experienced relationships*' (Hinde, 1997: 40).

Hinde (1979) suggested that it is necessary for both participants in a relationship to define that relationship similarly. Most of the difficulties in the early stages of a relationship, even with primarily formal relationships such as that of teacher and pupil, can be seen as involving the reaching of an acceptable agreed definition of the relationship (Kington, 2001, 2009). The definition is usually worked out progressively as the relationship develops (Kington, 2005). The consequent interactions involve negotiation between two individuals, teacher and pupil. The pupil tries to perceive the character underlying the set of 'role identities' that the teacher displays, and devises a 'role' for him/herself that can best make use of the teacher's role and character. This is a two-way process, and continuation of the interaction demands some mutual accommodation such that each improvises a 'role' roughly in line with that of the other (Kington, 2005, 2009).

The importance of personal experience and individual differences

In addition to the research relating to relationship development and construction, the study also considered the importance of personal experience in the development of classroom relationships. For example, Dewey (1938) claimed that experience is not just an event that happens, but an event with meaning. He defined experience as either a particular instance or a process of observing, undergoing or encountering. In addition, he stated that because experience is multi-layered and interwoven with other experiences, it is practically impossible to analyse, and any analysis that does take place inevitably causes that experience to change. Strauss (1965) and Berk (1989) argued that 'experiences' are constituted from moments throughout our lives when something 'dawns' on us and we achieve some sort of insight, these moments are sometimes labelled 'educational episodes' and supposedly lead to some sort of transformation. For example, Woods (1990) believed that pupils were constantly open to status passages and transformational episodes due to the large number of new experiences and phenomena which they are exposed to, but which they have little or no control over, such as individual teachers, classroom organisation, daily activities etc. In addition, he noted that the actual meaning of such experiences can also change over time and the effects of them can become transformed.

1

Woods (1990, 1995) went on to argue that the social class structure, gender divisions and racism can be said to be the most persuasive influences operating on pupils outside of the school. He suggested that individuals do not follow subcultural norms slavishly, but have choices. Similarly, Furlong (1976) in his study of a London comprehensive, found no proof of pupil cultures, but evidence that different pupils took part in different groups at different times, which he claimed '*simply illustrates the point that they do not always agree about what they know. Teachers, subjects and methods of teaching mean different things to different pupils*' (p. 169).

Measor and Woods (1984) found that the majority of pupils who they studied were 'knife-edgers' – those who appear as totally different people to different teachers on different occasions, but all of which combine to constitute their composite identity and, therefore, the identity of which the teacher will form a perception. Weis (1985) claimed that what pupils 'choose' to value represents a creative response to the material conditions of their lives as they experience it in terms of their class, gender and ethnicity. Although the form of these cultures was related, to a certain degree, to what schools did, they were also produced partially as a response to school practices themselves and were tied to the experiences of pupils outside the school (i.e. the material conditions of their lives and the extent to which these conditions are affirmed, denied, or simply ignored within educational institutions). Thus elements of class cultures, gender cultures and ethnic traditions interacted in a complex way. Furthermore, Woods (1990, 1995) suggested each pupil had a multi-faceted personality and that at different times, with different teachers and in different contexts, a given pupil would allow a different facet of this integrated personality to show through.

Methodology

Research design

An in-depth investigation of the nature and development of teacher-pupil relationships required the observation of actual teacher-pupil relationships in natural settings, further consideration of the context in which they develop, and a description and analysis of the understanding and behaviour within the relationship of pupils and teachers (Kington, 2005, Kington et al. 2007). A framework for the selection of an appropriate methodological approach and of specific methods was developed consisting of the following criteria:

a)   Presentation of a full and detailed account of pupil and teacher interactions in a classroom setting;

b)   Description of how teacher-pupil relationships were promoted in the classroom;

c)   Contrast and comparison between different school contexts and age groups;

d)   Examination of the development of the relationships over a period of time; and,

e)   Description and analysis of children's and teachers' understanding of the teacher-pupil relationship and its micro-developmental changes.

The research design consisted of case studies in two English primary schools. The two schools were contrasting in location, one being in a disadvantaged area within the inner city (St. Stephen's Primary School) and the other in a suburban area of relatively high socio-economic status (Redhill Primary School). Case studies were carried out over a period of three terms (one school year).

