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Working relationally with shy students: Pedagogical insights from teachers and students

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ABSTRACT

Shy children can find engaging with classroom demands challenging, inhibiting their development as agentic learners. In the present study, seven Norwegian elementary school teachers with acknowledged success with shy students were observed teaching and then interviewed about their observed pedagogies. A shy child in each class was also interviewed. Both sets of interviews were analysed drawing on concepts from cultural-historical theory: relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency. Analyses revealed that teachers employed relational expertise to build common knowledge (understandings of their and the child's motive orientations) with each student. Common knowledge then mediated the unfolding of the child's agency as an engaged learner. The study offers unique insights into how shy children can be supported as learners.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that shyness might go unnoticed in school, possibly because the behaviours pose few overt challenges to classroom management (Keogh, 2003). However, growing evidence has accumulated on the academic and interpersonal difficulties that shy children can experience in school (Crozier, 2020; Evans, 2010; Kalutskaya et al., 2015). Perhaps due to these findings, teachers now appear to be increasingly aware of shy students' difficulties and are implementing a range of interventions to help overcome them (Coplan et al., 2011; Nadiv & Ricon, 2020; Thijs et al., 2006).

We present analyses which reveal the sensitive support that elementary school teachers can offer shy children in their classrooms and discuss the implications for schools. We draw on interview data from the first phase of a national study,¹ where we interviewed Norwegian teachers who were recognised as being successful in their work with shy students. Seven of the teachers in this phase of the study were also observed while teaching and a shy child in each of their classes was interviewed. The analyses here are based on these seven parallel sets of interviews. Our independent readings of the interview transcripts from both sets of informants showed how well

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the teachers knew the children and that the students were aware of teachers' strategies and intentions. This observation led us to an analysis of what constituted these strong and effective relationships between teacher and student.

We therefore address two issues that have so far received little research attention. The first is to reveal the processes through which changes over time in a shy child as learner are brought about. Recognising that student-teacher relations are crucial for shy students, we do this by examining how teacher and child worked *relationally* together. Doing so allows us to make a second contribution to the field of pedagogies for shy children. Previous research has relied on teachers' reports on their use of strategies (e.g., Coplan et al., 2011; Nyborg et al., 2020). Yet, student perspectives are also important, not least for ethical reasons. To our knowledge, no previous research has investigated *students'* views on the nature of their interactions and relationships with teachers - or directly compared teachers' and students' perspectives.

We draw on Vygotskian cultural-historical approaches to studying children as learners to explore the perspectives of teachers and students and examine their motive orientations, what they orient towards in activities (Hedegaard, 2014). This focus highlights the emotional aspects of learning (e.g., Damasio, 1999; Pekrun et al., 2017) and has allowed us to reveal shifts in children's agency as learners. This unfolding of agency was examined in the context of the relationships that the teachers built with the children and was analysed by employing cultural-historical understandings of how relationships can enable agency (Edwards, 2010, 2017). Therefore, the present study aims to reveal the insights that are afforded by taking a *relational* approach to analysing the pedagogies of teachers working with shy children.

2. Shyness in school

Shyness is a temperamental trait characterised by wariness and anxiety in the face of social novelty and perceived social evaluation (Rubin et al., 2009). Among children from elementary-school age onward, shyness is also associated with self-consciousness, embarrassment, and fear of being negatively evaluated (Crozier, 1995). From a motivational perspective (Asendorpf, 1990), shyness is thought to reflect an underlying approach-avoidance conflict, whereby the desire to engage with peers (high social approach motivation) is simultaneously inhibited by social fears and anxieties (high social avoidance motivation). Shyness shares conceptual overlap with several other constructs pertaining to aspects of social wariness, including behavioural inhibition (Kagan, 1997) and anxious solitude (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003).

Research shows that shy children can encounter emotional and interpersonal difficulties in elementary school (Kalutskaya et al., 2015), including internalising difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) and negative peer experiences (e.g., exclusion, victimisation) (Coplan et al., 2013; Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Hanish & Guerra, 2004; Karevold et al., 2012). Perhaps as a result, shy children tend to perform less well academically relative to their more sociable elementary school classmates (Crozier, 2020; Crozier & Hostettler, 2003). In a systematic review of 26 published studies, Evans (2010) identified consistent modest negative correlations between shyness and attainments in numeracy and literacy. Shy children also obtain lower scores relative to their peers on measures of language development (Evans, 2010; Hughes & Coplan, 2010; Spere & Evans, 2009). These studies further demonstrate that lower test scores are more pronounced on measures of expressive vocabulary. Although it is debated whether this trend reflects underlying competence or the effects of anxiety upon performance, shy children's difficulties may impact on their attainments more generally. That shy children are at risk academically is unsurprising given the considerable importance accorded in current pedagogies to students' oral participation in class (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

Teachers' descriptions emphasise shy students' withdrawn behaviours, anxiety, and low self-esteem: shy students try to avoid making mistakes in class, appear fearful, seek stability, need to be in control and are over-dependent on adults (Mjelve et al., 2019; Mjelve et al., 2022). Observational studies of their behaviour in the classroom find that they tend to be quiet across a range of situations in school: they volunteer fewer contributions, respond less frequently to direct questions and to questions directed at the whole class (Evans, 2010).

