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The practice of relationality in classrooms: beyond relational pedagogy as empty signifier

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on findings from a wider project examining 'relational pedagogies' within Australian secondary schools. The paper considers the growing use of the 'relationships' concept as a descriptor of specific teaching practices. Normative descriptions of 'relationships' (and concordant descriptions of relational pedagogies) can be at odds with the empirical realities inherent to classroom practice. This paper suggests that accounts of the relational should consider the 'context' and the 'immediacy' of the relationships made possible in classroom settings. Arguing that designations of relational pedagogy require (i) consideration of the 'empirical realities' that contextualise pedagogical encounters and (ii) reflexive appraisals of teacher and student positionality, this paper draws on descriptions of relational pedagogy offered by a group of teacher–participants to illustrate the various ways that the 'relationships' concept gains form. The analysis outlined in this paper demonstrates that teachers define and enact relational pedagogies in idiosyncratic ways within their classrooms, rendering normative *a priori* conceptualisations of the 'relationships' concept incomplete and prone to irrelevance.

Introduction: a case for empirical accounts of relationality

'Relationships' provides a useful descriptor in accounts of teaching and learning practice. Suggesting something valuable and worthy of nurturing, 'relationships' functions as a metonym for modalities of teaching and learning that emphasise student voice, dialogue, participation, and student success, all of which take shape within idealised forms of encounter that preface engagement and transformative interactions between teachers and students (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Bishop et al., 2014; Joldersma, 2018; Morgan et al., 2015). Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) note that under such usage 'relationships' conjures imagery of symbiotic encounters 'between teacher and student that depend not primarily on individual attitudes, but on the fact that they are part of a larger cultural event—the event of teacher-student interaction' (pp. 27–28).

This paper interrogates the ways that the 'relationships' concept gains form and currency in descriptions of teaching and learning practice. Central to the argument outlined in this paper is the claim that any such description of the pedagogical relationship must be underpinned by what constitutes the relation and the ways that students and teachers approach the relational encounter. We argue that the 'relationships' concept risks becoming an empty signifier—a concept that on first reception holds appeal, but that ultimately lacks pertinence on closer application—without attendant consideration of the learning context and the positionality that teachers and students maintain.

To expand this argument, we draw on the articulations provided by a group of secondary teachers working within an Australian secondary school to illustrate how the 'relationships' concept gained form and meaning in their practice. We assert that for descriptions of the 'relationships' concept to maintain pertinence as a viable descriptor of practice, the empirical realities encountered in classrooms must be accounted for. The classroom setting provides an important locus for contextualising a sense of how teachers and students come into relation and the capacity that these encounters have for mediating learning. When students and teachers enter the pedagogical exchange, the relations they enact are shaped not only by who they *are* as learners and teachers but also by the contingencies inherent to the learning context (Hickey et al., 2020; Osher et al., 2020; Riddle & Cleaver, 2017; Rodríguez, 2008). On this point, we highlight Rodríguez's (2008) observation that 'just because a student and teacher are placed in the same social space does not automatically guarantee a relationship' (538). Context matters; it is with *how* teachers and students come into relation within the moment of the encounter that shapes what is pedagogically possible.

Taking a cue from Lingard's (2007) assertion that the 'actually existing' dynamics inherent to a classroom must provide a focus for inquiries into the pedagogical exchange, we examine how the descriptions offered by our teacher participants provided definition and conceptual clarity to the relationships they enacted. During participation in pedagogical planning meetings and subsequent one-to-one interviews, we captured accounts of what 'relationships' meant in this school. As a component of a wider project that sought to define more robust descriptions of what constitutes the pedagogical relation (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey et al., 2021), we were especially interested in how certain ideals came to be associated with the concept. To this end, we also participated in observations of classroom practice and engaged further dialogues with the teachers to ascertain how their definitions translated into classroom practice.

These accounts emphasised that decontextualised descriptions of the pedagogical relationship fall short when applied in practice, *within* the classroom. Between the ideal and actually existing practice rest contingencies of context and the positionality held by teachers and students. It is from these variable aspects of the pedagogical encounter that we assert that descriptions of relationality (and concordant relational pedagogies) must emerge in order to more accurately account for the idiosyncrasy of the classroom and the interactions that teachers and students broach.

