Defining Teachers' Classroom Relationships

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Introduction

The study of social development in children differs from the study of cognitive development in that it does not solely focus on the process of development and acquisition of knowledge, but considers the constraints (situational and interpersonal) that are apparent during this process. Children entering school already have a long history of social learning, bringing with them perceptions of the self and of their social environment. However, social learning in early years has taken place mainly within the family and supervised play-groups. During this process of socialisation, an important component of the culture which the child adopts, and a significant determinant of his/her needs and self-perceptions is the element of grouping. Even while the child's experience is limited within the bounds of the family, values of group interaction enter into his/her world because they are part of the family life and customs. When that experience extends to school, there is greater opportunity for encounter with cultural values of other groups, which widen the child's experience. Schooling covers a broad area of intellectual and social development, much of which takes place under the direction of the main agent in the classroom, the teacher. Evidently interactions between teacher and pupil have profound effects upon the formation of social skills. The teacher mediates between a child and society, while schooling provides the practice arena for the child's social behaviour.

This chapter presents selected findings from a small-scale, exploratory study of teacher-pupil relationships. The study employed both observation and interview techniques with children and teachers in order to provide a description and understanding of teacher-pupil relationships 'in context'. However, a further method was also used that was based on teachers' own ideas and feelings regarding classroom relationships. Such an instrument is the repertory grid interview, the practical method based on Kelly's personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955). It is this method that is the focus of this chapter.

The aim of the project was twofold: i) to develop a method with which a teacher's classroom relationships could be discussed from his/her perspective; and, ii) to assess the method and to explore the perceived qualities, as well as elements of the formation and development of teacher-pupil relationships. The study considered aspects of school life such as classroom context and organisation in terms of opportunity for interaction and reinforcement of positive relationships, as well as investigating some of the possible pervasive influences on teacher perceptions and expectations. The findings reported in this chapter advocate that the nature of these relationships has great significance when related to their manifestation and use in everyday interactions, and that continuity of positive feedback and shared activities are important as a means of emphasising a sense of reciprocity between teacher and pupil.

Theoretical background

For brevity, a review of the current literature in this area will not be included as it can be found elsewhere (e.g. Kington, 2001; Kington, 2005). However, a brief overview of personal construct theory and the repertory grid technique is detailed below.

Personal Construct Theory

Personal construct theory was proposed by George Kelly. According to Kelly (1955), a person tries to organize experiences in a way that is meaningful for them. Observations

are made about the environment, and hypotheses are put forward, tested, and a theory is developed. Every experience is filtered through personal constructs. Constructs created in different situations are built into a construct system which can both define thinking and actions, and affect personality when talking and acting. Kelly (1955) formed a *fundamental postulate*, as follows:

> *A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he anticipates events.* (Kelly, 1955: 46)

Kelly characterises the central concept of '*construct'* in his theory, as follows:

> *Let us give the name constructs to these patterns that are tentatively tried on for size. They are ways of construing the world. They are what enables man, and lower animals too, to chart a course of behaviour, explicitly formulated or implicitly acted out, verbally expressed or utterly inarticulate, consistent with other courses of behaviour or inconsistent with them, intellectually reasoned or vegetatively sensed.* (Kelly, 1955: 9)

Kelly (1955) considered constructs bipolar, in order to stress their dichotomous nature. They have two extremes, e.g. honest vs. dishonest. Another central concept in Kelly's theory is that of the '*element'* that is explained as '*The things or events which are abstracted by a construct'* (ibid: 137). Thus a construct is characterised through its elements, and with elements an individual can describe phenomena through which they exist. Such phenomena are, for example, persons, events, objects, ideas, etc.

The repertory grid interview
In addition to philosophy and theory, Kelly (1955) developed a method for data gathering called the repertory grid technique. This technique gives an holistic view of the individual, and enables them to do so in their own terms. Whereas other techniques – such as questionnaires, attitude scales, or observation techniques – presuppose that one can use the terms offered by others, the repertory grid technique allows the participant to discover personal constructs in terms of how they experience attitudes, thoughts, and feelings in a personally valid way (Solas, 1992). The grid technique has been used a number of times in the past with individual teachers (Oberg, 1986; Shaw & Thomas, 1982). Diamond (1988) concluded that 'the grids proved a useful, speculative tool which reflected back to the teachers their changing views of themselves and teaching as seen through their own eyes' (p 176).