Several studies have investigated teachers' intervention strategies for helping shy children. In an early study, Brophy and Bohrkemper (1989) interviewed a sample of experienced teachers about their general strategies for working with shy and withdrawn students in grades kindergarten to six and elicited the teachers' responses to vignettes describing hypothetical shy students. Three general strategies were commonly mentioned: (1) modelling and instruction to encourage greater participation; (2) attempts to provide a supportive environment for the child and boost their self-esteem; and (3) shaping desirable behaviours. Frequently used strategies included enlisting peer support, assignment to specific roles in the classroom, reassurance, and praise for academic success.

More recent studies have identified other approaches, including modelling behaviours, providing verbal encouragement and praise, indirect strategies (e.g., seeking information from colleagues), and encouraging joint activities and play with other children (Coplan et al., 2011; Deng et al., 2017; Nadiv & Ricon, 2020; Thijs et al., 2006). Bosacki et al. (2014) reported teachers' efforts at: understanding the reasons for shy students' quietness, recognition of the importance of developing the child's trust, and offering socio-emotional support. Nyborg et al. (2020) recently asked teachers about strategies targeted at anxiety reduction among shy students. The most frequent responses included opportunities for private practice prior to asking specific questions in class, breaking tasks requiring oral performance into manageable components, setting explicit classroom rules for responding to student presentations, and careful selection of partners for learning pairs. They reported positive changes in their shy students. It is therefore important to investigate the processes underlying these changes.

Researchers are paying increased attention to the *quality* of the relationships between shy students and their teachers (Chen et al., 2021; Sette et al., 2021). Shy students tend to form more dependent relationships with their teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rydell et al., 2005). However, establishing a positive student-teacher relationship also appears to be particularly beneficial to shy students in terms of promoting positive outcomes at school (Arbeau et al., 2010). In this regard, a close examination of teachers'

relationships with shy students may be of particular value.

3. A cultural-historical approach to studying pedagogy

The present study attempts to capture the detail of the relationship between teacher and shy child, while recognising the emotional aspects of children's participation in classroom life. The slippery concept of children's agency is key to this participation. A special issue of *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* tackled the need for what the editors described as a nuanced view of agency and how that may help us understand how it is manifested in educational settings (Rajala et al., 2016). Our intention is to contribute to the discussions they initiated with a clear focus on the developing agency of shy children as learners.

The cultural-historical approach we take moves beyond the frequently invoked interactionist view of agency. Priestley et al. (2015), distinguishing between 'agency as a variable, agency as a capacity and agency as phenomenon' (p. 20), concluded that it is an emergent phenomenon that arises in people's actions in their worlds. We would agree. These actions involve judgments and intentions as one navigates one's way through the demands and opportunities of practices. Priestley et al. (2015) from their interactionist standpoint, offer what they describe as an ecological view of agency that recognises a dynamic relationship between individuals and their social environments.

A cultural-historical approach to this relationship, however, takes a more dialectical view of personal agency and the cultures people inhabit, relating the relationship directly to learning. Galperin's approach exemplifies this. He argued that culture formed the internal plane, where internalisation occurred. While mental acts are a means of externalisation as we act on the world (Galperin, 1976, cited in Arieivitch, 2003). Arieivitch noted that in this way Galperin acknowledged the role of culture in learning and development without abandoning the individual (Arieivitch, 2003), a point elaborated by Stetsenko and Arieivitch (2004) and Stetsenko (2017).

Our framing therefore means that we see children as active agents, with feelings, values, and interests, acting in and on an environment so that they are shaped by the environment, but also shape it. In brief, child and environment are a unity in a dialectical relationship with each other. Therefore, when studying learning and development we need to attend to that unity, how it is structured, and taken forward (Kellogg & Veresov, 2020). Vygotsky (1998) labelled the connections that comprise the unity and their implications for learning and development as the child's "social situation of development" which becomes the path "along which the social becomes the individual" (p. 198). In summary, a child creates their personal social situation of development through their engagement with what is valued in the practices they inhabit and their agency is evidenced in their propelling themselves forward in their social situations of development.

The emotional aspects of this motivated engagement are crucial, but Vygotsky died young, before elaborating the relationship between affect and learning. This part of his legacy has been taken up by others, for example A.N. Leontiev (1978) with the idea of object motive. Discussing how object motive connects the object of activity with the motive that creates engagement with the activity, his explanation is a little opaque. He explained: "The main thing that distinguished one activity from another, however, is the difference in their objects. It is exactly the object of activity, that gives it a determined direction. According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of activity is its true motive" (p. 17). Of course, people might interpret an object of activity in different ways. For example, a teacher may interpret an oral presentation as an object of activity that is an important step in their aim to develop children's oral competence; whereas a shy child may interpret the same task as an unnecessary hurdle they will try to avoid. We should therefore recognise the emotional element in the judgments and intentions of the child in relation to a task. Elkonin (1999) clarifies this connection between affect and learning by arguing that children's motives always develop before their competences, therefore we need to attend to them. As we shall see the teachers in this study worked hard at sustaining the shy children emotionally.