Relationality and relational pedagogy

We commence with Christine Edwards-groves et al.'s (2010) observation that 'education occurs through lived and *living practices* that relate different people to

one another' (52). The relation represents the 'the basic unit of education' (Aspelin 2011: 10), wherein the inter-relational dynamic is central to the educational endeavour. It is with how the process of teaching and learning proceeds *as* a relation, situated at the interface of the encounter between teacher and student and set within the classroom context, that the basis of a pedagogy that takes stock of student and teacher positionality and the contingency of the learning context is founded. Generally referring to something considered valuable and indicative of modalities of education and schooling that emphasise the nurturance of positive interactions between teachers and students, 'relationality' is used to describe progressive orientations to learning and teaching that value student choice, an ethics of social justice and convictions towards democratic participation (Edwards-groves et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2015; Sellar, 2012). Yet, as Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) argued, 'relations are not necessarily good; human relationality is not an ethical value. Domination is as relational as love' (p. 7). Complicating existing conceptualisations is the observation that there is nothing necessarily *good*, nor transformational, in relationality *per se* and that *bad* relationships just as readily constitute the relational.

We observe that the literature derives two broad conceptualisations of relationality. The first we define in terms of declarations of orientations to the practice of teaching and learning, and the second as focussed on the affective dimensions of the experience of *being-in-relation.* Aspelin (2021) provided a useful account of the first, with his *teaching as bonding* indicative of this perspective:

> Through 'inclusion', the teacher becomes directly involved in the student's encounter with the world, and the gap between the two is bridged. Such encounters with 'someone other than who I am' are at the heart of the pedagogical relationship, and thus of genuine teaching. It is in the moment that the teacher and the student meet each other from their different positions. (p. 594)

For Aspelin (2021), 'teaching means bonding; without a bond between teacher and student, there can be no teaching' (p. 594). Hinz et al. (2022) identify a similar theme in their suggestion that the pedagogical relationship proceeds when teachers and students are mutually 'sensitive to the unfolding, dynamic understanding emerging out of what is being shared' (p. 78). Emphasising the encounter, and the practical enactment of teaching and learning in these moments (for Hinz et al. this was indicated in 'conversation'; for Aspelin, via the practice of 'bonding'), the relationship is constituted as a practical enactment and something *performed*.

The second perspective is evident in accounts describing what it means to experience the relationship. For example, Reeves and Le Mare's (2017) survey of the social and emotional dimensions of teaching and learning illustrates this perspective, with their observation that 'relational pedagogy therefore, is manifest in teachers who are aware of and explicitly focus on the quality of their interactions with students to develop classroom communities that promote academic, social, and emotional growth' (p. 86). The implication of Reeves and Le Mare's (2017) account is in the recognition they give to 'the contexts in which [students] develop' and how such settings 'including schools, are reliable sources of supportive relationships' (p. 86). Stressed here are the affective dimensions of teaching

and learning and how students and teachers come into relation as an aspect of the learning exchange:

> Since genuine relationships require attunement to individuals and their expressed needs, practices that instantiate them are necessarily emergent and variable rather than pre-determined and fixed. (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017, p. 87)

This aspect of the pedagogical encounter is also identified in Morgan's (2018) typology of relational practice. Morgan (2018) notes that *relational agency*, *relational equity* and *relational being* emphasise the capacity of students and teachers to negotiate the emotional and intra-personal dimensions of being-in-relation. For Morgan (2018), cognisance of teacher and student positionality, and how teacher critical reflection of practice might provoke opportunities for better understandings of the mutuality of positionality, stand as crucial to an effective relational pedagogy.

Recognition of teacher and student positionality is equally evident in Joldersma's (2018) consideration of 'ethical intersubjectivity':

> The reversal that 'spiritual exercises' of slowing down make possible is exposure to something ethical, the student-as-end. ... The passivity of such attention reveals an ethical subject: a being worthy of being seen as a sense-making self, whose meanings of the world are worthy of consideration. This reversal of the 'intentional arrow', indicating something fundamentally intersubjective, reveals an ethical relation. (p. 444)

For Joldersma (2018), the relationship is realised upon the recognition of the Other. Beyond positioning students 'as an impediment to the efficiency of the fast-paced orderliness of the day' (p. 443), the relation is activated as a means of coming to know the Other via an ethical intersubjectivity that prefaces understanding and the student's experience as 'worthy of consideration' (p. 443). This consideration of the intersubjectivity of the encounter provides a foundation for a pedagogy that attends to student learning via an ethics of mutuality.