Sample

The selection procedure for the sample was as follows:

- two schools: in contrasting socio-economic areas
- two teachers in each of the schools: one in a Year 3 class, the other in a Year 6 class
- eight children in each class: four boys and four girls who represented a cross-section of the class.

The main selection procedure was undertaken by either the Head or the Deputy Head in each of the schools. To a certain extent, as with the selection of schools, the choice of classrooms was limited to those whose teachers were willing to partake in the study. All four teachers were female, but did represent a range of ages and years of experience. The selection of participant pupils was initially influenced by preliminary observations in each of the classrooms.

Methods

The need for immersion into the classroom culture, and an exploration of the patterns and developments of teacher-pupil interactions / relationships, led to a qualitative analysis of the nature and development of teacher-pupil relationships in the primary school (Kington, 2001, 2005, 2009). There is not time here to discuss the various strengths and limitations of techniques of data collection and analysis, however, any limitations of a particular data collection tool were compensated for through the use of an alternative method which was stronger in other areas (Bryman, 1988; Day et al, 2006; Kington, 2001). This also meant that findings were enhanced where both qualitative and quantitative tools provided '*mutual confirmation*' (Bryman, 1988: 131). A further potential benefit

of using more than one method of data collection with a given sample of research participants was 'cross-method validity raising' in which evidence from one method can be used to facilitate richer responses when using a different method (Day et al, 2006, Kington et al, in press).

The main evidence collection method was semi-structured, face-to-face **interviews**, different versions of which were used with teachers and pupils. This was supplemented at various stages of the research by document analysis, and informal interviews with school leaders and other teachers. The evidence was gathered in an iterative and evolving process consistent with the use of grounded theory methods. Thus, a rich and detailed picture of the teacher-pupil relationships in the target classrooms was recorded. The preservation of this evidence in detail serves to enhance the verifiability of the findings (audit trail, etc) (Day et al, 2007).

The opportunity for in-depth description of relationships was offered by **observations** of interactive episodes between teacher and pupils and sequences of interaction within the classroom. Observations were interrelated with the interviews regarding the perceptions of the existing relationships. The contextual information which this approach generated regarding participants' perceptions of and interactions within the relationship were important in order to incorporate both partners' understanding and behaviour, and to explore these interrelated elements. **Pupil diaries** were also used in conjunction with these two methods to illuminate further the children's perceptions and feelings about the relationships.

Discussion of substantive findings

Teachers' general perceptions of classroom relationships

Drawing on the results of teacher interviews, it was possible to come to some basic conclusions about the way in which the participating teachers perceived their roles. At the beginning of the school year, each teacher rated highly the need to be approachable and to provide a secure environment where pupils could be happy and confident. Within this context, where all pupils were to be offered equal opportunities for academic and social success, high standards were to be set by the teacher and a fair but firm discipline enforced. All teachers saw respect as an essential ingredient of the environment, with the majority admitting that it was difficult to achieve this in partnership with approachability. Participation in the management of their learning experience was also generally seen as essential for all pupils since this enabled their progress both academically and as active members of the class group.

Interestingly, the results of an inquiry into 'ideal' and 'practical' priorities in the classroom showed that at both teachers (Year 3 and Year 6) at St. Stephen's Primary School saw the relationships with pupils as the main 'ideal' priority. At Redhill Primary both teachers (Year 3 and Year 6) considered classroom organisation as being the main 'ideal' priority, with relationships with pupils as of secondary importance. When considering the practical implications of daily life in a primary school classroom, the teacher-pupil relationship was placed, by all four teachers, at a much lower level of importance. This suggests that they all saw the opportunities for forming relationships as being contingent on the establishment of a working structure.

The maintenance of order was featured prominently by all four teachers which places a firm emphasis on the need to provide a stable framework. Recognition was made of the importance of teaching skills, particularly in regard to the practical day by day encounters, however, in spite of previous studies (e.g. Atkinson, 2000; Day et al, 2007, 2009; Moses & Croll, 1990; Wragg et al, 1989) which indicated that primary school teachers were becoming more aware of weaknesses in their subject knowledge, interviews data revealed that this was not a priority for the participating teachers in this study.

i)   Impact of pupil age on relationships

Age can only provide a very crude indicator of social development and there are considerable variations amongst children of the same age, resulting, in part, from differences in individual social experiences (Croll, 1996). This led, therefore, to different types of teacher-pupil relationships within each year group studied. At the beginning of the academic year, all four teachers were interviewed individually and agreed that the age factor was relevant to the development of classroom relationships. Both Year 3 teachers drew a contrast with the teaching of infants in which they had seen themselves more as a surrogate parent, providing social training rather than encouragement towards academic achievement. The two teachers of Year 6 classes were looking forward to the 'more interesting' work attempted with older children, their maturity, and a higher level of mutual trust than they had experienced previously.