This emphasis on the connection between motive and learning is not unique to a cultural-historical approach; but the dialectical unity of the social situation of development opens up a way of strongly connecting children's developmental trajectories with the institutional practices in which they learn and develop. Hedegaard (2014) has progressed this strand of work with her concept of motive orientation. She explains: "Motive development can then be seen as a movement initiated by the learner's emotional experience related to the activity setting." (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 21). Motive orientation involves affect and gives direction to how children interpret and take actions to respond to the demands, the objects of activity, they recognise in a practice. It is a personal response, which involves children's sense of their own competence in the field of action.

Clarke et al. (2016) in their contribution to the special issue noted how difficult it was for teachers to recognise children's lack and emergence of agency, but how important it is for children's engagement in activities that take them forward as learners. They found that low agency students discussed how they were positioned in relation to high agency students in classroom discussions and that a fear of being seen to be wrong inhibited their participation. The team concluded that classroom social structures produced and maintained differences in how student agency was enacted. Only one of the low agency children, Kim, described herself as sometimes shy, suggesting that the findings we shall discuss may have implications for reluctant participators beyond our target group.

Teachers have crucial roles in creating and sustaining these social structures and the relationships within them. Relationships with others are where children's motive orientations develop (Elkonin, 1999; Lisina, 1985). These relationships orient children to what is salient in the practices they inhabit. The practices of schools are shaped by explicit and implicit expectations of behaviour, largely orchestrated by teachers. One part of the teacher's role is to nurture motive orientations that lead to children's engagement with the cognitive demands of classroom tasks (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013).

In our analyses, we drew on a related set of cultural-historical concepts to examine how these social structures can be shifted to enhance the unfolding of student agency in school activities. In brief, we examined how teachers nurtured the motive orientations of shy children, and over time enabled their agentic engagement with the demands of classroom life while creating their social situations

of development. The three concepts are: relational expertise, common knowledge, and relational agency. They were developed initially to explain successful inter-professional collaboration (Edwards, 2005, 2010, 2011); but have subsequently been employed in a wide range of settings to explain different forms of collaboration (Edwards, 2017; Hopwood & Edwards, 2017). Latterly they have also been used to begin to understand pedagogical relationships (Rai, 2019; Shires, 2021).

Relational expertise in teaching includes the capacity to elicit the motive orientations of learners in relation to a task and to be explicit about one's own motive orientations as a teacher. Rai (2019) employed the concept to explain how primary age children are oriented towards active engagement with classroom demands; whereas Shires' (2021) analyses of high school pedagogies show how teachers employ relational expertise to orient students towards a love of the subject they are teaching. In both examples, the orientation involves the teacher in taking the perspective of the child and identifying their motive orientations, while also being clear about what matters for them, their motive orientations, in relation to a task or engagement with subject matter knowledge. For example, a shy child's motive orientation could be towards avoiding speaking out in class; whereas a teacher's motive orientation could be captured in a statement such as "it is important for everyone to be heard".

This exercise of relational expertise contributes to building *common knowledge* (Edwards, 2010, 2011). Common knowledge is not shared knowledge of the subject area. Rather, it comprises the motive orientations of a child and their teacher in relation to the task or subject area. Common knowledge then mediates the interactions between teacher and child. The teacher will be aware of the child's reluctance to speak; while the child knows that her doing so is something the teacher would value. This common knowledge then shapes how teacher and child work together. The third concept, *relational agency*, describes the shifting relationship between teacher and child and the unfolding of the child's agency as a learner, mediated by common knowledge. At first, the teacher leads, aware of the child's motive orientations, but over time, the child, aware of what matters to the teacher, becomes an increasingly competent and confident actor in classroom life.

To summarise, our premise is that common knowledge is built by sensitive teachers who exercise relational expertise, take students and their motives seriously and are explicit about what matters for themselves. They then use the resulting common knowledge, comprising the different motive orientations, to mediate the agency of children as children become increasingly agentic learners.

These statements were tested through three exploratory research questions applied to data from teachers who were recognised for their expertise with shy students.

1. How is the sensitivity of such teachers revealed in their exercise of relational expertise in their classrooms?
2. How do these teachers build common knowledge with shy students?
3. How is that common knowledge employed as resource to support the unfolding of shy children's agency as learners?

To our knowledge, previous studies of relational forms of pedagogy have not undertaken analyses at this level of detail.

4. Design and methods

4.1. Sampling

We discuss part of a five-year research project on teachers' use of strategies to promote learning and social development for shy elementary school students. Stage one of the project involved collecting interview data to inform a national survey in stage two. Here we report analyses of data from the first stage. Nineteen teachers were recruited to this phase based on recommendations from fellow professionals, such as Educational Psychologists and school Principals over their success in working with shy children and came from different schools and regions in Norway (Mjelve et al., 2019).