Situating empirical accounts of relational pedagogy

We extend these accounts from the literature to consider how our participating teachers developed complex, but idiosyncratic articulations of the 'relationships' concept. For some of the teachers, we encountered 'relationships' represented an ideal that indicated cohesion and unity within the classroom. For others, emphasis was placed on the interpersonal dimensions of 'getting to know' students at the *personal* level. While the conceptualisations relayed in the following accounts aligned with the broad contours evident in the literature—where relationality corresponds as a technique for mediating the teaching–learning exchange, or as indicative of the affective and emotional aspects of encountering the pedagogical Other—it also occurred that consideration of the school context and the classroom settings within which these encounters occurred provided a significant point of reference.

The recounts offered here were captured over a 12-month period within a school that had developed a dedicated 'pedagogical framework' that emphasised the nurturance of teacher–student inter-relationality. This particular school was selected as a key site for this project expressly for the emphasis it had given to relationships within its pedagogical

planning. The school had formally defined this emphasis on nurturing relationships within various policy designations and sought to align the objectives of this plan within collegial approaches to teaching and learning across the school.

Following the securing of ethics clearance to conduct this research (University of Southern Queensland approval H20REA221) alongside further approvals from the school's Principal, we commenced by analysing this policy documentation for references to teacher–student relationships and set about convening initial interviews with the participating teachers. To prompt the interview discussions, we relayed a general configuration of the 'relationships' concept as we had come to understand it from our readings of the literature and analyses of the school's policy documentation. We noted in our précis to each interview that the idea of the pedagogical relation implied three fundamental vectors: relations between teachers and students; relations between students and learning; and relations between students, teachers and the spaces of learning (Hickey & Riddle, 2021). Within this typology, we sought to provide further nuance by indicating that wider circles of relationality, including relations that students and teachers each enacted in their own family, peer and friendship networks, and through the wider socioeconomic contexts also had bearing in shaping the relations that were then possible within the school. This broad conceptualisation provided an initial launching point for considering how relationships factored in each teacher's practice.

Findings

A common theme in the discussions related to the ways that 'relationship' implied collaborative practice. The teachers each reported that an effective relationship was crucial to the classroom dynamic. This positioning of the relationship as a mode of encounter reflected the basic function of the relationship as an *exchange* (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey, 2020), and indicated the dynamic interaction that learning encounters require. As a demonstration of this requisite interaction, the relationship was viewed as being dependent on its constitutive participants—teachers and students—coming together in defined ways. From this perspective, several accounts of what constitute the precise formations of the learning relationship emerged. We subsequently categorised the data into themes that echoed these formations—'the purpose of relationships', 'the risk of self-declaration', and 'the school-wide enactment of relational pedagogy'—and move now to detail how our participants relayed their understandings of the concept in these terms.

The purpose of relationships

An initial focus of the interviews centred on establishing a sense of the purpose underpinning relationships. It was notable that relationality and the development of a relational pedagogy corresponded closely with ideals associated with *student engagement*. It was equally notable that the school's pedagogical framework had positioned relationality in this way, and that effective teacher–student relationships were deployed as a means for ensuring student engagement. Relationality held an *instrumental* purpose in this sense, representing an enabling attribute for achieving pedagogical outcomes.

Extending this further, two variations of this instrumental function of relationality were defined in the interviews. The first emphasised relationality as crucial for *behaviour management*, while the second emphasised *learning*. An illustrative view of this first variation was offered by one teacher:

Researcher: So what does relationality mean to you?

Teacher: Knowing your students . . . and usually, schools are good at this. If you've got students 'at risk', they're going to have relationships with certain staff, and again if something happens with that student, they're going to go to that staff member they have that relationship with, generally speaking. . . . I've been lucky this year, any sort of 'crisis' I've had with our students, I've been able to talk them down . . . *just because I know them.*

While this view might initially be taken as emphasising a commitment towards understanding students' positionality, we observe an inverse thematic: that this inflection of relationality is applied for the instrumental purpose of maintaining classroom order and the orderly functioning of the school. In this conception, it is not so much an understanding of the students' positionality that is sought, but the deployment of a mechanism for ensuring compliance and adherence to school processes.