The four teachers had clear expectations about the level of ability within their classes in terms of academic and social skills and, although other factors contributed to these expectations, age was a major influence in broad terms. The Year 3 teachers both expected to take on a strongly nurturant/pastoral role with the class, as well as the rigorous daily curriculum. Their day had a

relatively flexible structure, mainly due to reliance on outside help from parents or classroom assistants. The Year 6 teachers expected to instigate a more controlled environment, with the focus on independent learning. The pastoral role of the teacher was mainly considered to be active at break times or after school. The day was carefully structured, with an emphasis on organisation of work and time. The teachers agreed that during the course of primary school, teacher-pupil interactions evolved from a caring, nurturant quality to information presentation, questioning and control. In the later junior classes, teacher and pupils asked more questions of each other; questions became more information-specific, and feedback more focused.

At the beginning of the school year, the major expectations for Year 3 pupils involved evaluation of the teacher and shared activities. The term evaluation refers to such qualities as being 'nice' and 'considerate'. Therefore, the development of the teacher-pupil relationships in this age group is also described in terms of shared activities (i.e. how often do they spend time with the teacher, etc). In addition, being able to 'help the teacher' was often mentioned as a positive experience by pupils, for example, if a pupil is asked to help with the Christmas decorations when they have finished work, they saw this, not only as a reward, but also as an indication that the teacher likes them.

Any decline of the relationship appeared to be due largely to conflict and ego-degrading experiences. For example, a pupil being punished for something that was not her/his fault, or not being asked to help when they have done the same amount of work as those who have been asked, experienced a feeling of unfairness. In Year 6, loyalty and commitment were viewed as essential qualities in a teacher, but the core growth experiences were quite similar to the findings for Year 3. That is, the older pupils were always aware of injustice and reacted to the ego-reinforcing/degrading experiences in the same ways. The decline of the relationships was described in terms of loyalty, for example, there was a greater reliance on teacher-pupil trust as the pupils got older and they were, therefore, more reactive when this trust was broken.

Throughout the school year, systematic experience-related changes took place in the way young children perceived other people. The Year 3 pupils attended to 'here and now' aspects of the teacher and other children; while the Year 6 children gave an increasing emphasis to more abstract and inferred characteristics such as personality traits and dispositions. By the time the pupils had a second interview (summer term), a majority were aware that experiences leading to knowledge and evaluation are strongly based on activities or actions in the classroom in which both teachers and

pupils participated. Consequently, they accepted that the more often they worked/spent time with the teacher, the more this would enhance the teacher-pupil relationship and, in turn, enhance their learning experiences.

However, at the start of junior school, pupils in both of the Year 3 classes began noting that, whereas the teacher often moved around the classroom to give attention to children, they, as pupils, were not able to do so. Teachers were acknowledged as controlling their behaviour as well as teaching them. They also found towards the end of the year that, in general, teachers showed fewer signs of help, sympathy, joint activity and overt praise. Pupils maintained their interest and attention in the teacher throughout the years of the primary school, but they began to pay additional attention to their peers.

This peer dependence (or independence from the teacher) was directly age related from the findings of this study. It was not observed in the Year 3 classes (maybe because the pupils tended not to have the same confidence and trust within their friendships, or perhaps the situation did not require it), however, the girls in both Year 6 classes were noticeably divided into independent groups. This caused some problems at St. Stephen's where the group of girls wanted to work completely independently of the teacher and the rest of the class. The teacher's reaction to this attitude was often met with resentment and the craving for further independence.

ii) *Impact of pupil gender on relationships*

The four teachers, all of whom were female, generally saw their relationships with individual girls as being less confrontational than those with individual boys. Girls were generally considered to be more open, trusting and willing to please. Alternatively, while it was considered easier to 'joke' with boys, girls were said to be more likely to be cheeky, volatile, and have less self-control.