Ethical issues were first discussed within the team and with the departmental leadership. The *Norwegian Centre for Research Data* (on behalf of the University of Oslo) then approved all processes, including the recruitment of participants, their informed consent, and measures to ensure privacy. All the teacher participants signed standard informed consent forms and the parents and the children who were interviewed provided their assent. The interview data were anonymised after data collection. The team was particularly aware of the need for sensitivity when working with minors with special needs (Lewis & Porter, 2004). The team member who undertook those interviews has experience in such work.

4.2. Data collection

Eight of the 19 teachers who were currently working with a shy child agreed to be observed and interviewed. The analyses reported here comprises individual interviews using stimulated recall interviews (Dempsey, 2010) with seven of those teachers and a shy student in each class, as one child was not available for interviewing. In order to prepare for the interviews, two of the authors made observations over a 1- to 2-hour period in the class. One researcher focused on the teacher's actions by writing field notes, the other made iPad video recordings of the targeted shy child and events in the immediate surroundings. The observations were not based on a particular theory. The aim was to capture the teachers' general and specific approaches that appeared to offer positive support for their students' learning, as well as the shy student's responses to these strategies and the surroundings. Stimulated recall methodology allowed us to elicit the reasons underlying the classroom actions of the teachers, while the prompts based on video clips served as triggers for the conversations with the children about their experiences of classroom life.

The notes, and the video clips allowed the team to tailor the stimulated recall interviews with each teacher and student. Video clips were watched only by the research team, the relevant class teacher and the child. The interviews with teachers were held in the

schools, with the two fieldwork researchers, between two and seven days after the observations. One led the interviews; the other took notes and the aim was to gather teachers' reflections on their classroom strategies with the target child. Here a flexible approach was adopted due to the difficulties interviews may involve for shy children, resulting in a variation in length, depth, and content of the interviews. All the interviews were audiotaped. The teacher interviews lasted between 47 and 82 min, producing a total of 441 min. Those with children lasted between 23 and 40 min, with a total of 214 min.

4.3. Analyses

Both sets of interviews were professionally transcribed and translated into English. The first stage of the analysis was to build descriptive accounts of what was happening. Team members read the transcripts independently and each wrote short snapshots of the teacher-child relationships; while the two fieldwork researchers also organised all the teacher statements about how they worked with the child in columns alongside children's comments about what the teacher was doing and how they felt. In this stage, each member of the team employed their own insights to interpret the data. These snapshots and re-organised statements were discussed at team meetings and revealed the strength of the relationships between teachers and children. In the second stage of the analysis, in order to move from description to explanation, the three relational concepts, relational expertise, common knowledge, and relational agency were employed to interrogate the data in greater depth and to attempt to capture the child's developing agency as a learner over time. The listed statements as units of analysis were coded with one coding per statement. These analyses were discussed within the team. One round of refinements to the coding took place to clarify the coding instructions in relation to the data and a recategorisation of the data was undertaken after team discussions. The categories are as follows (T = teacher; C = child).

Using relational expertise to build common knowledge

T: Understanding what matters to the child

T: Being clear to the learner about what matters to them as a teacher

C: Being clear about own strengths and needs

C: Knowledge of teacher expectations

Using common knowledge and relational expertise in the unfolding of relational agency

T: Doing things with the learner – showing they are on the side of the child – taking the child forward in shared (inter) actions

C: Doing things with the teacher – acknowledging that the teacher is helping the child to deal with shyness

A growth in student agency

T: and C: A shift in responsibility from teacher to learner over time.

A relational focus on a safe environment

This category was left open.

Once categorisation was completed and checked within the team, in the third stage of the analysis, the two fieldwork researchers, together with one other team member looked across the cases to explain how the teacher used relational expertise to build and employ common knowledge with the target child, they then examined how teachers worked relationally with each individual child to capture change in the child over time. These analyses were also checked within the team.

5. Findings

We answer the three research questions in turn and first show how the expert teachers created inclusive classrooms as emotionally safe spaces for all students. These actions were pre-requisites for the more intensive relational work with shy children. We next present the analyses just described. In doing so, we reveal the intricacies of a relational pedagogy that supports the engagement of shy children with the curriculum and classroom life.

5.1. How is the sensitivity of such teachers revealed in their exercise of relational expertise in their classroom?

These teachers regarded all students as active participants in classroom environments and were adept at taking the perspectives of children, recognising them as individuals with feelings that might affect how they experienced school. In doing so they were exercising relational expertise by reflecting a concern with what we have been describing as motive orientation, together with [Elkonin's \(1999\)](#) argument for attention to emotion, because children's motives develop before their competences.

For example, all the teachers welcomed each child at the start of the school day. One teacher explained "*I greet everyone in the morning in the hallway, they can tell me things and I get to know how they are doing that day*". The shy child in her class saw this as part of normal practice, saying "*I don't give it much thought, it has become a habit kind of. It's not much to think about, it's like ok*".

The teachers were also clear with all children about their expectations for them. Actions included writing the plan for the day on the whiteboard: "*The main reason for writing the plan for the day on the board is for them to know what we are going through and to make it clear for them what they are going to do during the lessons.*" This clarity was useful for all students and appreciated by the shy students, as shy children can be particularly sensitive to novelty. The target student in that class told us: "*...if you forget it, or if you are going to get something and if you don't get what she (teacher) is saying, you can take a look at the board, and that's good*".