Beyond the suggestions that this implies around surveillance and the instrumental manipulation of the relationship, we speculated on what students would perceive of these attempts at gearing the relationship towards behaviour mediation. We suggest that the likelihood of diminishing any meaningful connection with students would be high, rendering such attempts at relationality ultimately pointless. This account provided a further reminder that the pedagogical relationship must be built upon a genuine 'ethic of intersubjectivity' (Joldersma, 2018), with the risk that students might perceive any instrumental enactment of the relationship as *insincere*.

In a contrasting example, an account detailing how the learning experience might be enhanced was offered:

Researcher: So, 'relationality' . . . how would you define it?

Teacher: If you don't have it, you can't teach. You make no impact whatsoever.

Researcher: So, it must come first.

Teacher: Definitely. You can't manage behaviour. If the kids don't respect you, they're not going to listen, or feel that you have any care for them. They're not going to respond to anything you do.

Researcher: So 'care' is a crucial component of this?

Teacher: Oh yeah . . . As long as you have your pedagogical toolkit, you can teach anything. Content is not that important—content knowledge . . . the content follows once you've built that relationship. *It's allowing them to be who they are. I have the 'wobble stools' because I know that some kids need to be moving to learn, and it's in getting to know your students and getting to know how they learn—what their strengths are . . .* (emphasis added)

In contrast to the first account, this variation of the idea of relationality rested on *nurturance*, with this translating in enhanced student learning outcomes. The guiding ethic of care that this invoked, in conjunction with the practical arrangement of the

classroom space and mediation of the physicality of the interpersonal encounter (via the use of 'wobble chairs' in this instance) prefaced this conceptualisation. Relationality in this sense came down to the identification of the students' strengths and how this understanding might be used to negotiate the pedagogical exchange.

The risk of self-declaration

The interviews also revealed a further, unexpected dynamic of relationality: the declaration of the Self as a modality of the relationship. This theme was surprising in that the discussions to this point had largely situated the relationship at the juncture of the student–teacher 'interface' (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey, 2020). This shift to a more reflexive conceptualisation indicated how several of the teachers engaged in appraisals of their own practice and positionality in the classroom. Indicative of these accounts was one teacher's articulation of how she mediated relationality through self-declarations of her personal life and family:

> Teacher: I think before you can teach any student you need to have a relationship with them. My classrooms are always the first, at the start of the year, the first week—first two weeks—is just about relationships. So, my lessons are all about classroom expectations and things like that, but also team building things, and get to know me—I'm not just a teacher, I'm actually a human being, I have my own children, I have my life out of school. I kind of open that up to them.

> Researcher: There would be a limit on that though? How do you negotiate how far you let the students know about who you are?

> Teacher: I really just follow the kids lead. If they want to know something about me, and I'm happy to share it, I let them know. I don't personally try to close off my life to them. My goal is to, if they see me down at the shops, to go 'ohh, I don't want to go near her'; I want them to come up and say 'hey' and feel comfortable in doing that.

This inflection of relationality emphasises personal disclosure as a means for developing familiarity with the Other. Although a first reaction might suggest that this conviction towards interaction and ensuring that students feel comfortable in engaging teachers as fellow individuals is laudable, a challenge emerged in terms of how comfortable any individual—teacher or student—might be in sharing these personalised accounts of Self. This approach to nurturing relationality raised questions as to whether *limits apply on what should be known about the Other's personal life.*

We speculated on whether it was possible to be relational without such self-declaration. For instance, could relationality instead be focused on the development of an ethic of 'care' that emphasises the cognisant appraisal of the Other as learner (Noddings, 2015; O'Connor, 2008)? Self-declaration as the foundation of relationality poses problems of revealing insights into the personal life that may not be appropriate to share, while also fixing a point of focus on the Self (and not learning *per se*).

An alternative to this approach towards self-declaration was identified by another teacher. Notably, this approach worked to avoid the risks associated with self-exposure and the revealing of personal information:

> Like, if you've got a good pedagogical toolkit, and you've got a good behaviour management toolkit, you can build those relationships, because you're giving them respect. But I say to

my kids on the very first day 'I'm not your mate and I'm not your mother' . . . but I am going to be here and I am on your team . . .