Galton et al (1999) found that girls received the same amount of teacher time and more of the teacher's overall attention. This study found, however, that, with regard to interactions, the boys tended to have slightly more verbal and non-verbal contact than girls.

iii) *Impact of socio-economic status on relationships*

The issue of socio-economic status had a different impact on the formation and development of perceptions for teachers than gender, since most of the sample children within each class were from a homogenous group. Hence the individual relationships formed did not generally take account of the

social background of the individual child. However, the teachers were aware of the "type of school" they were working in and, therefore, took relevant circumstances into account on a general basis. For example, at Redhill there were a number of incidents where lack of funds at home prevented attendance on school trips or advancement in literacy, and resulted in the bullying of the child concerned. St. Stephen's, although in a much more affluent area of the city, was also aware of the bullying that could take place when one pupil did not have the same as everyone else.

However, only two teachers, both in Year 3 classes, saw socio-economic status as being an important element in their relationships with pupils. One claimed that her relationships were enhanced by living within the area from which the school drew its pupils, while the second saw biased attitudes learned at home as being a possible inhibitor in the forging of links with children in her care.

By the end of the school year, teachers admitted to having become more sensitive to the diversity in the classroom and particularly to gender differences. In three cases out of four, based on their experience, teachers expected boys to behave in a more disruptive manner than girls. They perceived that bad conduct by pupils of ethnic difference seemed to be based on a lack of positive male role models in the home and parents' distrust of the school system. Differences in class were not perceived to have caused problems since the four schools studied drew on homogeneous areas.

Impact of individual pupil difference on pupils

Despite consistent academic enquiry, what constitutes a 'good' teacher remains opaque (Pollard et al, 1994; Pollard with Filer, 1996). It is impossible to isolate any particular trait which leads to the production of 'good' teaching, since such teaching results from the complex relationships between teacher and pupil, relationships which are constantly being negotiated within the flux of daily school life. Nevertheless, it is clear that pupils' relationships with teachers can profoundly influence pupils' perceptions towards school (Mac an Ghail, 1988; Day et al, 2009; Kington et al, 2007).

Approaches used to analyse classroom behaviour in terms of the differential treatment of pupils (Davies, 1984; Kington et al, in press) tend to assume that the behaviour of teachers is constant, whereas in reality such behaviour is complex, variable and context specific. For this project, information was gathered regarding pupils' perceptions of their teacher and what makes an 'ideal teacher'. This highlighted the numerous types of teacher-pupil relationships in existence in addition

to the types of relationships which pupils prefer to have. The information provided revealed explicit gender differences between the pupils' perceptions of their relationship with the teacher.

The majority of pupils in all classes reported that they 'got on with' their teacher; the majority of those who responded negatively were boys, thus reinforcing the teachers' opinions regarding the potential difficulty between female teachers and boys. However, when the pupils were asked what they liked about their teacher, a more specific picture emerged. The class of the Redhill Year 6 teacher provided the most positive profile, including comments such as 'kind', 'encouraging', and 'a good teacher'. The most negative response came from the class of the St. Stephen's Year 6 teacher where the majority of participant pupils reported that there was nothing about her that they liked.

Nearly the entire sample of children felt that boys and girls were treated differently in class. Over half of the boys thought that girls were told off less than boys and that girls generally had more choice in class. A small number of boys and girls thought that girls were told off more than boys, and half of the girls thought that boys talked more than girls. These figures tended to polarise the traditional opinions that the genders hold of each other; that females perceive males as noisier and males see females as escaping criticism more often (Wilkinson & Marrett, 1985).

These findings suggested a gender bias. For example, whilst it was clear that the boys perceived their relationships with the teachers in terms of authority and control, this did not preclude 'good' teacher-pupil relationships. In a number of cases, this fact provided them with a well-defined limitational framework on which to build. Consequently, those teachers with whom the boys felt they had the most ideal relationship, were those who could both control the class and relate to the boys by 'having a laugh', thus making the lessons enjoyable and interesting.