Teachers also talked of explicit ground-rules about mutual respect, again applied to the whole class. Sometimes, these rules could specifically mention shyness. "*We have talked about rolling one's eyes or giving someone a look, which easily can happen. If I see something like that, I tell them that it is not accepted, and that it is okay to be shy.*" They also emphasised friendship, several ensuring that children would not be left friendless during break times.

Within this focus on inclusive classrooms, the teachers also adapted arrangements specifically for the shy child. Strategies for seating the shy child in the classroom were mentioned by several teachers and students. In all cases the strategies were led by a concern that the shy child should feel comfortable and unthreatened and all reflect concern with the shy child's emotional wellbeing in the classroom. One teacher explained "I was careful when we were to change seats again, she should not sit close to someone laughing at her". Another teacher reported "Now she sits with three girls I know care about her." The child told us her preferences, "I prefer to sit next to my friend, not to one of the noisy boys". In another example the teacher explained: "...she prefers sitting on the side, if she is in the middle she might be pushed, and she finds that frightening". The student told us: "I like sitting by the wall".

The teachers were also sensitive to aspects of school life that could cause difficulties for the child. One teacher observed: "She does not want to be approached by grown-ups during breaks [...] She appears to be sad, and she seems very introverted and hunched, looks to the ground and leans against the wall and it is quite visible that she is uncomfortable". The student's description echoed the teacher's: "In breaks, I walk around doing nothing, sometimes I like being alone, I just wander around thinking [...] I don't know". Several teachers noted that noise could impede the child's motive orientation: "She likes things to be quiet and she wants to learn as much as possible, so I think she gains quite a lot from a quiet classroom...". The student confirmed how a quiet classroom was beneficial for her, "... I like it when it is a bit quiet because then you get to get more work done during class".

These strategies, both general and specific, appeared important as they evidenced a classroom discourse where emotional wellbeing was of concern to all and the shy child was not noticeably singled out. This approach is likely to be welcomed by shy students as even positive attention can be stressful for them.

5.2. How do these teachers build common knowledge with shy students

We are making strong claims about the creation of common knowledge, as it involves the child in recognising a teacher's motive orientations in relation to them and implies a high degree of trust in a relationship between teacher and child. Indeed, several teachers talked explicitly of building trust with the child: "My experience is she trusts me."; "It is all about building relationships". These relationships were built in conversations between the teacher and child. Here a child explains: "I have individual talks with teacher, I like it." Spooner et al. (2005) have shown that shy children benefit when shyness is not hidden but dealt with explicitly. One teacher in the present study explained: "We make it (shyness) normal by talking about it. We have conversations on a regular basis about how she is doing". Others mentioned specific agreements with the child: "We have an agreement that she should raise her hand at least once a day".

In these meetings the successful teachers made their intentions, their motive orientations in relation to the child, clear to the shy children so that they could respond to them, and together they could construct the common knowledge that they could use to mediate the unfolding of relational agency. We again look across all the case studies to describe teachers' and students' mutual understanding of the students' anxieties in different activities and of the children's strengths. At the same time, we show how the students were aware of teachers' motive orientations in relation to their development as agentic students.

Fear of speaking up in class was common across all the cases at some point in the child's trajectory towards becoming an agentic learner. Here is one description from a teacher: "During presentations when everyone is supposed to present from group work or something, she just stands there and can't say a word [...] it's like she blocks out the world, just standing there, staring at a point far away." The student explained how such a situation made her feel: "I find it strange when everyone is looking at me. If you talk and stand in front of the class, it's like everyone is staring at you all the time." A similar situation is described by another teacher: "She does not manage to express what is written, her nerves takes control, and this is due to her being so nervous that she does not even dare to say that she doesn't want to." The student confirmed the reluctance to speak up: "I don't dare to put my hand in the air, I am afraid to give the wrong answer. We have talked about not being critical, but still I feel that I get a bit scared".

The teachers, nonetheless, persisted in both making demands on the shy children that involved overcoming these anxieties, and in supplying strategies to help them. These teacher expectations, motive orientations, could be addressed to the whole class: "I feel it is harmless to say that everybody must say something". This general expectation was also emphasised with the shy student: "I tell her that everybody has to talk and that it is you can do it". The student, who was still in the early stages of addressing her anxieties, commented: "She wants me to raise my hand, but sometimes I can't remember what to say". Here another teacher discusses a strategy with a shy child who had started to overcome her anxieties: "I think this (raising hand half way up to show that you know the answer) is very helpful to her since she very often knows what we are talking about". The shy student commented: "I can raise my hand half-way up, to show that I know the answer, but don't want to say it aloud". There were also examples of hidden signs between teacher and student, previously agreed in meetings, such as: "She looks at me in a certain way; she wants me to say it". While one child commented "It is clever of her (the teacher) to say talk to the person next to you".