For the purposes of this study, the repertory grid interview was conducted by following four steps:

i)   The teacher is asked to produce a list of people who are important to him/her (e.g. mother, father, sister, etc.) or describe significant incidents / turning points in their professional life. These may come from present as well as past experiences. The situations, people and/or events form the elements of the grid, with the teacher included as the most significant element.

ii) The teacher is given a triad of these people and asked to think about how two of them are similar to each other, and at the same time differ from the third. All of the elements are included in one or more triads. The categories obtained formed the constructs (Ingvarson & Greenway, 1984; Fransella *et al*, 2003). Based on these elements and constructs, a matrix is formed (elements in columns, constructs in rows).

iii) The teacher is asked to rate the matrix.

iv) Factor analysis is applied in order to condense the information obtained.

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Research design
The sample
Four teachers were involved in the study; however, the data for only one of these teachers is presented here. Linda[1] was a Year 3 (7-8 yrs old) teacher in her early thirties. She had worked at the school for nine months and prior to that had completed a year and a half of supply teaching in and around the local area. Linda worked at Greenacre Primary School, which was a maintained County primary school for children aged 4-11 years. The school opened in 1880 but had only been in existence as a primary (elementary) school since 1984. There were 15 classes, with one class designated for children with Special Educational Needs. The school was well equipped and was located on the edge of some playing fields used by the school for football and other sporting activities.

Data collection
Prior to the repertory grid interview being administered, evidence was collected via semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, 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).

The opportunity for in-depth description of relationships was also 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. Finally, diaries were also used to illuminate further the teachers' perceptions and feelings about the relationships.

A complex profile was compiled for each teacher which comprised:
- a general description of the day's lessons focusing on the teacher's behaviour;
- verbatim notes of teacher and pupil interactions, including examples of when the teacher talked about or expressed feelings with the class, used praise, built on the ideas of the pupils, used criticism, etc;
- a diagrammatic representation of the classroom seating plan.

In order to understand the nature of teacher-pupil relationships it was also necessary to consider what was happening between the teacher and pupils in relation to:
- each participant's behaviour and understanding within the relationship
- the setting (class organisation, space)
- the dynamics of the relationship (roles, changes in behaviour etc)
- the context of the relationship as defined gradually by the participants (in context, in time).

The repertory grid interview was presented to each of the teachers as an empty table, i.e. the teacher contributed all of the material in order to construct her perceptions. Since these interviews generate plenty of rich data, factor analysis was used to condense it and determine the nature of underlying patterns among a large number of variables. In order to strengthen the reliability of the results, the structure of perceptions was shown to the individual participant teachers so that they could reflect on their thinking and understanding.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

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The repertory grid interviews were conducted in the school, during the school day. Each teacher participated in four interview sessions, each taking approximately one hour. In order to elicit the elements for the grid, each teacher was asked a series of questions. The responses formed a list of positive and negative relationships characteristics which were used as the elements of the repertory grid. When continuing with the grid, the elements were written on cards which the participant could physically arrange. Variations of this approach have been previously used with teachers (e.g. Day *et al*, 2008). Once all the elements had been written on individual cards, they were given to the teacher and she was asked to confirm that they were the same ones she had described. Each teacher was given an opportunity to change wordings as well as to add or to remove properties during the interview.

Each teacher was then asked to choose cards that described themselves as a teacher and which best described the relationships they had developed in the classroom. The 16 elements elicited from Linda, as well as the eventual codes given for these elements, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Elements elicited from Linda and groupings

ELEMENTS	GROUPINGS
Liking Shared construction	Contextual understanding of classroom relationships
Caring Questioning Feedback Daily rituals Rules	Classroom interaction
Clarity Flexibility Organisation	Teacher expectations of pupils
Approachability Discipline Respect Sensitivity Loyalty Dependence on peers	Teacher perceptions of relationships with pupils

The second step in the interview was to ask Linda to sort the cards (elements) in an arbitrary way that made sense to her. At the same time she selected the constructs that she connected with her own classroom relationships. Having grouped the constructs, Linda was asked to describe the groupings (i.e. the similarities of the elements in each group) and write them on cards. These are given in Table 1. Furthermore, Table 1 also shows which elements belong to each grouping.