For this teacher there was a clear division between the professional and the personal. This did not mean that the nurturance of relationships with students was truncated or diminished. Instead, the relationality enacted by this teacher—and as later witnessed during classroom observations—emphasised the immediacy of the classroom context and the dynamic inherent to this teacher's interactions with her students as the basis of the relationship. It was at the learning interface (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey, 2020) that relationality was activated for this teacher, with the classroom providing the context of this relationship and the foundation upon which the encounter with students would proceed. The relationship in this instance was centred on the common purpose of learning and corresponded with the shared experience that the teacher and her students had *in the moment* of the pedagogical encounter.

School-wide enactment of relational pedagogy

The intent to enact pedagogical approaches defined as relational was viewed as important by all teachers interviewed. Various ways of achieving this were also noted in the classroom observations that coincided with our interviews. Some teachers were explicit in relaying to students their personal convictions towards establishing meaningful working relationships, while others incorporated more nuanced approaches to curriculum design and lesson planning that created climates conducive to building relationships. Regardless of the method taken for activating the relationship, it became clear across the interviews and observations that establishing relationships was considered important as a means for enhancing student engagement and success in learning. This school-wide emphasis on relationships was described in the following ways by the Deputy Principal responsible for teaching and learning within the school:

> Researcher: The pedagogy concept: how is pedagogy defined for you?
>
> Deputy Principal: For me, it's about the way that we operate in terms of, not just our classroom interactions with students, but pedagogy also happens in the playground and whenever we are interacting with our students. So, it's not something that is confined to the four walls of the classroom. And that's why I very deliberately put PBL [Positive Behaviour for Learning] as one of the pillars in our pedagogical framework because it does need to be all encompassing; it doesn't just happen within those four walls of the classroom.
>
> Researcher: OK, so 'pedagogy' doesn't equate as 'instruction' or the 'art and science of teaching'?
>
> Deputy Principal: No, it's a whole-school 'thing'.

A subtext of relationality was writ-through the school's pedagogical framework and aligned with an aspiration to enhance student learning outcomes. Indeed, much was made across several interviews with the Deputy Principal that the school was working to enshrine a culture of effective relationships geared towards enhanced student learning outcomes. When examined, 'relationships' in this usage indicated something larger than the student–teacher interface and tied to the development of a whole-school culture that sought to improve student learning. This conception of the

pedagogical relationship materialised in the frameworks and policy enactments that the school activated. In an early conversation with the Deputy Principal, the school's pedagogical framework and Positive Behaviour for Learning structures were described:

> 'The [School] Way' is based around *Respect*, *Responsibility* and *Perseverance*. That operates at all levels of the school; it's not just about the students. We also talk about 'The [School] Way' in terms of our expectations; for students that's your 'non negotiables' . . . turning up with your equipment, starting the learning by lining up outside in two lines to get that baseline calm, before you move inside to start the learning. It's our one-to-one laptop programme and making sure students take responsibility for that. From the staff side, the pedagogical part of that is that we have high expectations for our students, we want to build an inclusive and innovative learning environment here, because we do have a unique opportunity in establishing a new school to not do things in the way that they have always been done but rather to try new things, and certainly an element of our Principal's leadership is the permission to try and fail and pick yourself up again and do things differently . . . So, there is certainly, from the executive and from the Principal, a sense that we all have permission to be innovative to try different things and give it a go and see what happens.

These structures provided a framework against which pedagogical relationships were enacted. In the same interview, the Deputy Principal noted the following:

> Researcher: Structures are fundamental in schools, but we're fascinated in how those translate into the day-to-day conduct of individuals. So, the conversations that you have with your staff . . . it is the level of 'formality' within those that we're fascinated with. Is the 'evidence' that comes into those the 'trick'? For instance, we can find tangible things like student performance [as found in centralised, departmental data and assessment reporting] but there are also the 'hunches' that teachers have as well, when you're working one-to-one with students and indeed, with colleagues. Do you feed that material into your practice, and how does that work; that more 'informal' evidence?

> Deputy Principal: So, there's a couple of different ways that that happens. So we have a whole-school 'data plan', and within that we have a 'data placemat process' where teachers capture key evidence around the students in their class and look at the data 'inputs'. So that can be their reporting outcomes for previous years, their behavioural, their attendance data; they look at their class on a 'placemat'. That then feeds into the conversations about the teacher's professional growth, and we also have . . . a process called 'collegial conversations'. So, that's where teachers have set goals for themselves . . . for what they want to achieve.