The teachers made a point of discussing the child's strengths with the students and showing that these strengths were valued. Here a teacher discusses a student who is bilingual in Norwegian and Polish: "...she is really talented in English Language [...] I don't know if that is related to her being bilingual". The student confirmed that she thought she was doing well in English, she said, "...perhaps learning English is easier when I speak two languages to begin with...". Another teacher reported: "She (student) has some areas of interest in which she is very talented, among others drawing and painting [...] her arts and craft teacher claims it is very rare to see children of such young age have such great drawings." The student confirmed the interest, "I like arts and craft, drawing [...] I like drawing birds and dragons and stuff". Strengths could also include other school activities and teacher awareness of a student's responsible agency within a clear role: "She is the type that comes forward and wants to be a librarian (assist in school library), she takes on different assignments." The student told us: "I am a mini librarian now, several apply, but most of them just want to biip (register) the books, but it's actually a lot more than that".

5.3. How is that common knowledge employed as resource to support the unfolding of shy children's agency as learners?

We found that the common knowledge, the mutual understanding of what mattered to the teacher and the child mediated the delicate and sensitive unfolding of relational agency. The exercise of relational agency between teachers and students is, in our analyses, a process in which the teacher gradually withdraws their support, and the agency of the child becomes more apparent. As the child's agency grows, they become increasingly active in creating their social situation of development, using the resources available to them, and propelling themselves forward as engaged learners.

We look briefly across the cases for examples of how common knowledge mediated the unfolding of relational agency and then demonstrate the process through two vignettes. The children were at different stages of their trajectories and this was reflected in the roles of the teachers. Here we focus on the later stages, where the unfolding of a child's agency is revealed. Here a teacher draws on how she built common knowledge and worked alongside the child encouragingly: *"I show her that I care. She knows I want the best for her. I sort of understand, and that she hears that I understand how she is doing"*. The child explained: *"I do not like presenting alone in front of everyone, it is better in pairs, but I have done it and it went okay"*. The teacher confirmed this change: *"It has taken a long time before I have gotten her to say anything, but now she talks a lot more"*.

The teachers at this stage were also challenging children: *"I try to say 'Yes, but it is not easy, you can do it, don't give up, come on.' because I know she has the skills, she is quite talented"*. The child told us: *"I'm not completely relaxed, but in fact I'm feeling quite confident regarding those classroom issues now"*. These changes over time could take several years and were helped by the Norwegian system where in elementary schools, teachers tend to stay with the same class year on year.

5.3.1. Vignettes

We start with how teacher and child used common knowledge to help shape the child's motive orientation and then give the views of the teacher and child on the growth in child agency over the past year. We refer to the categories that alerted us to specific actions, such as 'showing they are on the side of the child', when presenting the accounts.

Vignette 1. The female student was in grade 6.

Using common knowledge and relational expertise

Teacher: Doing things with the learner. Showing they are on the side of the child. Taking them forward in shared (inter)actions. The teacher explained as follows:

"I need to give her confirmation when she has become that confident that she raises her hand. I hug her (and all students), touching her and being near her results in her feeling 'I am good enough'. I try to build an inner confidence saying 'I am good enough'. I give her recognition by using looks, that I am interested in her, a question of being seen."

"We have conversations on a regular basis (once a week) about how she is doing. I often talk about that she has improved in maths and ask her what her thoughts are regarding that."

Child: Doing things with the teacher. Acknowledging that the teacher is helping the child to deal with shyness. The child explained as follows:

"She looks at me in a certain way; she wants me to say it in a way [...] She is trying to make me say something without getting embarrassed and stuff."

"Teachers love hugging and stuff like that, I find it okay. It was fun (teacher touching her hair) and it tickled my hair a bit. It is a bit scary if she suddenly is behind me [...] But it means that I am working well."

"When my teacher praises me and the class, I feel happy, the others too, I use to pull the arms of my sweater down like this. It is lovely (when her teacher praises her), and very nice to hear [...] it is a bit embarrassing too."

A growth in student agency

A shift in responsibility from teacher to learner over time

The teacher explained as follows:

"It is a major difference in... from the girl that was by herself when I took over the class. Her mother says it goes much better for her; she has friends."

"She has said about her own school performance that 'I am not good at school' and one of the first things she told me last fall was that 'I am terrible in maths', but her performance is good now."

"From being a very quiet girl staring down at her desk, I have now a beautiful girl who looks up, raises her hand, she is active – she was trying to make herself invisible, not being noticed, now she dares (to do things). I can say to her (in class): 'What are you doing now? Is that something you should do now?' And she says 'No' without blushing now. She has become confident in terms of that what she is saying is not always correct."

The child explained as follows:

"It is fun to play with friends – sometimes the others ask first [...]. I like being asked (by the teacher) when I have my hand in the air. (When teacher is correcting her in class): It is a bit of fun, and she helps me to say it right and stuff."

These interviews highlighted the emotional aspects of learning, including acknowledging the importance of peer friendship for a

feeling of belonging at school. The teacher had been explicit about what mattered for her including her need to engage all children in an inclusive classroom and the child recognised the teacher's priorities as they related to her. The common knowledge that was built allowed a set of unspoken signs to operate between teacher and child and to give the child the confidence to orient to classroom activities, participate, and engage.

Vignette 2. The male student was in grade 6 in a different school.