The structure of Table 1 was used as a starting point for the next step. Linda was asked to describe differences between the groupings, comparing them in pairs. According to Kelly (1955) the similarities and differences are described as constructs and, since in the repertory grid technique constructs are considered bipolar, Linda was also asked to determine the opposite of each construct, and write these on the cards. At the same time, she explained which pole of the construct best described her classroom relationships. Table 2 shows the constructs (and their opposites) given by Linda.

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Table 2: Linda's constructs

Construct	Opposite pole
Pupil likes the teacher	Pupil does not get along with teacher
Teacher and pupil work together in learning process	Pupil does not want to work with the teacher in learning
Teacher cares	Teacher does not show caring
Teacher uses questions to elicit interest from pupil	Teacher does not ask questions
Teacher gives positive feedback to pupil	Teacher does not give feedback
Clear rituals within the school day	Day is chaotic and not structured
Class rules are established at the beginning of the relationship	No rules
Teacher is clear about expectations	No clear expectations
Teacher shows flexibility in expectations	Expectations are rigid
Good classroom organisation	No organisation in the classroom
Teacher is approachable	Teacher is not approachable
Good standard of behaviour and discipline	Behaviour and discipline is poor
Teacher shows respect for pupils	No respect for pupils
Teacher is sensitive to pupil needs	No sensitivity to pupil needs
Teacher shows loyalty to pupils	No loyalty
Teacher encourages dependence on peers	Teacher discourages dependence on peers

For the second interview, the elements and constructs were set into a grid where elements were in columns, and constructs were in rows. A copy of the grid was given to Linda, and she was asked to rate every box in the grid on a scale of 1 – 5 (1=the construct was not important to the element, 5=the construct was very important to the element).

Factor analysis
Due to the amount of data generated via the grids – the 16 x 16 matrix with value loadings from 1 to 5 - factor analysis was employed to reduce the information in order to determine relationships and structures among constructs. When implementing the factor analysis, two constructs ('teacher shows loyalty to pupils' and 'teacher encourages dependence on peers') were removed because they showed no variance (i.e. all their ratings were the same (5)). The factor analysis resulted in a three-factor solution.

Since the purpose of the study was to define classroom relationships through the perspective of a teacher, Linda was asked to validate the findings during a third interview. She was shown the results of the factor analysis and asked to comment on the four-factor solution (which was explained in advance). As she was happy with the solution, Linda was then asked to rank the categories. As the next step, the factor analysis with three factors was implemented, and the solution was shown once more to Linda (Table 3).

Discussion
Context for relationship development
Linda commented on the notion of 'liking' developed through familiarisation, shared construction, and knowledge of the relationship. The opportunity and time children had to interact with the teacher was said to be significant. Limited positive interactions and controlled impositions by the teacher (seating arrangements or interruptions of interactions) sometimes diminished the shared opportunities with the teacher and opportunities to experience reciprocity in their relationship. Conversely, pupils whose development led to an increased number of social encounters were said to enjoy more opportunities to learn about others and about relationships.

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Table 3: Linda's perspective on good classroom relationships

CONSTRUCTS	FACTORS
Pupil likes the teacher Teacher shows respect for pupils Teacher cares Teacher is approachable	Context for relationship development (1)
Teacher is sensitive to pupil needs Clear rituals within the school day Class rules are established at the beginning of the relationship Teacher is clear about expectations Teacher shows flexibility in expectations Teacher gives positive feedback to pupil Teacher uses questions to elicit interest from pupil	Positive interaction (2)
Good classroom organisation Teacher and pupil work together in learning process Good standard of behaviour and discipline	Teacher expectations (3)

Linda reported that this factor was further related to the dynamics between the social networks, and pupil dependence and independence in their relationships with the teacher. She said that, in her experience, children would define their relationships by the relationships other children had with the same teacher, rather than in relation to the qualities of their own relationships. This concern was intrinsically linked to a pupil's awareness of the status of their relationship with the teacher compared with other developing relationships in the class.