The collegial conversations involved teachers self-reflecting on practice, in conjunction with peer observation of classes; usually conducted by the Principal, Deputy Principal, or a relevant Head of Department. By enacting this approach for peer observation and ensuing professional dialogue, teachers were afforded the opportunity to reflect on their practice and deliberate as part of a collegiate that understands the dynamics of the school.

We did however note that such an approach towards generating a climate of collegial engagement did raise its own risks. We asked if this approach to in-class observation and professional dialogue could be construed as a form of 'surveillance':

> Researcher: Let's just say, as you do the walk around, that you observe some practice that may not be up to standard—that requires attention—how do those conversations happen?

> Deputy Principal: It can happen in a number of ways, depending on the context. If it is a question of performance, it is very much a direct conversation with the teacher at an appropriate time. I may choose to send an email to the teacher saying 'hey, I would like to have a conversation, can we make a time', come in close my door and have a private conversation about what I observed and what needs to change. It could be that it's not necessary for a Deputy Principal to be involved, and then I pass on this information to a Head of Department who is a direct line manager, because it needs to be dealt with at that level and they would have a conversation. But again … its very much part of the fabric of the school … that we are open and honest with one another.

We queried whether it was possible to have the sort of open, deliberative conversations outlined by this approach when staff were aware of the surveillance that they were placed under during these observations. Further, we questioned whether teachers might performatively 'play a role' and commit to feigned enactments of practice that met (perceived) requirements *when the boss was watching*. We appreciated that the collegial atmosphere nurtured in the school somewhat mitigated this problem, but it remains that these expressions of relationality maintained a more challenging edge.

Discussion

A relational pedagogy works to make explicit the relationships that teachers and students enact in the ordinary, day-to-day practice of schooling, while (re)framing the focus of learning towards proactive and meaningful interpersonal encounters that shape the experience of learning. Relational pedagogy challenges existing views of hierarchical pedagogical relationships that focus on the transformation of the student solely. Finally, a relational pedagogy actively resists the normalising effects of what Lingard (2007) frames as 'dominant actually occurring pedagogies' that lead to 'indifference' (p. 246) to instead provoke idiosyncratic, in-the-moment encounters that are responsive and contextually relevant.

The school and its teachers were actively working towards the realisation of these principles, with very deliberate aspirations towards relational approaches to teaching and learning supported in school policy documentation and similar planning resources. The school continues to define relationality as an aspect of its pedagogical framework, with the conceptualisations developed in the collegial conversations and peer evaluations of classroom practice informing the definitions of relationality applied in the school. Although we queried the potential for surveillance in these processes—especially when considered from the perspective of the imbalanced power relations that inhere to senior members of staff observing more junior colleagues—it remains that this approach towards self-reflection and peer dialogue provided the grounds for refining empirically informed and contextually contingent accounts of the pedagogical relationships relevant to this school.

These efforts to collectively define relationality represented the expression of a 'community of inquiry' (Kamler & Comber, 2005), which has broadened the discursive repertoire for describing the learning relationships that teachers and students engage. Significantly, these activations of collegial inquiry and conceptualising have afforded definitions of relationality that recognise the situated and in-the-moment nature of the teaching–learning dynamic and that equally draw into consideration the positionality of its student cohorts and surrounding communities. Although the various policy enactments applied in the school have established the coordinates for conceptualising relational approaches to

teaching and learning, it remains that practice-informed accounts are crucial in establishing the definitions that inform this documentation. It is in this way that recounts of practice, informed by empirical accounts of teaching and learning, provide capacity for recognising the *actually existing* encounters that teachers and students engage.

Conclusion

We contend that accounts of relationality and relational pedagogy must be defined in context of the school setting. A pedagogy of being-in-relation requires the reflexive appraisal of teacher and student practice to account for the ways that relationships come to be built and nurtured in context of the site of learning. Accounts of practice that recognise the contextual contingencies inherent to the school and the positionalities that teachers and students maintain provide empirically realist accounts of the relations that teachers and students engage. We suggest that significant opportunities for generating empirically informed accounts of practice emerge from the type of inquiry applied in the case school reported here. Via its activation of a 'community of inquiry' approach that sought to inform school policy designations and define shared articulations of practice, the means for capturing rich accounts of what constitutes relationality was found. When extended into observations of practice and concomitant professional dialogues that problematised and expanded the dimensions of these practices, a powerful means for describing relational pedagogies that remained contextually relevant and grounded in practice emerged.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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