Using common knowledge and relational expertise

Teacher: Doing things with the learner. Showing they are on the side of the child. Taking them forward in shared (inter)actions. The teacher explained as follows:

“He talks a lot to me and explains that he finds (the films they were watching) revolting and scary and he gets a bit worried... I show him that I recognise what he is feeling, and I sit down with him, I look at him at the same level, I don't talk to him when standing up, I sit down, at the same level. My intention is to make the situation safe...To him you are as much a caregiver as a teacher.”

“If I had (corrected him in whole class setting), it would have been like a big personal disappointment, that would have been very unpleasant for him, and he would have felt like a failure.”

“I talked to him about being a welfare leader (a role given to children during break times) after having observed that he was by himself a lot in the breaks in grade 4 – actually he liked it so much that he still is a welfare leader.”

Child: Doing things with the teacher. Acknowledging that the teacher is helping the child to deal with shyness. The child explained as follows:

“I don't raise my hand often, something dark happened during 3rd grade and it is stuck with me, I only raise my hand when it is something that I am 100% certain of, but when I am 95% certain, I don't. We do not make agreements to prepare for answering questions because I then I am only looking for the right answer to that specific question and miss the whole picture.”

“I talk with the teacher once a week about the welfare leader activities.”

A growth in student agency

A shift in responsibility from teacher to learner over time.

The **teacher** explained as follows:

“When I took over this class, I knew this is a boy who is very attached to grownups. [Now] if he is not approaching me at break time it is because he has understood that he can't always go to the grownups.”

“You need to be observant and go over and see that he has understood the tasks and that he actually is working.”

“He fancies taking on responsibilities. He thinks it is brilliant, he still loves being a welfare leader.”

The **child** explained as follows:

“[My learning partner and I] do not have a lot to talk about, we are both rather talented in maths so we do the exercises rather quickly.”

“I am a welfare leader during breaks, I am rather hyper about everyone having someone to play with, I was bullied in 4th and 5th grades myself”.

“I am very happy in this class.”

This teacher recognised the child as an emotional being and found ways of structuring the child's social engagements so that they were oriented to overcoming his anxieties about peer relationships. The child's trajectory towards becoming an agentic learner illustrates a point often made by Vygotsky that development is not uniform across domains (Vygotsky, 1998). This 6th grade student loved his welfare leader responsibilities; yet was easily upset by films and could not always be relied to keep focused on classroom tasks. Nevertheless, in terms of shyness and dependency on adults he had moved a long way.

5.4. Summary

Good teachers know their students, and their strengths and weaknesses. Here we reveal how teachers, who have acknowledged success with shy students, went further by supporting the students relationally to help them develop as agentic learners able to take forward their social situations of development.

The teachers took the perspectives of the shy students to better understand their motive orientations and build common knowledge with them. As well as sympathetic observations, they discussed the shy children's feelings with them. They used their relational expertise to build trust and elicit student anxieties. The findings show that the students' motives were oriented towards dealing with their anxieties but also towards their strengths at school; while the teachers were oriented towards the child's shy behaviours in order to work with the child on changing them. As one teacher put it *“I show her there is another way of being”*.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study has been to investigate what insights are afforded by taking a relational approach to analysing the pedagogies of teachers with acknowledged success in working with shy children. We recognise that good teachers have insight into their students,

particularly their strengths and weaknesses, but we went beyond this generalisation to analyse the processes by which they helped their students become agentic learners able to take forward their social situations of development. To do so, we employed the three relational concepts: relational expertise, common knowledge, and relational agency. The concepts were initially constructed to inform collaborations across practice boundaries and have since been used, for example, to explain practitioner-client relationships in family support work (Hopwood & Edwards, 2017) and as a way of explaining pedagogy from observational studies (Rai, 2019; Shires, 2021).

Although the three relational concepts have informed interpretations of pedagogic actions in these studies, the study presented here is the first to apply them in a systematic way to how teachers and children discuss teaching and learning processes. Using the concepts in this way means that the study extends our understandings of the potential of these concepts in explaining a relational pedagogy in two ways.

First, the present study is the first to use these concepts to analyse interview transcripts from both teachers and students to examine whether the approach can explain how shy children become agentic learners. This is valuable in itself; but accessing both perspectives also allowed us to examine common knowledge directly rather than infer it from interviews with a single actor, whether teacher or child.

Second, because the teachers were aiming at slowly enabling the agency of withdrawn children, it was possible to examine in detail how the teachers used the common knowledge that they built to mediate the unfolding of a child's agency as a learner. This agency is a crucial element in the construction of a child's social situation of development. Although most children are able to propel themselves forward as learners in ways that meet the demands of schooling, there are children who find this difficult. These teachers were able to guide the motive orientation of shy students towards meeting these demands, as well as work with them relationally, exercising relational agency, as they tackled them. We therefore argue that these three concepts can usefully explain a relational pedagogy (Hedegaard and Edwards, forthcoming).