The building of trust was another aspect relationship development. According to Linda, this trust was grounded in the care and consistency demonstrated over a period of time, in which a teacher's concern was reflected in response to an individual pupil and the actions they were prepared to take in order to support and develop the child and their relationship. Behaviour that potentially undermined this trust, was said to include inconsistent application of the rules, escalation of situations due to immediate use of sanctions, and humiliating pupil in front of peers.

Finally, Linda discussed reciprocity as an instrumental aspect of teacher-pupil relationships in the sense that if the teacher demonstrated a negative attitude to the pupil, the pupil would react negatively to the teacher. Lack of reciprocity, expressed usually through bad or unfriendly behaviour, was a potential cause of breakdown of the relationship. To elaborate, a teacher and pupil were said to have a good relationship if the esteem/respect that one expressed toward the other was reciprocated.

Positive interaction
Linda thought that an important principle in the development of relationships was proximity. This did not guarantee that a 'good' relationship would develop; however, it seemed that pupils needed to see, hear and interact with the teacher regularly and consistently. Closely related to proximity was the consistency of the relationship, which was demonstrated by the teacher in the form of verbal and non-verbal communication. This consistency could be at any level – personal or institutional.

The importance for the teacher to be genuine in their teaching, according to Linda, was associated with the need to maintain communication, to reduce barriers, and for new

ideas to be considered. She went on to state that the intensity and strength of the relationship depended on the status of the pupil and their willingness to exhibit genuine feelings to the teacher rather than attempt to seek attention. The pupils who were more successful in the development of their relationships were those who acknowledged and accepted the fact that, although the relationship could be reciprocal, it was unequal.

Pupils enjoyed sharing time with the teacher, but the ways in which this manifested itself in classroom interactions differed according to the specific relationship rituals and the individuals concerned. Linda stated that daily rituals provided a vehicle through which the teacher might establish relationships with the pupils. For example, the first ritual of the day, taking the register, offered an opportunity for the reinforcement of relationships from the previous day. The classroom rules also provided a framework for the stabilising of relationships within the group and with the teacher. Pupils who were involved at an early stage in the formation of these rules were provided with an initial bonding experience with the teacher as well as enhancing their own commitment to the rules.

Teacher expectations
Linda commented that clear expectations about the level of ability within their classes in terms of academic and social skills were important. She expected to take on a strongly nurturant/pastoral role with the class, as well as the rigorous daily curriculum. Her day had a relatively flexible structure, mainly due to reliance on outside help from parents or classroom assistants. However, there was also a focus on independent learning, with an emphasis on organisation of work and time.

The need for the teacher to be approachable and to provide a secure environment where pupils could be happy and confident was said to be vital. 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. Participation in the management of their learning experience was also reported by Linda as essential for all pupils since this enabled their progress both academically and as active members of the class group.

Conclusions
Through the repertory grid interviews, Linda provided her explanation of a positive teacher-pupil relationship. During interviews she was compelled to consider issues that she had not reflected on previously. Rather than a specific type of teacher-pupil relationship, a range of relationships was found to occur for this teacher. 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.

This research suggests that, in order to understand classroom relationships, one should perceive them as a dynamic, developing and contextual process. Dynamic in the sense that they involve more than one person in the negotiation and construction of shared meanings; developing because relationships continuously change in various ways; and contextual in the sense that teacher-pupil relationships, as a process, take place within a certain definable context.

Inferences made about teacher-pupil relationships have to take into account the individual differences of the teachers and pupils involved in the study, the interpersonal competencies, context of the relationship, and the methods used to approach and understand these. The repertory grid technique gleaned more reliable information than with more traditional semi-structured approaches, since although less flexible, the starting point is the participant's own thoughts, ideas and experiences. Therefore, the

discussion revolves completely around what is important to them. However, there are weaknesses to this method – it is a lengthy process and one that can be mentally and emotionally exhausting for the participants as they are required to reflect on their own thinking, reasoning and practice. Although the development of a relationship with participants over time can be an advantage to a study of this kind, the use of such a method could also result in participant fatigue and retention issues. In spite of this, the methodological implications of this study provide an important critique towards the methods often used in the study of classroom relationships. Consistent observations of the relationship proved to be an essential base for the conduct of the interviews with participants and the understanding of the importance of the responses.

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