Inevitably, only two of the teachers (both at Redhill) were able to strike this balance as a number of boys believed that some of their teachers spent what they considered to be too much time attempting to control the class instead of teaching. In comparison, a number of the boys at St. Stephen's stated that it was also important for teachers to impart knowledge both efficiently and confidently. Consequently, most of the boys perceived teacher-pupil relationships to be far from ideal. The majority of boys in the sample tended to perceive their relationships with their teacher as one in which teachers are rather distant figures of authority who do their job with varying levels of success.

In relation to girls, the findings revealed that they positively preferred the teacher to be in control/strong disciplinarians, as they perceive that these qualities are representative of good teaching. It is in this way that the girls are able to gauge which teachers are worth listening to and worth building a relationship with. The majority of girls in this study voiced their preference to build a 'caring' relationship with their teachers, whom they feel ought to be encouraging, understanding and, above all, fair. Unlike the boys, these girls felt that teacher-pupil relationships should not be based on unequal power, but on an equal footing in which mutual respect prevails. This would then provide a platform from which to establish a 'meaningful' relationship which would foster, what they consider to be, an ideal learning relationship.

The findings of this study revealed that, apart from the Year 6 class at Redhill, very few girls felt they had anything remotely resembling ideal relationships with their teacher. For example, the same year group of girls at Redhill were alone in feeling that the teacher wanted to form a relationship with them and did not spend most of the time ignoring them, as other girls did. In contrast, a significant proportion of the girls who perceived their relationships with the teacher in a negative light, stated that the teacher was intent on unnecessarily imposing her authority and demanding respect, rather than working towards creating relationships which would earn their respect. This inevitably led to the development of strained relationships which manifested themselves as control and discipline problems, or as strategies employed to minimise contact/conflict whilst simultaneously maximising the remaining opportunities for learning (Wilkinson & Marrett, 1985).

The findings of this study also revealed a distinct gender difference between the pupils' perceptions of their teacher's expectations, with the boys holding far more positive perceptions than the girls. This may be because the boys tended to perceive relationships with the teacher according to a different set of criteria from the girls or because their needs – whether behavioural or work-related – were attended to more often and more quickly than those of girls (Mahony, 1985;Wolpe, 1988). The findings also suggested that the gender difference was reinforced further by the variable of socio-economic status for the boys. For example, the Year 6 boys at Redhill generally perceived their teachers to hold positive expectations of them and this, combined with their generally stable relationships with them, enabled these boys to perceive teachers as a positive influence on their school experience. In contrast, the boys at St. Stephen's generally seem to perceive their teacher and their teacher's expectations of them with an air of resigned indifference, which they felt had little influence on their experience of school.

The study suggests that the girls at St. Stephen's generally held negative perceptions of their teachers whom they felt had low expectations of them. They perceived their teachers as having little interest, respect or understanding for them. Nevertheless, the girls refused to allow their negative perceptions of their teacher's expectations to influence their attitude to school, rather tending to view their teachers in instrumental terms i.e. the means by which to acquire knowledge (Abbott, 1996). In contrast, the girls at Redhill perceived their teacher as having quite high expectations of them, although some of them believed they had little time to help or explain things to them, whilst having enough time to 'pick' on them or discipline them in a way which the girls considered unfair. In addition, the majority of these girls developed strategies in order to 'get by'.

Conclusion

Rather than a specific type of teacher-pupil relationship in both age groups, a range of relationships was found to occur. Individual differences as well as the perception of relationships as dynamic and continuously developing made it difficult to establish general statements about a specific type of teacher-pupil relationship. This was partly due to the fact that each teacher-pupil relationship develops dynamically between two individuals, therefore, no two relationships were identical. Many factors contributed to the formulation and development of such relationships. However, this study focused on age, gender and socio-economic status and found that each variable, although equally important, had varying degrees of effect on the relationships. All four teachers altered, in some cases quite dramatically, their style of teaching and communication having regard for these factors.

Finally, the children involved in the study also had certain perceptions of teacher-pupil relationships which they displayed in their relationship with the teacher. They also reflected upon them in their interviews while describing the formation and development of the relationships. This proved valuable since even if the children's concepts of the relationship were 'immature' or limited in their reflection of social processes, they were still able to use and refer to these tools in their discussion of the relationship. Differentiation of their relationships compared with other pupils' experiences was made on the basis of frequency and intensity of interactions and these differentiations characterised the awareness of the importance of these relationships for children.

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