The findings reveal that the teachers took the perspectives of their shy students and used their relational expertise to elicit the children's motive orientations. This relational expertise was exercised within classroom discourses which emphasised the inclusion and emotional wellbeing of all students. Importantly, the teachers were also explicit about what was important for them as teachers and the shy children recognised their teachers' motive orientations, both generally and in relation to them as individuals. Given that the interviews with both teachers and children were not structured to examine the relational concepts in action, but simply to elicit interpretations of observed actions, the children's awareness of teachers' intentions in their interviews was impressive. This awareness allowed us to argue that common knowledge, knowledge of each other's motive orientations, was being constructed. This common knowledge then mediated how teachers worked relationally to nurture the agency of the shy students.

We are not proposing that the teachers' practice was extraordinary. Rather, we are arguing that the relational concepts provide a way of describing and explaining a pedagogy with children who were having difficulty in engaging with all the demands of classroom life. We therefore suggest that these concepts can be usefully employed in analyses of pedagogies with other children needing intensive support. We acknowledge that we are making strong claims about the creation of common knowledge, as it involves a child in recognising a teacher's motive orientations in relation to him or her and implies a high degree of trust in a relationship between teacher and child. We believe that the analyses presented here warrant these claims.

The building and use of common knowledge to enable the unfolding of learners' agency as they constructed their social situations of development took time and could be uneven. This slow development was no doubt afforded by the Norwegian practice of a class teacher staying with the same class year on year in elementary schools. The findings suggest that in other school systems there is much to be said for schools recognising shyness as a potentially debilitating condition which can be addressed by teachers who are aware of what is involved in the kind of intensive support offered by the teachers in the present study.

A further contribution of the present analysis is to reveal the perspectives of shy children on their teachers' intensive engagement with them. Our earlier studies showed that teachers were attuned to and wanted to help shy students overcome their anxieties (Mjelve et al., 2019; Nyborg et al., 2020), yet recognised that these difficulties frequently sat below the threshold for statutory interventions (Solberg, Edwards, Mjelve, & Nyborg, 2020; Solberg, Edwards, & Nyborg, 2020) and frequently had to be tackled as part of an inclusive pedagogy within their classrooms. Several other studies have also addressed teachers' strategies with shy students (Coplan et al., 2011; Deng et al., 2017; Nadiv & Ricon, 2020; Thijs et al., 2006). However, all those studies focused on strategies from teachers' perspectives and did not consider student perspectives.

Interviewing both children and teachers brought new insights into the experiences of shy children in inclusive elementary school classrooms. As we have already suggested, to our knowledge the present study is the first to do so. Shy students' fear of negative evaluation can create barriers, making them unforthcoming about their anxieties. However, it was clear in the interviews that these children were on trajectories towards a reflective awareness of their shyness and how it could be managed. They therefore offered unique detail about how they made sense of teachers' strategies.

None of the children disliked discussing their shyness with their teachers (Spooner et al., 2005). Indeed, frequent one-to-one meetings were valued and were where teachers and children revealed what mattered to them, agreed on support and challenges, and built the all-important common knowledge that mediated their interactions in more public fora. This finding suggests that intervention strategies can be readily tailored if teachers and shy students discuss them in order to understand the other's perspective, to share the teacher's intentions and align them with the children's perspectives, to help the child develop as a learner.

The findings reveal a high degree of common understanding between teacher and child, understanding that was built over time and based on teacher sensitivity and children's trust. This trust appeared to give the children a secure base from which they could build their engagement with the demands of classroom life, which has been demonstrated to be particularly helpful in the case of shy children (Rydell et al., 2005). The findings also remind us that children's engagement with school involves more than good task-oriented behaviour. Friendships were key for almost all the students, essential to their emotional well-being and this was

recognised by the teachers. This is consistent with research evidence that friendships can protect shy children from negative consequences of their shyness (Baardstu et al., 2020; Sette et al., 2017). There were also examples of how distinct roles – two children were welfare leaders and one a librarian – could help with social interactions and a sense of belonging. Similarly, Sainato et al. (1986) reported that providing shy-withdrawn students the role of classroom manager led to increased frequency of peer interaction and improvements in peer status.

7. Concluding thoughts

The present analysis contributes to shyness research through detailed examination of individual cases. The students spoke at length about their difficulties and how teachers helped them. They were aware of their shyness, regarding it as something that they wished to change and collaborated with their teachers to increase their classroom engagement. We agree with Beer (2002) that shy children have the capacity to change if they desire to change and perceive that they *can* change and hope that our relational analyses contribute to understanding how such changes are accomplished.

We are also aware that shy children are not alone in finding school engagement problematic and suggest that future research could examine how this form of intensive relational pedagogy may benefit other children. We therefore also suggest that breaking down and labelling pedagogical processes by employing the three relational concepts offers fresh understandings that can inform the practices of teachers and open up new forms of analysis to researchers in the field of pedagogy.

We are therefore hopeful that the findings from the present study can directly contribute to the development of best practices for helping shy students overcome the difficulties they can face at school. Our analyses suggest that not only that pedagogic interventions can be effective, but also how they can be accomplished: by exercising relational expertise, taking the child's perspective, building trust, discussing shyness with the child and with the class, constructing common knowledge and helping the unfolding of the child's agency as a learner.

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